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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CRIMSON PATCH ***

THE CRIMSON PATCH



"You want to warn me.... What about? I don't understand"

THE CRIMSON PATCH

BY
AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

Author of "The Slipper Point Mystery," "The
Girl Next Door," "Three Sides of Paradise
Green," "The Sapphire Signet,"
etc., etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
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"You see!" whispered Virginie, clinging to Patricia spasmodically

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"O, Melanie, let me stay just a few moments!"

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Melanie stood in the doorway surveying her with stern surprise

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THE CRIMSON PATCH

CHAPTER I

SUITE NUMBER 403

So this was to be her home—and for three long months! Patricia Meade dropped her suitcase on a convenient chair and gazed curiously about her. A hotel bedroom, with stiff-looking twin brass beds, two willow rockers, one straight chair, an imposing mahogany bureau and one small table—absolutely all the furniture, if one excepted the stiff draperies at the windows and one or two not particularly artistic pastel pictures adorning the wall. Through a door and across the intervening sitting-room she could see another bedroom similarly equipped.

In the sitting-room, her father, Captain Meade, was tipping the grinning bell-boy who had brought up their luggage,—a snub-nosed, blue-eyed, curly-haired young chap whose gaze was rivetted adoringly on the captain's khaki uniform. When the boy was gone, the captain turned to the door of Patricia's bedroom.

"Well, honey! Not much like home, eh? Do you think you can stand it for three months? Jove!—if she hasn't got her suitcase and is unpacking it already!"

Patricia was indeed frantically flinging her belongings about.

"Oh, it's jolly!" she replied, over her shoulder. "But you're right about it's not being much like home. I felt as if I'd just expire if I couldn't see things strewn around in a sort of careless and cosy way, as if people really *lived* here!" She rose suddenly from her kneeling posture before the suitcase, ran across the room and thumped both stiff pillows on the beds, knocking them a trifle awry. "There! Now they look more like real beds that you sleep in and less like advertisements in the back of a magazine!" she laughed. "The sitting-room's a little better, with that big table and the pretty reading-lamp and the comfortable chairs. But do let's get a lot of papers and magazines and books at once, and have them lying all around as we do at home. Mother would be scandalized—she's always picking them up after us," she went rattling on, and then stopped abruptly, lips quivering, eyes bright with sudden tears.

"If mother could only be with us!" she sobbed.

"Now, honey, don't—" the captain soothed her, laying his arm lovingly around her shoulder. "Remember you're a soldier's daughter; and,—well, brace up! Mother's going to be beautifully taken care of in that Sanatorium, and Aunt Harriet is with her, to keep her company and incidentally to indulge in some little pet cures of her own, on the side."

"But why, oh! *why* did it have to happen just *now*?" wailed Patricia, refusing to be comforted.

"Is it any wonder that she broke down completely and had a bad case of nervous prostration, after waiting over a year for me to come back from France? And feeling sure, too, for the last six months that she'd never see me alive again after she heard I'd been taken a prisoner to Germany? It's enough to have broken down the nerve of a cave-woman. And your mother was always delicate."

"Oh, Daddy! It was like getting you back from the dead," sighed Patricia, hiding her head in his shoulder and shuddering at the memory. "And in three months, you're going back again!"

"But not to the dangers and horrors, this time," he reminded her, and added half under his breath, "Worse luck! Fortunately or unfortunately, my constitution will never stand the strain of trench-life again, after a few months of German prison-diet, etc. But I'm only too thankful that the Government has found use for me in some other capacity."

Patricia, who had been perched on his knee, snuggling her head in his coat collar, suddenly sat up straight and looked him in the eyes. "Daddy, can't you tell me what it *is* you're doing?" she begged. "I don't ask just from idle curiosity. I want to understand. I want to help you if I can. I love America, and I am a soldier's daughter, and I want to act intelligently about things and be of some use. That's one reason I'm so glad you've allowed me to be with you in this strange, big city and in this great hotel, for three months,—besides the joy of not being separated from you before you go back to Europe again for goodness knows how long! *I* want to *do* something for my country, too!"

The Captain stroked his short mustache for several silent moments before answering. "I quite understand how you feel," he said at length. "And I appreciate it. You're seventeen, Patricia,—almost a woman grown. I know I could *trust* you utterly with the whole thing, but it isn't wise,—in fact, it isn't even allowable. A government secret is a government secret, and cannot be revealed even to one's nearest and dearest. This much only, I can tell you. While I was a prisoner, I stumbled upon a very valuable secret, something new possessed by the enemy which, however, they have not had the gumption to make use of properly. But I saw that it could be vastly improved upon and made a hundred times more effective. The Government has charged me with this task, and I'm to take it back with me when I go. It's a very vital and important thing, Patricia, and may turn the tide for us. More I cannot tell you. It would not be wise nor even *safe* for you to know. And you can help me most by appearing to know nothing whatever about my affairs. Remember that,—to *know nothing, whatever happens*,—" He was interrupted by a loud knocking at the door and went to open it.

"Telegram for you, sir!" grinned the bell-boy of the snub-nose and twinkling eyes. Captain Meade tore it open hastily.

"Here's a pretty pickle!" he exclaimed, handing the yellow slip to Patricia. "Your Aunt Evelyn fell yesterday, just before she was to take the train from Chicago to meet us here, and will be laid up for the next six or eight weeks with a broken leg. Just like Evelyn!" he added impatiently. "She was

always the worst youngster for falling down and getting damaged at critical moments. And she's kept it up consistently all the rest of her life. I'm sorry for her, of course, but what on earth are we to do?"

They stared blankly at each other. "Poor Aunt Evelyn!" sighed Patricia, sympathetically. "She was looking forward so to this three-months' holiday. She wrote that she hadn't been away from home even a week, for the last ten years, and was going to enjoy the rest so much. I'm awfully sorry for her. She'll be so disappointed!"

"Yes, but that doesn't solve the problem of what *we're* going to do," argued the captain. "She was to be your companion here. I can't be around all the time. I may even have to be away several days at a time. A young girl like you can't stay alone in a big hotel. What in sancho *are* we going to do?" He ran his hands through his hair despairingly. "It was only on the basis of her being able to join us that your mother and I consented to this arrangement at all. I guess now you'll have to go out to Chicago and stay with her, after all. There's no where else for you to go."

"Oh, Daddy, Daddy, don't!" implored Patricia, hurling herself at him in a panic. "I couldn't, I simply *couldn't* stand being parted from you now. And I'd have the most miserable time there. Aunt Evelyn would be in bed and a trained nurse pattering around her all the time, (I know her!) and there'd be nothing to do and I'd be simply wretched and unhappy all the while. We can have such a cosy time here, just you and I, and I'll promise to be very good and quiet and read a lot, and stay here in our own suite all by myself when you are away. I've brought a lot of fancy-work, too, and I'm going to do Red Cross knitting and make all my Christmas presents during these three summer months, so I'll be very, very busy. Do say yes, Daddy!"

Captain Meade looked only half convinced. "I don't like it at all, Patricia. It will not only be lonely, for you, it may possibly even be *dangerous*. There are spies about us all the time. If they should happen to nose out my mission, they'd no doubt try to make it hot for me—and for you too. Your Aunt Evelyn was to be your safeguard. But now—"

Patricia suddenly interrupted him. "Do you have to go away for any length of time very soon? I mean, to go for several days?"

"Well, no," he admitted. "I'm supposed to be giving lectures at the churches and Y. M. C. A.'s of this city and hereabout on my experiences as a prisoner. That, however, is hardly more than a 'blind,' to cover my real work. It will take me away some afternoons and evenings, but I shall not stay away overnight for a few weeks yet, in all likelihood."

"Then, Daddy," urged the wily Patricia, grasping eagerly at this straw, "until you find you have really to be absent for any length of time, let me stay with you. If later on you should find you must go, then we can see what to do. Meantime let's be happy together for a while and see what's going to turn up. I'll even go to Chicago then, if you insist, if you'll only let me stay here with you for a while."

And then Captain Meade relinquished the argument, glad to settle the vexed question, at least temporarily. "Very well," he said, a trifle reluctantly. "Stay you shall, since you wish it so, at least for a while. But, Patricia, attend to what I am going to say, and never forget it under any circumstances. It's an old saying that 'walls have ears,' but it was never truer than it is in these days and in a big hotel. Trust no one. Hear everything, see everything—and say nothing. My very life, and even yours too, may depend upon your obeying in this, implicitly."

Patricia nodded gravely. "I understand, Father!" was all she replied. But her brain was a-whirl with feverish, delicious excitement. "Spies," "danger," "secret mission"—the magic words gave her an indescribable thrill! And yet, with it all, she realized too the gravity of the affair; and the realization served to give her a mental balance beyond her years.

"But now let's go down to dinner!" cried the Captain gaily, glad to change to a subject less tense. "I've an appetite worthy of an ex-prisoner in a German camp!"

As they passed out into the corridor, Patricia glanced up at the number over their door. "Suite number 403!" she murmured, squeezing her father's arm. "Now I wonder just what's going to happen to us while this is our home number?"

CHAPTER II

FRIENDS OR ENEMIES?

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They made their way through the long corridors, down the elevator, past the cosy sun-parlors and into the imposing dining-room. To Patricia it was all a splendid adventure, even without the strange, new element so recently hinted at by her father.

"Daddy," she began, when they were settled at a comfortable table for two in a remote corner, "I wonder if you realize how simply heavenly it is for me to sit down to a meal like this (not to speak of all the meals to come!) and pick out just exactly what I want to eat, without having cooked or helped to cook them all beforehand, and knowing I won't have to wash the dishes afterward!" She picked up the menu and scanned it luxuriously. "Now I think some cream-of-asparagus soup and a tenderloin steak and some nice French-fried potatoes would just suit me to-night!"

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There was no response to her remark, and, glancing up curiously, she found her father's gaze riveted on the waiter who had just arrived to take their order. Patricia, too, turned her attention to the man, and found him a singularly unprepossessing individual. He was of medium height, with a swarthy skin, and black hair plastered closely down the sides of his head. His eyebrows were extremely black and bushy, and one eyelid drooped conspicuously. Several of his prominent front teeth were of gold, and gleamed in a sinister manner when he spoke. His voice was thick and husky, and had a foreign accent.

"Are you to be the regular man for this table?" questioned the Captain. The man merely nodded in sullen affirmation.

"I want to know your name," pursued Captain Meade. "I expect to be here some time and may keep this table. And if I'm going to have anyone about me regularly, I prefer to call him by the name that belongs to him. What's yours?"

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"Peter Stoger," still sullenly.

"What nationality?"

"Swiss."

"Very well, Peter. You may take our order." And without further remark, the Captain dismissed him.

"Daddy, I don't like that man," whispered Patricia when he was gone. "He looks like an alien enemy. I don't believe he's Swiss at all. Can't we have another? I know he's going to make me uncomfortable and worry me."

"Oh, he's all right," replied the Captain easily. "You must learn not to mind an unprepossessing outer appearance. If he makes a good waiter, nothing else about *him* will matter much to us. Don't get 'spies' on the brain."

Patricia subsided, unconvinced, and they both gazed quietly about them for the few moments while they were waiting to be served.

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"Oh, Daddy," whispered Patricia, "don't look for a minute or two, but isn't that a lovely woman at the table diagonally at our right, just a little behind you? She reminds me somehow of Aunt Evelyn. And there's a pretty girl with her, just about my age, I should think, but I wonder what makes her look so queer and cross—and sullen?"

After a proper interval, Captain Meade glanced in the direction indicated. The woman's appearance was certainly striking enough to attract attention in any assembly. Her wavy gray hair was elaborately dressed, she had large, liquid brown eyes, she was beautifully if quietly gowned, and was of imposing height and build.

"She does look a little like your Aunt Evelyn," he agreed, "only much handsomer and more imposing. The young person with her doesn't seem to be enjoying life, somehow."

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The girl in question did indeed appear very unhappy. She was fifteen or sixteen years old, but of a slight, fragile build that made her seem younger. Her hair, a mass of dark curls, was tied back simply at the nape of her neck. But her lovely face was marred by a pouting, sullen mouth, and her big dark eyes gazed about her with an expression that struck Patricia as one half-frightened, half-rebellious. She did not often look about her, however, but kept her gaze in the main riveted on her plate. Her companion chatted with her almost continuously, but she answered only in monosyllables or not at all.

They were a strange pair. Patricia could not understand them at all, nor could she, for the remainder of the meal, keep her eyes long from turning toward their table. The older woman fascinated her, not only by her handsome appearance and vague resemblance to her aunt, but also because of some subtle attraction in her vivacious manner. Once she looked up suddenly, caught Patricia's gaze fixed on her, and smiled in so winning a manner that Patricia was impelled to smile back in response. The girl puzzled her by her strange, inexplicable conduct toward one who was so evidently interested and absorbed in her. Patricia found herself wondering more and more what could be the relationship between the two.

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But their own meal now delightfully finished with French ice cream and tiny cups of black coffee, Patricia and her father rose to leave the dining-room. Their way led directly past the table that had so deeply interested Patricia. As she approached it, she noticed that a dainty handkerchief belonging to the older woman had fallen unheeded to the floor at her side. Stooping to pick it up, Patricia restored it, and was rewarded by another charming smile and a "Thank you, dear!" But in

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the same instant her eye caught that of the young girl, and was held by it for a long, tense moment. Patricia was no practiced reader of expression, but it seemed to her that in this moment, fear, hope, dread and longing were all mirrored successively in the beautiful dark eyes raised to her face. Then the lids were dropped and the girl went on eating in apparent unconcern.

Patricia and her father passed on. They had almost reached the door of the big dining-room when Captain Meade stopped suddenly to grasp the hand of an elderly lady seated at a table near the door.

"Mrs. Quale! by all things unexpected! How do you happen to be here? Let me present my daughter, Patricia." Patricia made her best curtsy to one of the quaintest little elderly ladies she thought she had ever seen.

"Delighted to know Patricia," began Mrs. Quale. "I'm here by virtue of having my house burn down, not exactly over my head, but while I was away in New Haven. Carelessness of old Juno, my colored cook. She would keep too hot a range fire and overheated the chimney. At any rate, here I am till the thing is rebuilt, and a precious long job they're making of it, with all these war-time restrictions. So this is Patricia! I saw her once before when she was a tiny baby. Are you staying here, Captain Meade?"

The Captain sketched briefly for her, the reason of their presence in the big hotel,—his wife's breakdown and departure to a sanatorium; the closing-up of their home and his coming with Patricia for a combination of holiday for her and lecture-program for him to this distant city, of their disappointment about Aunt Evelyn, and their consequent predicament.

"Well, don't worry your head another moment about Patricia," laughed Mrs. Quale. "Fate seems to have arranged things very nicely, that I should be here to act as her chaperon whenever necessary, and general adviser at all times. My suite is 720, ninth floor. Be sure you call on me soon, Patricia, and we'll get really acquainted in short order. Your father played in my back yard as a child (his house was right next door to ours) and so I feel quite like a grandmother to you!"

"I like Mrs. Quale, Daddy," Patricia confided to her father, as they were ascending to their rooms in the elevator. "I like the way her hair is fixed in those queer, old-fashioned scallops, and her dear, round, soft face, and her jolly manner. But how is it, I've never heard you speak of her before?"

"She is an old friend of my boyhood days," replied her father, "and, as she said, we used to live next door to her. I don't know why I didn't think of her right away, when your aunt's telegram came. I shouldn't have hesitated to take you straight to her and put you in her care. However, if her house is out of commission and she's staying here, it answers the purpose even better. You must be sure to call on her in her rooms to-morrow. Now, I'm afraid you're in for a lonely evening, Patricia, for I have an important business matter to attend to, and may be detained rather late. Telephone down to the office for anything you need or any attention you want, but don't leave these rooms on any consideration—short of a fire! Tomorrow we'll do the town and go out somewhere in the evening, so I hope you won't be lonely to-night,—eh, honey?"

"Indeed I won't be lonely. Don't you worry about me a minute!" agreed Patricia. "I've heaps of things to do."

When Captain Meade had gone, Patricia flew about, busily occupying herself with unpacking her trunk and making her bedroom a little more homelike with a few of her own personal knickknacks and belongings. When this occupation could be prolonged no further, she sank down in a cosy chair by the table in the living-room, intending to read a magazine, but in reality to dream delightfully over the events of the day and her father's strange, half-exhilarating, half-terrifying hints.

A great hotel full of people,—literally hundreds of them,—coming and going continually,—some of them friends, some of them enemies, perhaps,—and she, Patricia Meade in the center of it, she and her father the very center of a whirlpool of plots and danger, perhaps! Then more sober thought reminded her that there was, in all probability, no likelihood of anything particularly thrilling except in her own imagination, and she laughed at herself for romancing so foolishly. They would have a very delightful holiday, she and her father. He would accomplish safely and without difficulty, the mission that occupied him, they would return home to a reunited household at the end of the summer,—and then he would go away, 'over there' again.

At this point in her reverie, she suddenly dropped into an unpleasant depression and decided to send for a sandwich and a glass of milk, write a tiny note to her mother and go to bed. All at once she realized how very tired she was and how the excitement and exhilaration had all evaporated, leaving only weariness in their place. Rather timidly she telephoned her order to the office and sat down again to await its arrival.

Five minutes later, she answered a knock at the door, to find the grinning, implike bell-boy of their first encounter, standing there with a tray.

"Didn't have no chicken left, ma'am, so I got you tongue. Best I could do!" he vouchsafed.

"Oh, thanks! That will do just as well," she replied, then something impelled her to inquire, "Do you always answer the calls in this corridor?"

"Yep,—at least I try to work it that way. I got a reason!" he ended darkly.

"A reason? What is it?" she asked idly.

"Not allowed to tell. State secret. Governor forbids it!" he grinned; and Patricia found herself laughing as much at his serio-comic expression as at his very apparent nonsense. "Anything else

wanted?" he ended.

"Nothing but your name," she replied, following her father's tactics. "If you're going to be around here regularly, my father would like to know it."

"Oh, it's Chet, just Chet Jackson!" he said, apparently a trifle dumfounded to think that anyone should care to know it. To the hotel at large he was only 'Number 27.'

"Well, goodnight. That will be all, I think." And Patricia turned back into the room to lay the tray on the table. But as she retraced her steps to close the door, she suddenly remembered that she had meant to order ice-water for the night also, and walked out into the corridor to see if Chester were still in sight. He was not, however, and she turned back toward her own door, murmuring, "Oh, well, it doesn't really matter. I don't want to bother 'phoning down again. Daddy can send for it when he comes in."

What impelled her, just at that instant, to turn her head and glance over her shoulder, she never quite knew. Perhaps if she had not, if she had gone quietly in and closed her door, all future events might have been different. At any rate, turn her head she did, drawn by some mysterious power, and beheld a curious sight.

A door diagonally opposite her own, across the corridor, was standing a trifle ajar. It had not been so while she was talking to the bell-boy, of that she was positive, nor had she heard the faintest sound of its being opened. And in the opening was framed a face, gazing at her absorbedly, intently. Patricia's heart gave a sudden leap. It was the face of the young girl she had noticed in the dining-room.

So unexpected to both was this encounter of eyes, that for a long instant, neither could remove her gaze. Patricia was first to recover her poise; moreover, truth to tell, she was even a trifle pleased at this opportunity to break the growing monotony of the evening. She smiled her friendliest smile at the face across the corridor, and with its resultant effect on the girl in the opposite doorway, she was not a little astonished. The expression in the big, black eyes changed suddenly from watchfulness to wonder, and a slow, reluctant answering smile curved the sullen mouth. The effect was like a shaft of sunlight breaking through a black cloud.

"I was looking for our bell-boy," Patricia called across laughingly and informally. "He escaped before I could speak about bringing ice-water." The girl in the opposite doorway suddenly realized that her presence too, might call for some explanation.

"I was looking for my—ah—for Mme. Vanderpoel," she hesitated. "She has gone out. I am a little lonely—and was watching for her—to return." She spoke with a noticeably foreign accent and her manner was reticent and confused. But Patricia, for some inexplicable reason felt immediately drawn to her. The girl was lonely. So was she. What possible objection could there be to spending a while in each other's company?

"Why, I'm lonely, too," she vouchsafed. "My father was to be away all the evening. Won't you come in and sit with me awhile? I've a couple of sandwiches that we can divide, or I can send for more. Do come!"

For a moment it seemed as if the girl were about to consent. A surprised, dimpling smile lit her face for an instant, and she replied, "Oh, thanks! Since you are so—"

At this moment the door of the room adjoining hers opened and a waiter came out, bearing in his hands a tray of used dishes, and passed directly between them, down the corridor. He glanced neither to the right nor left, and disappeared in a moment down the turning at the end of the hall. Patricia realized with a tiny qualm of dislike that it was the waiter of her own table. But his passing had broken the spell of the new acquaintance.

"I thank you—but—but this evening I must stay in the room," the girl resumed, inexplicably contradicting what she had plainly intended to say at first. The bright smile was gone. Her face had again assumed the clouded, sullen expression. Patricia was thoroughly puzzled.

"Well, that's too bad!" was all she could find to reply. "Same here, or perhaps I could run over to you. Are you staying here long?"

"I think so. I am not sure how long."

"Oh, well, then we'll have plenty of time to get acquainted. Goodnight!" Patricia ended pleasantly, as she closed her door.

But sitting alone and nibbling her sandwiches later, she found herself vexed with many puzzling surmises. Who was this strange, interesting, appealing foreign girl? What was her relation to the beautiful woman she called 'Mme. Vanderpoel'? Why had she appeared to assent to the invitation so gladly, and suddenly retracted after the passing of the man, Peter Stoger?

"I like her, though," thought Patricia confusedly, "And yet I can't for the life of me tell why. I can't make her out. I don't believe what she said about looking for that woman to come back. I think that was only an excuse. I firmly believe she was watching *me*. But why? There's something queer about the whole thing. But, no matter what happens, I'm going to make a desperate effort to get better acquainted with her. I believe we're going to be friends."

CHAPTER III

THE SHADOW ON THE WALL

33

In spite of her resolution to get better acquainted with her mysterious neighbor, however, Patricia made no further progress in that direction for several days. These were spent in a round of sight-seeing with her father through the big, busy, manufacturing city in which they were staying, at present so absorbed in its war work and munition making. After that came a series of delightful trolley-trips through distant and picturesque parts of the surrounding country. And when she was at leisure at all, Patricia spent not a little time with Mrs. Quale, finding a real delight in her quaint, sunny, comfortable company. During their wanderings, it chanced that she and her father took few meals at the hotel. And thus it fell out that she saw nothing, or almost nothing, of the curious couple that had so interested her on the first night. Once, indeed, she did have a brief glimpse of them at breakfast, but the older woman only acknowledged her presence by a friendly little nod. The girl never so much as turned her head or looked in Patricia's direction.

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Then, on the sixth morning after their arrival, came a change. Captain Meade announced it as they were taking their leisurely breakfast.

"We've done all the gadding about that I'll be able to indulge in for a while," he told her. "I must settle down to business now, and I'm afraid you'll be left pretty much on your own hands."

"Well, to tell the truth, I don't mind very much," she replied, lazily dallying with the grape-fruit. "I'm so tired of being on the go that I'll appreciate a little rest and quietness."

"I must go off this morning to be gone almost all day," went on Captain Meade. "You will be a little lonely, perhaps, but there's always Mrs. Quale. Don't rush her too much, however. Remember she's a very busy woman. But you can always turn to her in emergencies or if you need advice."

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"No, I won't bother her," returned Patricia, "and I think I'll spend the morning over at the sea-wall in the park. I love it there, and it's just the place to take some knitting and a book and perhaps write some letters. Will you be back to lunch?"

"I hardly expect to. Order a lunch sent to the room, or go down to the dining-room if you prefer, but don't wait for me."

"Oh, I'll have my luncheon sent upstairs, I guess," sighed Patricia. "I detest that Peter Stoger more every time I see him. I feel as if he were spying on me constantly. I can't understand why you don't realize it, too."

The captain smiled as they rose to leave the table. "Poor Peter would be surprised, and horrified probably, if he realized he was posing as a German spy for your benefit. But suit yourself, Patricia, about luncheon, and don't be alarmed if I'm not back till late. If I'm not here by dinner-time, ask Mrs. Quale if you may dine at her table."

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"I surely will," agreed Patricia. "And I—I beg your pardon!" The latter remark she addressed suddenly to the handsome woman whom she now knew as Madame Vanderpoel, who was breakfasting alone at her own table, and, as they were passing, had touched Patricia, a trifle hesitantly, on the arm.

"It is I that must beg *your* pardon," she answered. "I am going to be so bold as to ask a very great favor, though I do not even know you, but I am in great trouble and perplexity this morning."

"Why, I'll be glad to do anything, of course," began Patricia, in surprise.

"I was sure you would. I read it in your face. That is why I ask," Madame Vanderpoel hurried on. "I am called away to New York this morning on the most urgent business—something that cannot be postponed. Unfortunately, my dear little charge, Virginie, Mademoiselle de Vos, is quite miserable—a violent nervous headache; she is subject to them frequently, poor little soul! I dread to leave her alone all day in the care only of that stupid chambermaid, yet my business is such that I simply cannot postpone it. Would it be imposing too much on your kindness to ask you to stop in there occasionally, just for a moment or two, to see that she is as comfortable as possible? You are, I believe, just across the hall from us, so it would not be a long journey."

37

"Why, I'll be delighted to!" agreed Patricia, heartily. "I'll sit with her just as long as she cares to have me. Don't worry about her at all. I'm famous as a nurse, too, for my mother never has been very well, and I'm used to waiting on her."

"Oh, thank you so much!" breathed Madame Vanderpoel, seemingly much relieved. "I'll be so much easier in mind. I leave almost at once after breakfast. Go in as soon as you like. Just knock at the door and open it. I'll leave it unlocked. I can never repay your kindness."

38

"That solves the problem of my day for me, Daddy," remarked Patricia, when they were back in their rooms. "I'll stay around here and visit Virginie de Vos (My! but I'm glad I know her name at last!) every little while. I've been real anxious to meet her, and didn't know how I was going to get the chance."

But the captain frowned a little doubtfully. "It's all right, I suppose, and you couldn't very well refuse, but I rather wish you didn't have to come in contact with any strangers here. They may be all right—and they may not. These are queer times, and you can't trust any one. Get Mrs. Quale to go in with you, if possible, and don't stay there more than fifteen minutes at any time."

Patricia opened her eyes wide with astonishment. "Well, of all things! You don't suspect people like *that* of—of anything queer, do you?"

39

"I suspect no one, and trust no one in this entire establishment except, of course, Mrs. Quale. But don't get another attack of 'spies' on the brain, just because I warned you to be ordinarily cautious. It's probably all right. I'll be back by eight o'clock, anyway. Now, good-by, honey, and take care of yourself."

Patricia waited until nearly ten o'clock before essaying her first visit to the sick girl across the hall. Then, obedient to her father's injunction, she called up Mrs. Quale on the house telephone, to ask if that lady would find it convenient to accompany her. But the clerk at the desk informed her that Mrs. Quale had gone out for the day, leaving only her maid. Patricia had seen this woman several times, quiet, elderly, and noticeably hard of hearing, and who, Mrs. Quale said, had been in her service for many years. So Patricia was left with no alternative but to make her first venture alone. 40

"I'm sure Daddy wouldn't want me to neglect the poor little sick thing, even if Mrs. Quale isn't there," she told herself as she knocked at the door of number 404, across the hall.

She had vaguely expected to find the sick girl in bed, her head swathed in bandages, the room darkened and orderly. The sight that met her eyes as she entered, at a half-muffled "Come in," was as different as possible from that picture. The room was in great disorder, and bright with the glare of the morning sun. Both of the twin-beds were unmade—and empty. But at one of the windows, her back to the room, stood Virginie de Vos, staring out into the street. She did not turn round as Patricia entered.

"I beg your pardon—good morning," ventured Patricia, timidly. "I came at the request of your—of Madame Vanderpoel, who said you were ill. Is there anything I can do for you? Oughtn't you to be in bed?" 41

Still with her back to her visitor, Virginie shook her head. Suddenly, however, she whirled around. Her eyes were red and swollen with crying, but there were no tears in them now.

"Thank you—oh, very much! It is so thoughtful of you to come! My head does not ache—at least, not now. I am better. I do not need any care."

"But surely, there must be something the matter! You—you cannot be feeling quite well. Madame Vanderpoel said you were suffering severely," returned Patricia, thoroughly puzzled.

"Whatever it was, I am better now," muttered the girl, almost sullenly. "But you are—you are so kind!" she added, and her eyes lit up with a friendly gleam for an instant.

"Look here," cried Patricia, in sudden determination, "perhaps you *are* feeling better, but your headache may return. Now, I have a plan to propose. It's very hot and glaring and noisy in this room. You see, it's on the street side and you get all the racket from this busy avenue. Beside that, it hasn't been made up yet. Come over and spend the morning in our sitting-room with me. It's so quiet and pleasant there, for it faces on the little park at the back. I'll darken it up, and you can lie on the couch, and I'll read or talk to you—or just let you alone to sleep. *Please* come!" 42

Her manner was so cordial, so urgent and convincing, that Virginie visibly wavered.

"I ought—I ought not." She hesitated. "You do not know—you cannot know—"

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Patricia, impatiently. "What earthly reason could there be for not coming? Just come right along, and we'll have a lovely time. I'm awfully lonesome, and you probably would be, too, alone here all day. So come!"

Very reluctantly the girl assented and followed Patricia. Once established in the cool, pleasant, half-darkened sitting-room, however, her hesitancy seemed suddenly to vanish. Patricia insisted that she occupy the couch, which she finally consented to do, though patently more to please her hostess than herself. 43

"I am not sick; my head does not ache at all. Madame Vanderpoel was—er—mistaken." And, indeed, she looked the picture of health, now that her eyes were returning to a normal appearance.

"Never mind. She must have been worried about you, or she wouldn't have asked me to see to you. So lie down here for a while, and I'll sit by you and do this fancy-work. I suppose I ought to be knitting, but I do get so tired of it at times. Do you ever embroider?"

"Ah, I—I love it!" cried Virginie, in sudden enthusiasm. "Anything of the—artistic I love and have studied to do." It was when she grew excited, Patricia noticed, that her language became a trifle confused. 44

"Tell me," Patricia suddenly asked—"that is, if you don't mind—what nationality are you? I had thought perhaps you were French."

The girl's manner again grew restrained. But she only replied in a voice very low and tense, "I am a Belgian!"

Patricia impulsively dropped on her knees by the couch and took both of Virginie's hands in her own.

"You poor, poor darling!" she murmured. "And did you—were you driven out of the country?"

"We lived in Antwerp," Virginie replied simply. "My father and I have always lived there. My mother is long dead. When the war came, I was being educated—in one of the best schools. At first it was thought there would be no danger. Antwerp was thought to be—what you call—impregnable. Then, when the Germans had taken Malines and Louvain and Liège, Madame Vanderpoel (she is my mother's sister-in-law), came to take me away from the school, to take me to England. She told my father it was too dangerous, that he should flee also. But he would not go. He is an old man, and I am the last of his children. He was too old for army service, but he said he would remain and defend 45

his villa there in Antwerp. He declared the city could not be taken. But he insisted that I go away to England—to safety. He sent me from him, though it broke our two hearts—and I have never seen him since. You know what happened to Antwerp."

She hid her face in the pillows and shook with unrepressed sobbing. Patricia knew not what to say to comfort the stricken girl. For several moments she only smoothed the dark hair in silence, but her touch was evidently soothing, for Virginie presently sat up and dried her eyes. She continued no further, however, with any personal disclosures.

"We too have suffered," began Patricia, thinking to divert her mind from herself,—46"suffered dreadfully. You know, my father went over with the army when the war first broke out here, and when we bade him good-by, we knew there was a big chance of never seeing him again. But when we got word, a few months later, that he had been wounded and taken prisoner by the Germans, we were *sure* we shouldn't. The suspense was simply frightful. I never want to go through such a thing again as long as I live. Six long months it was, and we had no idea what had happened to him. We almost hoped he was dead, because the things we read of as happening to the prisoners were so unspeakable. And then he escaped and came back to us—we never knew a thing about it till he was brought home one day. I thought Mother would die with the joy of it. She's in a sanatorium now—getting over the shock of it all. So, you see, Virginie dear, I know what you have suffered, and I'm sure your troubles are going to vanish—just as ours did."47

But Virginie only shook her head. "It is not possible. You do not know all—you cannot. My father is—perhaps—worse than dead. He—but still, I feel very close to you. We have both suffered. We understand—each other. I—I love you!" And she kissed Patricia impulsively on both cheeks.

Another silence followed, the girls sitting close together on the couch, in wordless, understanding sympathy. Suddenly Virginie sprang to her feet, her dark eyes gleaming. "Hush! Listen!" she cried. "I heard a strange rustling outside the door. Can it be—some one listening?" She hurried to the door and pulled it open, Patricia close at her heels. The corridor was empty.

"It was probably only a maid going by," laughed Patricia. "You're as scary as I am, I do believe. I heard it, too. But let's go and settle down again. I'm sure we're going to be the best kind of friends. Isn't it lucky we're right across the hall from each other?"48

But Virginie did not assent to the latter question. Instead, she put one of her own. "Do you speak French at all?" she inquired. "I have studied the English, but I speak it with difficulty. I *think* only in French, and I can express myself better in that tongue. It is my native language."

"Oh, I'd love to talk French with you!" agreed Patricia, joyfully. "Father made me study it and speak it with him ever since I was a little girl. But I haven't had much practice in it lately, and I don't believe my accent is very good. We'll use it all the time, and you can tell me when I make mistakes."

So they began to chatter in French, to Virginie's evident relief, and her manner presently lost much of its restraint. At noon Patricia sent down for a delicious luncheon to be served for them both in the room, but was thoroughly disgusted to find that her pet aversion, Peter Stoger, had been sent up with it. And though he seemed anxious to arrange the table for them, she summarily dismissed him, shutting and locking the door after him with a shudder.49

"I thoroughly detest that man," she confided to Virginie. And, rather to her surprise, Virginie heartily agreed with her.

"I know. I feel a great dislike toward him. I think he is an enemy. I think he is—watching."

"Precisely what *I've* thought!" cried Patricia. "Isn't it queer that we've both felt the same about him! Ugh! I wish now that we'd gone down to the dining-room. We could have sat at your table. You have another waiter. Well, never mind. Let's enjoy ourselves now, anyway."

The afternoon wore away, finding the two girls still in each other's company, still exchanging girlish confidences over fancy-work and books. But they did not refer again to Virginie's father, and both seemed to avoid any reference to war subjects in general. Patricia longed to take the girl more into her own confidence about her father and his affairs; but, mindful of Captain Meade's constantly reiterated warnings, she resisted the impulse.50

At half past five Virginie remarked that she must return to her room and dress for dinner, as Madame Vanderpoel would soon be back.

"Tell me," asked Patricia, "why do you not call her aunt, as she is your mother's sister-in-law? It would be natural."

Virginie suddenly retired to her shell again. "I never have," was all she vouchsafed. "I—do not know why—that is—" They were walking toward the door as she replied. All at once she stopped, tensely rigid. "There it is again!" she whispered. "Do you not hear it?" There was indeed a curious intermittent sound, as of some one cautiously tiptoeing down the carpeted corridor. Patricia opened the door with a quick jerk.



"You see?" whispered Virginie, clinging to Patricia spasmodically!

The hall again was empty. But at the far end of the corridor, where it turned into another, the wall was illumined by a brilliant patch of sunlight from some window out of sight. And blackly on that patch of sunlight, as on a lighted screen, was outlined the silhouette of a man's form, and of something else that he evidently carried in his hands.

51

"You see?" whispered Virginie, clinging to Patricia spasmodically.

"Yes, I see!" answered Patricia.

The motionless silhouette was unmistakably the form of Peter Stoger, carrying a tray.

CHAPTER IV THE CRIMSON PATCH

52

"I don't like it at all, somehow, and yet I can't exactly tell you why." Captain Meade shuffled the books and magazines on the sitting-room table, rearranging them precisely and absent-mindedly. On his forehead was an anxious frown.

"But, Daddy," cried Patricia, "what possible objection can there be to my being friends with that lovely girl? She is so lonely and so sad! I just love her already. Think what she has suffered—and is still suffering! It seems as if it would be simply cruel not to be friends with her now, after what she has told me."

"But the very things you've told me about her and your conversations with her make me feel there's something strange about the whole affair. She's not as candid and open in manner as I should like. She seems to be hiding something all the time. And her relationship to that Madame Vanderpoel appears singular. She says the woman is her aunt, by marriage, yet she doesn't seem to care to call her so. I am deeply sorry for the girl, if her story is true, as it probably is, but I feel as if there is much that she is concealing. And I frankly confess that I do not like this Madame Vanderpoel. Why should she have told you that the girl was ill with a severe headache, and then you go in and find her in the best of health, apparently? Things don't hang together, somehow."

53

"Well, what am I going to do?" demanded Patricia, almost in tears. "Madame Vanderpoel has invited me to go with them on a trip to Creston Beach to-morrow and spend the day with them there. I suppose she wants to do something in return for my looking after Virginie to-day. She spoke to me about it as we passed her table to-night. You had gone on ahead to speak to Mrs. Quale. I told her I'd ask you about it. Are you going to say I mustn't go?"

54

The captain tugged at the end of his short mustache and strode up and down the room perplexedly. At length he spoke. "You simply must trust me in this matter, honey, and remember that I'm not an old tyrant, but just a cautious Daddy, striving to do what is best for us all. You will have an engagement with Mrs. Quale to-morrow. Fortunately she suggested to me this evening that perhaps you would care to spend the morning with her and help her select some wall-papers for her house that is being rebuilt and decorated. And let me offer just this wee bit of advice. See as much as you want of this little Virginie when you can be with her alone. She is a poor, forlorn child who is suffering greatly—of that I feel certain. And I believe there is no harm in her. But avoid, if you can, any engagement or invitation which includes the older woman."

"Father, what do you suspect her of? What are your suspicions about her?"

55

"I suspect her of nothing. I do not care for her on general principles. Sometimes we have only instinct to trust, and mine tells me, just now, simply to be careful. That's all. Now call her up on the 'phone and say you will not be able to accompany them, and thank her, of course, for so kindly thinking of you."

Patricia did as she was bid, and was answered by Virginie, who said Madame Vanderpoel was not there. "I'm so sorry that I'll not be able to go, but Father had made another engagement for me," Patricia assured her, and there was a murmured reply over the instrument that the captain could not catch. But when Patricia hung up the receiver, her face was a study in perplexity.

"What do you think she said, Daddy? 'I am not sorry. I enjoy seeing you more by ourselves.' That was all, but isn't it singular? I don't believe she cares for that aunt of hers. And yet, I can't understand why. Madame Vanderpoel seems lovely, to me, and she appears to be so fond of Virginie. I'll take the hint, however. And it fits in very nicely with what you advised me to do, too. Oh, by the way, Daddy, I nearly forgot to tell you what happened this afternoon. And if you don't think that Peter Stoger is spying, after you hear it, I give up." And she described to him the strange incident in the hall.

56

This time the captain did not laugh at her fears. Instead, he frowned and looked worried. "That does certainly seem suspicious. I'll have to look into the matter," he vouchsafed, and refused to discuss the incident further.

In the two weeks that elapsed after the foregoing incident, the friendship between the girls increased, after a fashion, but Patricia was at times sorely puzzled and perplexed by the strange moods and whims and actions of her new companion. On one day they would be in each other's company for several hours, visiting in the Meades' attractive sitting-room, where they read or sewed, or taking long walks or trolley-rides into the country. On these occasions Virginie would be almost clinging in her confidence in, and affection for, Patricia. Not the tiniest flaw would mar their intercourse, and Patricia would acknowledge herself more deeply interested than ever in this attractive girl. Then on the next day, perhaps for several days following, Virginie would seem distant, reserved, morose, sometimes almost disagreeable. She would pass Patricia with the coldest nod, refuse to make any engagement to be with her, and almost seem to resent any advances toward the furtherance of their friendship. Patricia worried and grieved about it in secret, though she would not openly acknowledge, even to her father, that Virginie's singular conduct hurt her.

57

Madame Vanderpoel, on the contrary, always seemed most cordial and friendly, and while she never commented on her ward's conduct to Patricia, would often cast at her a deprecatory and apologetic glance when Virginie was more than usually disagreeable in manner. Plainly, the girl's strange conduct tried her sorely, though she was always very sweet about it and ignored it

58

whenever possible. Never again, since the first occasion, had she attempted to induce Patricia to accompany them anywhere or spend any time in their united company. Altogether, so thoughtful and agreeable was she, that Patricia, more fascinated by her than ever, often found herself wishing that she were at liberty to see more of this pleasant Madame Vanderpoel.

One rainy afternoon, Captain Meade having gone out, to be away till a late hour that night on a lecture engagement, Patricia called up her friend on the house telephone to ask her to come across the hall and spend the rest of the day with her. She did this in considerable trepidation, for Virginie had been more than usually morose and disagreeable and distant for a number of days past. As it happened, it was Madame Vanderpoel who answered the 'phone.

"Why certainly, my dear! Virginie will come over at once," she replied cordially. "She has been quite lonely this afternoon, and wishing for something to do. You are very kind."

Patricia had just begun to frame an answer, when, somewhat to her surprise, the receiver at the other end was suddenly hung up and the connection cut. The action was very abrupt. And though she told herself she certainly *must* have been mistaken, she thought she had heard, before being cut off, a voice in the room with Madame Vanderpoel declaring, "*I will not go!*" It was all very puzzling.

Virginie did not come in for some time, and in the interval Patricia framed a resolution. She would fathom this girl's singular conduct to-day or never, even if she had to ask the most personal questions to do so.

When the little Belgian at last arrived, she was polite, but distant, in manner, and distinctly unhappy. To Patricia's cordial remarks she returned only monosyllabic answers, was restless and ill at ease. They were sitting together on the couch, each pretending to be deeply engrossed in her fancy-work, when Patricia with wildly beating heart, suddenly determined that the time had come to put her resolve into effect.

"Virginie," she began, abruptly turning to the girl, "won't you tell me what is the trouble? What have I done to offend or annoy you? You are often so strange in your actions toward me. I cannot understand it. I—"

But she got no farther. To her intense amazement and dismay, Virginie suddenly threw herself across the couch in a passion of wild and violent weeping. It was several moments before Patricia could soothe her back to a state where she was able even to speak.

"Oh, I knew you would think this! I knew it. I knew it!" she sobbed. "I knew the time would come when I must explain—or lose your friendship. If you only could trust me. If you only knew—"

Patricia, at a loss for words, could only squeeze her hand in silent assurance.

"But you never will know—and I never can tell you!" she went on wildly. "I love you—I love you—as I love no one else on earth now—beside my father. Do you believe that?"

"I believe it if you say so," Patricia assured her quietly. "I feel sure you are telling me the truth." Her calm, soothing manner was having its effect on the girl's hysterical condition. Virginie herself suddenly became calmer.

"I wish you would make a promise," she continued. "If you knew my life and all that I have to endure,—all the puzzling, bewildering things that are pulling me this way and that—things that I perhaps can never tell you, because they would concern others,—I know that you would promise me this, never to care whether my manner seems cold toward you; never to think unkind thoughts of me, no matter how I may act—to say to yourself always, when I seem the worst, 'Virginie loves me; she does not mean this mood for *me!*' Could you make me that promise, Patricia? Some day, if God wills, I may be able to explain."

"Indeed, Virginie," cried her companion, sincerely touched, "I trust you every way and always! I'll never be annoyed any more, no matter how you act. I'll understand that it's something quite outside of myself that is causing it. Will that make you feel any better?"

Virginie did not answer in words, but the grateful pressure of her hands was sufficient response. The atmosphere having thus been cleared, Patricia abandoned the subject and plunged gaily into something quite different.

"You told me once, Virginie," she began, "that you had done a good deal of work in water-colors at various times, but you have never shown me any of your sketches. Have you any here with you, and if so, could I see them? I'm awfully interested in that sort of thing, though I don't do much of the kind myself."

"Ah, yes!" cried Virginie, brightening at once. "I have a whole portfolio in my room. I will go to fetch it. I love the work, and I turn to it whenever I have an opportunity." She ran out of the room and hurried back with a batch of color sketches that she spread out on the couch. They were really exceedingly clever, as Patricia recognized at once.

"Why, this is wonderful. You are a real, out-and-out artist, and I never realized it before!" she exclaimed enthusiastically. "I dabble a little in that sort of thing myself once in a while, but I'm not a great success. I do wish I had inherited some of father's artistic ability. He can do beautiful work, but I only just love it and admire it."

"Ah, your father is also an artist?" demanded Virginie, interested afresh.

"Well, I don't know that I'd call him exactly an *artist*," qualified Patricia. "He can draw and paint 'most everything fairly well, but he does excel in one thing. He's crazy about it,—it's a regular hobby with him,—entomology, you know, the study of bugs and moths and caterpillars and

butterflies, and all that sort of thing. And he can make the most beautiful sketches of them. Many's the day I've gone on a long butterfly hunt with him, and then have come home and watched him make sketches of the specimens we've caught. Just let me show you some of the things he's done. I think he has a number of his pet sketches in his trunk. He never travels without them." Patricia brought her father's sketches and placed them in Virginie's hands.

And now it was Virginie's turn to exclaim over the really beautiful work of Captain Meade. There were caterpillars and moths and butterflies, executed with consummate skill and exquisitely colored; each labeled with its own name and species. Virginie marveled over their curious titles.

"Ah, but see here, what singular names—"The Silver Spot,' 'The Red Admiral,' 'The Painted Lady'! Why are they so called?"

"I think it's mainly because of the different marking on the wings," answered Patricia. "You see, each one—but what's that? Some one knocking?" She ran to the door and opened it. Madame Vanderpoel stood outside.

"Do pardon me," she began hesitatingly. "I am making this little blouse for Virginie and have just come to a place where I can go no farther till I try it on. May I come in?"

"Why, surely!" returned Patricia, courteously, and Madame Vanderpoel entered. As Patricia had feared, however, there was an immediate chilling of the atmosphere as far as Virginie was concerned. The girl said not a word, but obediently, if ungraciously, slipped the pretty blouse over her head and stood in silence while Madame Vanderpoel made some necessary alterations. The lady herself strove to appear quite unobservant of the change and chatted on brightly while she completed her work. Patricia, bewildered and uncomfortable, also tried to appear as though nothing unusual was the matter. But she found the task difficult. At length, Madame Vanderpoel, declaring herself satisfied with the result, rose to go. While passing the table, however, she noticed Captain Meade's sketches, and, laying down her sewing, stopped to examine them.

"Ah, what beautiful, what unusual work!" she murmured, taking them up, one by one, and asking Patricia some questions about them. But at last she took her departure.

"Oh, by the way, may Virginie stay and have dinner with me here in our rooms?" questioned Patricia, before she left. Madame Vanderpoel gave her consent and was gone.

It was some time before Virginie recovered her spirits after this interruption, but when she was herself again, the two girls resumed their now wholly delightful intercourse.

"Let's send down for some sarsaparilla and fancy cakes!" suddenly cried Patricia. "I'm hungry and thirsty, too, and it's a good while till dinner-time." She telephoned her wish to the office, and Chester Jackson presently knocked at the door with the order.

"Golly!" he cried suddenly, catching sight of the mass of sketches on the table, "but them's purty things! You'd think they was the real article lit all over the place. Can I look at them?" Patricia laughingly gave her consent, and he turned them over, chuckling at their names. But he, too, at length departed, and the girls were not interrupted further till dinner-time, when Patricia asked to have the meal served in the room.

It was Peter Stoger who entered later with a heavily laden tray, approached the table, glanced about helplessly a moment, then planted the tray directly on top of all the sketches littered over its surface.

"Oh, be careful!" cried Patricia, in dismay. "Don't you see what you're doing? Hold the tray until I remove those things." Peter indifferently lifted the tray while she hastily collected the sketches and put them aside. Then he stolidly resumed his work of arranging the meal, and withdrew.

It was late when Captain Meade returned. Patricia had been telling how she had spent her day, and had just come to the part where she had showed his sketches to Virginie.

"Great Jupiter! You *did*?" he cried distractedly. "Why on earth didn't I warn you not to! I never dreamed you'd be tempted to do such a thing. Where are they—quick?"

Patricia watched him in a mystified daze as he nervously shuffled them over. What could it all mean? Had she done wrong?

"It's just as I feared!" he groaned. "*The Crimson Patch is gone!*"

CHAPTER V WHO TOOK IT?

70

It was a white-faced pair that finished a frantic, but thoroughly fruitless search, through every room of the suite for the lost sketch of the butterfly. The captain was too upset and nervous and unstrung by the occurrence to comment on the subject, for a time, and Patricia too bewildered and unhappy to ask any questions. But when they had hunted through every conceivable nook and cranny in vain, they gave it up and sat down wearily to rest. The Crimson Patch was gone!

"But, Daddy," moaned Patricia, "why did you never tell me there was anything important about these sketches? I never dreamed of such a thing. I would never, never have done what I did to-day if I had known."

"That's just the trouble," muttered Captain Meade. "There's nothing important about any of them except just that one—and that's—well, *vital!* I never told you about it, because it's safer for you and best all around that you know as little as possible of my affairs. Of course, it never crossed my mind that you'd be moved to *show* them to any one. They're not a matter of general interest."

71

"But what *is* there about this sketch, the Crimson Patch butterfly, that is so important, Daddy, and why didn't you keep it safely locked up? I shouldn't have thought you'd leave it just lying loose in your trunk."

"The secret about this particular sketch, I do not think it best for you to know, even now. You'll always be in a safer position if you can truthfully say you know nothing about it. It looks very much the same as the others—but it *isn't!* That is all I can tell you. And I had an excellent reason for doing just as I did about it. Had I kept an important secret always about my person, or even under lock and key, it would, as a rule, be in far greater danger of discovery than if carefully concealed in some such fashion as this and left around as if there were nothing unusual about it. Don't you understand? But tell me again the whole history of the thing, and who came into the room while you had the sketches out, and when. We've got to find the sketch as speedily as possible. Every moment that it is out of my hands is a dangerous loss of time."

72

Patricia patiently went over the history of the afternoon, recounting every detail she could remember. The captain listened intently, and sat for several moments in deep thought when she had finished.

"Tell me one thing," he suddenly demanded. "Do you distinctly remember seeing the Crimson Patch among the sketches when you first looked them over? Think hard."

"Oh, I know it was there, because Virginie spoke of the curious name and I told her it was given because of the two brilliant red spots on the wings. I know it was there."

73

"Then, as far as I can see," went on Captain Meade, "there were no less than four people in the room, each of whom came in contact with those sketches, and any one of the four may have been the guilty party who took it. Your little friend, Virginie, handled them first, and when she left for the night, you say, she gathered up her own sketches?"

"Daddy dear, you must not suspect *her*—you simply must not!" cried Patricia, sensing at once what he was driving at. "I would rather be suspected myself than have any one dream she could do such a thing. And how on earth could she ever know that the sketch was of any particular value, anyway?"

"What she may know or not know, I haven't pretended to inquire, but you must certainly see how easy it would be for her to slip the thing into her own pile and walk off with it if she wanted."

"Her own sketches were all on the couch," protested Patricia, "and they never once were near yours. I saw her get them together before she left."

74

"But was your back never turned on her during all the time mine were lying about?"

Patricia put her head down on the couch pillows and sobbed audibly.

"It seems too dreadful and unkind and mean to have such suspicions about her!" she wailed.

"Now, Patricia dear, be sensible!" demanded the captain, despairingly. "I'm no more suspicious of her than of any one else. I'm only trying to sift the thing to the bottom. Let's leave her, for a moment, however. You say Madame Vanderpoel was the next one in. She stayed about fifteen minutes, examined the sketches, and went out. Tell me just exactly what she did before she looked them over."

"She glanced at them as she was passing out, asked me if she could look at them, placed her sewing on the table, looked at them all, took up her sewing and went away."

75

"Did she put her sewing down near where they were on the table?" asked the captain.

"Yes, because I remember that she had to move it once, in order to see one or two that were lying under it."

"Do you remember whether the Crimson Patch was among those she looked at or commented on?"

"No, I don't remember. I was busy taking out some stitches in my fancy-work at the time,—something that had gone wrong,—and I didn't particularly notice what she said. But I'm almost sure she didn't mention that one."

"She might very easily have concealed it under her work and walked off with it," he went on. "Of

course, I don't say she *did*, but she might have, had she been so inclined. Now, how about Chester Jackson?"

"Oh, he couldn't possibly have taken a thing without my knowing it. He just leaned over the table and looked at them all and giggled and laughed over their names and said they were 'bully good stuff.' I saw him practically every minute of the time, except for two seconds when I ran into my room for another spool of thread. And he left without a thing in his hands that he could have hidden it in or under." 76

"The 'two seconds' you were out of the room might have been sufficient for him," commented Captain Meade. "So he isn't eliminated, either. But I rather suspect him less than any of the others. How about Peter?"

"*He's* the one, I haven't a doubt. I always did suspect him of being up to something. Of *course* he took it, Daddy! He went and set his tray right down on top of the whole lot of them, when he came in, in what I thought was the stupidest fashion, and I made him take it right up while I cleared them all aside. I believe he could have slipped the sketch under his tray and kept it out of my sight and got away with it without the slightest trouble. Can't you see it, Daddy?" cried Patricia, eagerly. Captain Meade looked only half convinced. 77

"Do you happen to remember whether that particular sketch was uppermost when he came in?"

"No, I don't honestly remember. But I know that the Purple Dart was uppermost when I moved them out of his way. It just happened to catch my eye in passing."

"Well, that proves nothing, of course. But the question now is, what in the world are we going to do about it? I dare not do any telephoning at this time of night (or rather, morning, for it's three o'clock!) or even go out, without exciting suspicion. And that's the last thing I want to attract to myself. Better have it appear that I care nothing about the sketch than to raise a breeze about its disappearance. I had thought that perhaps you might find out from your friend the Belgian girl whether by any chance it had slipped in with her own by mistake. But that must be done later and done with the greatest caution or the fat will be in the fire. And it's too late to order anything brought to the room, or I might have a chance to interview our waiter and bell-boy. Nothing for it, I guess, but to go to bed and get what sleep we can. It's been a bad day's work, honey, but don't blame yourself for a single thing. It's only one of those unpleasant combinations of fortune that will happen, plan as we may. And don't worry. That never did any good yet. Go to sleep and trust that everything's going to come out all right!" 78

In spite of which injunction, however, no sleep visited the unhappy Patricia for the remainder of the night.

CHAPTER VI

THE MYSTERY DEEPENS

79

During that sleepless night, however, Patricia laid some plans of her own, which she purposed to put into execution the next day. She felt weary and lifeless after the excitement and worry of the previous night and the hours of restless tossing that followed. Her father, likewise, seemed fatigued and depressed, though he strove hard, for her sake, as she privately surmised, to appear cheerful and hopeful.

"We'll hurry through breakfast," he told her, as they left the room, "and then I'll start out on the hunt. I've been thinking over a few of the possibilities during the night, and some ideas have occurred to me that I didn't think of at first. I want you to stay rather close to the room to-day—that is, don't go out for any length of time till I get back. I may not return before late afternoon, but don't let that worry you. And don't lose heart, honey! It will probably turn out all right. By the way, when we get down to the dining-room, please try to act as nearly normal as possible, and as if nothing were wrong. It might be fatal to let the world at large notice that all is not as usual. And, of course, don't touch this subject, as far as conversation goes, with a forty-foot pole!"

80

His latter injunctions Patricia found rather difficult to carry out. It was far from easy to appear her usual care-free self when weighed down with such a hideous burden of trouble. If she hadn't felt the thing to be all her own fault, unwitting though it was, she could have borne it better.

Most difficult of all was having to face Peter Stoger, who, in his usual leaden way, waited upon them. His dull stupidity, she always felt, covered a watchfulness, that being hidden, was more trying than if it had been open and aboveboard. This morning she felt certain he was watching them both, with a covert keenness, when he thought himself unobserved. The captain treated Peter in precisely the same fashion as usual. Once only did she observe anything unusual in his manner. This was when the waiter, in passing behind him, brushed his shoulder with the edge of his tray. It was a trivial matter, and, so Patricia thought, would, as a rule, have called forth no comment from her father. But, rather to her surprise, the captain turned on him with an impatient gesture and the quite sharp remark, "Be careful, Peter!" The man apologized almost servilely and backed away.

81

"That shows how worried and tired and upset Father is!" thought Patricia. "He doesn't usually act that way over such a little thing. He probably has his suspicions of that horrid man, too. I'm afraid he's wishing he'd taken my advice about him at first."

Many times during the meal did she glance over toward the table usually occupied by Virginie and Madame Vanderpoel, hoping, yet almost dreading, to see them. But the table remained empty, nor did they appear at all in the dining-room during that meal.

82

"Stay in the room as much as possible to-day," the captain again warned her before he went away. "I don't want to think of these premises being left free for any more queer things to happen."

"I will, but may I see Virginie?"

"I don't see any reason why you shouldn't, especially if it comes about naturally. It won't do to seem to avoid these people, either. But don't force any meeting, and above all things, I hardly need warn you to say nothing about what has happened. That would spoil everything."

For some time after her father left, Patricia sat maturing her plans. See Virginie this day she must, and she thought it could be effected in the most natural manner possible. She would ask her to bring her water-colors and sketches in again, and they would try to do some work, she (Patricia) attempting to make some copies of the sketches under Virginie's direction. In some such natural way the conversation might be led around to her father's sketches, and she might have a chance to determine whether the girl were at all involved in this dreadful affair. Nothing about it need be mentioned directly. Patricia felt sure she could determine, from Virginie's manner, how much she knew.

83

At ten o'clock she went over to the telephone and called up the office, asking to be connected with room 404. The reply she received, caused her a veritable shock.

"The room is vacant."

"*Vacant?*" she demanded. "You mean that Madame Vanderpoel and Mademoiselle de Vos are out?"

"They have gone—left the hotel. They gave up the room this morning and went away for good.... No, they didn't say where they were going or if they intended to return."

84

Patricia hung up the receiver and crept over to a chair by the window. A sort of black mist seemed to float before her eyes and her mind would register no impressions save trivial ones for a long while. She was aware of the distant roar of the city, borne across the more quiet stretches of the park outside her window, of the sparrows chattering in the branches, of the children romping in the quiet walks, the honking of an arriving automobile, and of little else.

Then gradually her numbed brain recovered its normal action. Virginie and her aunt were gone and without a single word to her, a single farewell! Could their abrupt and mysterious departure indicate any but one fact? After the strange disappearance of her father's sketch, what could it mean except that one or both of them were guilty and they were trying to conceal it by flight? One or both of them! No it *could* not be that Virginie was concerned. She would never, never believe that. And yet, if it were not so, why had Virginie gone away without a single word to the friend whom she declared she loved next best to her father? Surely she could have managed to say a word or two over the telephone, or scribble a tiny note! Perhaps she *had* written a note and it would

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arrive later in the mail. Patricia quite brightened for a few moments, at the thought. She would wait and see what the day's post brought. That would doubtless explain.

The morning hours dragged by. The weather was stifling and humid, and Patricia sat by one of the opened windows of the darkened room. Try as she would, she could not keep her depressed thoughts from picturing the darkest aspect of everything. How her pleasant life had changed since yesterday at this time, her bright hopes and plans collapsed like a fragile castle of cards! Who would have dreamed such a calamity could have befallen her?

At noon she telephoned down to the office to ask for the mail, and also, as she felt no appetite, requested that some crackers and a glass of milk be sent up at the same time, to the room. That was all the luncheon she felt she could possibly manage.

Chester Jackson arrived with the letters and her order a few moments later. The former she shuffled over nervously and hopefully. But they were only communications for her father, and nothing at all for her. The boy, watching her interestedly, noted the disappointment in her face.

"Miss your side-partner, don't you?" he queried.

"What's that?" she asked, absent-mindedly.

"You miss the mam'selle across the way a bit, I figure. You and her seemed pretty thick."

"Yes, I do miss her very much," acknowledged Patricia, actually glad to have any one to speak to on the subject. "But I'm awfully surprised that she went away so suddenly. I never even knew she was gone."

"You didn't, hey? Well, looka here! She gave me a message to give to you—that is, she *meant* it for a message, I reckon, only she didn't get it all off her mind."

"Oh, what *was* it?" cried Patricia, excitedly, her darkest suspicions of her friend vanishing at once. "I knew she would want to send some word to me."

"Well, it was this way. They sent down word to the office they was leavin', and for some one to come up and help bring down their hand luggage. So I went up to get 'em. The missus was bustlin' about good an' lively, but the gal was sort of teary and not doin' much. But when the little mam'selle handed me her grip,—the t'other one's back was turned for a minute,—she whispered to me low, 'Tell Miss Meade I'm going—' But she didn't get no further, 'cause the other one turned round quick like an' called me to come an' help her strap a bag. An' from that time till they left the place she never took her eyes offen the young 'un, an' *she* never got no chance to finish it up. But I thought I'd jest tell you that much, anyway."

"Oh, thank you so much for that, anyhow!" breathed Patricia. "But I can't understand why she was afraid to say it right out and let her aunt hear. It seems very strange."

"You needn't think that's the only queer thing about that pair," he hinted darkly. "I could tell you an earful if I chose!"

Patricia was just on the point of begging him to do so, when some delicate instinct bade her desist. Was it, after all, kind, or even honorable, to pry into the affairs of a friend, to hear "back-stair" gossip about them from a bell-boy in a hotel?

"Well, thank you very much for delivering the message," she remarked, "and please drop this letter in the mail-chute as you go out."

And after he was gone, curious as she had been to hear what he had to say about them, she was glad she had resisted the temptation.

The stifling afternoon dragged on. Patricia found ample food for thought in the news she had heard from the bell-boy, and spent the hours in fruitless surmise. On one score at least, she was relieved, almost happy. Virginie had not tried to slip away without letting her know she was going—perhaps she was trying to tell her destination; perhaps she was promising to write. But whatever it was, she had at least tried to send her some word. But why had her companion seemed to suspect it, to make it impossible? If indeed, she *had*! Why had not Madame Vanderpoel herself left a pleasant message of regret at leaving, when she had seemed so cordial, so friendly? Patricia could not but admit that the action had a very dark and suspicious aspect, after what had happened the night before.

And that brought her back again to her own troubles: The Crimson Patch!—who had taken it? Which one of the four that had had access to the room last night had concealed and carried it away? All of a sudden she sat up very straight. There were *not* four—there were only *three*! For beyond all question she was certain now that Chester Jackson was in nowise concerned in the matter. She could not explain how she knew—she simply *knew*. Something in that honest, snub-nosed, smiling face, those candid, merry eyes, assured her. Chet Jackson was unquestionably eliminated from the subject, and the puzzle was reduced to a triangle.

Half an hour later there was another knock at the door and Chester, re-appearing, presented her with a special delivery letter. He stood informally watching her while she tore it open and read it breathlessly. It was from her father, written that morning from New York, and it told her that he thought he was on the track of something that seemed important. The matter would keep him over night, but she must not be alarmed. She was to put herself in Mrs. Quale's care from dinner-time on, and he would return the next day and tell her all about things. That was all.

Though he had touched on nothing directly, Patricia was certain, of course, that he referred to the matter of the Crimson Patch. She was glad that he seemed to be in the way of discovering anything at all that would lead to the unraveling of their difficulty, but she felt suddenly very forlorn at the thought of his being away over night for the first time. And Chet, watching her keenly, saw her face

fall.

"Any bad news?" he inquired casually.

"No," she replied, rather pleased to have some one to talk to, so lonely had been her day. "Father's going to be away over night on some important business. I'll miss him awfully."

"Say!" ventured Chet, in a confidential tone, "I ask your pardon for speakin' about it, but you folks have had some trouble since yesterday, haven't you?" 92

Rather startled, Patricia nodded her head. Then she looked alarmed, to think that, by even so much, she had revealed something of her father's secret.

"Never you mind!" Chet assured her. "Don't get scared because you think you're giving anything away. I know a heap more than any one thinks I do." And at her amazed expression, he added:

"I'm goin' to tell you somethin'. It's a secret and don't you let on to anybody. I ain't goin' to be a bell-hop all my life, I ain't. I got ambition, and this here hotel life ain't for me."

"What—what are you going to be then?" stammered the astonished Patricia.

"I'm goin' to be a detective or a secret service agent or somethin' like that. I got it in me, I have. Sort of sense things out an' nose 'em down when no one suspects I'm anything but a 'buttons' in this here hotel. It's great sport. You see, not suspectin' I got more'n enough sense to carry me through the day's work, folks lets out a lot of things before me that they think I don't catch on to, an' I see a whole heap I'm not supposed to see. An' this here war has made a lot of lively doings about this place, I can tell you." 93

Patricia listened breathlessly. Here was confirmation of her own ideas, and more. Chet Jackson, beside being undoubtedly innocent of any complicity in the matter of the Crimson Patch might even become a valuable ally, if she did but dare to enlist his aid. She suddenly decided on a bold move.

"Chester," she said, "if you're going to do any detective work, try and do a little for us. The only trouble is, I can't tell you anything much about things, because they are very, very important secrets. So I don't know how you're going to get to work on it."

"Don't worry about tellin' me so much. I know a whole lot about you folks that you don't think I do. You'd be s'prised if I told you how much I *do* know!" Chet assured her darkly. "I gotta go now, because I been away from the office long enough. But next time I see you I'll tell you what I know an' we can decide what I'd better do. So long!" 94

And he was gone, leaving her in a maze of wonder over this new development.

CHAPTER VII LEFT ALONE

95

Patricia went back into the room and sat down to think it all over. Chester Jackson's curious remarks had disturbed her strangely. What he had said about knowing "a heap more about things" than any one thought he did was a little alarming, to say the least. What did he—what *could* he know about her father's affairs, and how could he have found it out? If only he had time to tell her before he rushed away, and not left her with this bewildering scrap of information!

However, one thing was becoming every moment more certain in her mind. The boy was innocent of any part in the disappearance of the Crimson Patch, and might, besides, be enlisted as an ally in its recovery, if only she dared to confide in him more fully. She wished with all her soul that her father were with her, that he was not to be detained away over night. She wanted to talk it all over with him, to ascertain how much he thought it wise to trust this boy. But he was not here, and presently she must go and put herself in the care of Mrs. Quale for the night. Even now she ought to be calling up that lady on the telephone, as it was nearly dinner-time.

96

She went to the telephone and asked to be connected with Mrs. Quale's room. The reply she received caused her a veritable shock.

"Mrs. Quale came in a while ago and then went out again, saying she would be away over night in New York."

Patricia hung up the receiver and sat down in the nearest chair with a little, frightened shiver. She would be alone over night, in this big, strange hotel, surrounded perhaps by unseen and unknown enemies. Oh, if she could only communicate with her father and urge him to come back at once! But that was not possible. He had said he was in New York, but had given no address, probably because he was hurrying about from place to place and did not intend to stop anywhere for the night. It was certainly unfortunate that Mrs. Quale had elected to be away at the same time. Well, it was too bad, but it was not fatal. In all probability, nothing unforeseen of any kind would happen. There was no reason why it should.

97

Suddenly a bright idea came to her. If Mrs. Quale's maid, Delia, had not accompanied her mistress to New York, why would it not be possible to ask her to come down and spend the night? Her companionship would be better than none at all. In the long weeks of her intimacy with Mrs. Quale, Patricia had grown to realize that Delia was becoming rather fond of her, in her queer, taciturn way, and would probably be glad to be of any help. She decided to go upstairs now to see her and talk it over.

Her interview proved rather a difficult one. Patricia had not Mrs. Quale's ease in communicating with a deaf person, and it was some time before Delia understood what she was driving at. And even when she did, there was hesitancy.

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"I've a bad earache to-night," she averred, "that's why Mrs. Quale didn't take me with her. I have it quite often. I'm afraid I won't be much company for you, Miss Patricia, and I wanted to go to bed pretty early."

"Oh, I'm not going to stay up late!" cried Patricia, "and, of course, you can have Father's room. I just want you to be there near me. Father would be dreadfully upset if he thought I was here alone."

"Very well, then," Delia consented at last. "To be sure, I wouldn't have you worried, nor the captain worried about you, even if I am too miserable to hold up my head. I'll be down at half past eight. I've things that will keep me busy till then."

After that, Patricia decided to worry no further about the matter, dress for dinner, go down to the dining-room, and take her meal as if she expected her father at any minute. After that, she would read and sew and write some letters and go to bed as usual. The sensible resolve steadied her. She put on her lightest and coolest attire, for the evening was still very hot, and at a very early hour went down to the dining-room. She wanted to have this ordeal over as speedily as possible, for she dreaded sitting at her table alone and being waited on by Peter Stoger.

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To her intense surprise, he was not there. She was served by another waiter, and Peter did not appear during the entire meal. Where in the world could *he* be? She ventured to question the new attendant about the usual waiter, but received only the reply that he was away for the day. It was certainly all very mystifying.

After dinner, which passed without any unusual happenings, she went into the lounge, supplied herself with some new magazines, and hurried away to her room. The absence of Peter Stoger disturbed her more than she cared to admit, even to herself. She disliked and feared him enough when he was present, but in his absence he seemed positively terrifying. She sat down by the window in the gathering twilight to think it all over.

100

Three of them gone—the very three on whom suspicion rested most heavily! The Crimson Patch gone with them. Her father gone too, involved in who knew what troubles, what difficulties, in his search. What *was* this strange Crimson Patch, anyway? Patricia shut her eyes tight and strove to call up the image of the sketch as she had seen it last. It was nothing, it was absolutely nothing but the cleverly executed sketch in water-colors of a peculiar species of butterfly with a bright crimson spot on each lower wing. There was nothing about it that was different, nothing that she could remember, to distinguish it from the many other sketches in her father's possession. That it could harbor any secret, and especially any government secret, seemed absolutely absurd. And yet—it

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must be so.

Then her mind wandered back to Virginie. Where was she now? What had she tried so hard to communicate in that broken, incomplete message to Chester Jackson? Would they ever see each other again? In twenty-four hours, life had suddenly assumed a very complicated aspect to Patricia. She could scarcely realize now how happy and care-free she had been last night at this very hour. It did not seem as if she could be the same person, so many were the perplexing problems on her mind.

And this brought her thoughts back to Chester Jackson. She must see him again, as soon as possible, and discover what it was that he knew about herself and her father and his affairs. She would call up the office and ask to have something sent to the room. So determined, she switched on the lights, went to the telephone and asked to have some of the hotel stationery sent up. There was nothing else she could think of, just at the moment. The knock at the door a few moments later sent her flying to it, her mind full of the questions she planned to ask. To her intense chagrin, it was another bell-boy who brought the paper.

Scarcely able to murmur her thanks, she turned back into the room and shut the door. Had Chester, too, deserted her? What could possibly have happened? It was the first time she could remember that he had not personally answered the summons. If he had also, for some inscrutable reason, left the hotel on this fateful night, she would certainly feel herself to be deserted of all mankind.

CHAPTER VIII

A PIECE OF PAPER

103

Delia having appeared at the time agreed on, and promptly withdrawing to her own room, Patricia continued to worry for an hour and a half over the problem that was perplexing her, trying vainly to write letters or concentrate her mind on a book. But it was useless, and at length she determined to put an end to her misery and suspense, in that direction at least, and ring for something else. If Chester Jackson did not answer this time, it would mean that he too had gone or been removed, and that she was left without a single friend to rely on.

So once again she telephoned, this time for ice-water, and waited in breathless suspense for the answering knock. The curly head and merry eyes of Chet Jackson at the door was like a bracing tonic to her overwrought nerves.

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"Oh!" she quavered. "Whatever happened to you? I thought you were gone, too."

He gazed at her in unfeigned astonishment. "I don't get yer!" he remarked. "There ain't nothin' happened to *me*!"

She explained her agitation, and he laughed unfeelingly. "Gee! I gotta *eat* sometime or other. An' half past seven's about as early as I can usually strike it. You hit my supper hour, miss!"

She laughed in relief and followed Chet as he came into the room to place the tray on the table.

"Chester, I want to know the rest of what you were trying to tell me this afternoon. What is it that you have found out? And how have you discovered things?"

He glanced about the room cautiously, then tiptoed over and closed the door into the hall.

"You can't be too careful in this place," he said apologetically. "I'll tell you all I can in the little time I can spare, an' if I don't have a chance to finish it now, I will come some other time. I bet you'll hardly believe me, but I knew before ever you folks landed here that your dad—beg pardon!—that the captain was comin' here an' that he had something secret an' important for the Gov'ment up his sleeve."

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Patricia started involuntarily. "How—how did you know that?" she stammered.

He grinned. "I told you I could make you sit up an' take notice. *Now* I guess you'll believe me! Well, I doped that out from the conversation of two gents who had a room here for a couple of nights an' left the day before you came. They was sending for things constant, eats and drinks an' what not,—an' I was kept runnin' to their room as reg'lar as clockwork. I got onto the fact that they was on the watch for some one from one or two things they said before me. They seemed to think I was deaf or dumb or hadn't any brains, just because I was only a bell-hop, an' you bet I acted the part all right. So they often talked right out before me, seemin' to think I wouldn't take it in.

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"Once, when I came in, one of 'em was sayin', 'He's a captain in the army, but he's not on active service 'cause he's been wounded; but I got word from headquarters he's doin' something worth lookin' into. He's comin' here in a day or two. He's got to be watched an' watched hard. He's camouflagin' it, too, with some lecture stuff or other, but that don't count.' 'Nother time, one of 'em says: 'He arrives to-morrow, so we'll disappear to-night. But it's all right. Franz is on the job, and so will Hofmeyer be, after to-morrow.'

"Well, there was other things, too, little things I can't remember now, but I says to myself, 'This here looks shady, Chet; better get on the job an' do a little detectin' work on your own! I didn't know this 'captain' from Adam, but I hate to see any one get done, especially by a pair of Huns, like them two looked, so I decided to keep my eyes open. Well, sure enough, them two gave up their room the night before you came, an' I've never laid eyes on 'em since. The next day you arrived, an' I just naturally cottoned to you both right away. You're the right sort. You don't act as if a bell-hop was made of wood an' hadn't any brains or any feelin's either. You treat 'em like human beings. An' your dad—I mean your father—gee! I could lie down an' let him walk all over me if he wanted to!

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"An' I made up my mind more than ever that I wasn't goin' to let any one put it over you two if I could help it. So I kept my eyes open an' managed it so's I could answer most of the calls in this corridor. An' I've seen a few little things that would bear lookin' into."

Patricia had stood drinking in this information with swiftly beating heart. "Chester," she exclaimed softly, "this is fine of you, and I appreciate what you have done more than I can tell you, and so would Father if he knew! But tell me, who is this 'Franz' and 'Hofmeyer'? Have you discovered that? I have a special reason for asking."

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"There ain't any one in this place who goes by either of them two names," he replied, "but of course that don't count. Naturally, they ain't the names any one would hand in here. But I got my suspicions about one person in this here hotel, an' I think I don't have to give you a hundred guesses who, either." He looked at her meaningly.

"You—you mean the waiter, Peter Stoger?" she hesitated.

"You said it!" he remarked succinctly. "He's a shady one, all right! Say, if you'll believe me, I seen him once without his guilt teeth—"

"What?" gasped Patricia, incredulously.

"Yep, they was nothin' but a set of false caps, fit on over his real teeth. He was hurryin' down the hall from his room, an' I guess he'd had 'em off an' forgotten 'em. After I passed him, I looked back

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an' saw him take somethin' out of his pocket an' raise his hands to his mouth. Oh, he's slick, all right! An' that funny droop in his eye, too. Once in a while he ain't got that, either. He can do it himself somehow or other. They're both just disguises, that's all. An' I bet my hat he's either Franz or Hofmeyer, for looka here: he came the same day you folks did."

"Oh, I knew it!" sighed Patricia. "I knew there was something wrong about him. I've felt it all along. But tell me, Chester, one more thing. I must ask it, though I hate to. Have you ever discovered anything—queer about—about Madame Vanderpoel and—and Mademoiselle de Vos? I hate to ask it about them, but—but I have a reason."

"They was a curious pair, all right," replied Chet musingly. "An' I could never rightly make 'em out. At first I was on to 'em good an' proper, because the madame had her room changed from one on the next floor to down here right opposite you. An' she sure did act queer to that little mam'selle; or at least the mam'selle acted queer to her—as if she just couldn't stand her. But I never saw the madame act ugly to her till to-day when she wouldn't give her a chance to send you that message. I watched 'em like a cat, but I never saw nothin' that made me suspicious that they was harmful to you folks, an' you seemed to cotton so to the little mam'selle. But there was somethin' always that seemed to me blamed funny in the way she hated that madame, an' it used to make me want to find out why.

"But say, I gotta go down now. I don't darst stay here another minute, this trip. But before I go, I'll tell you this much. After that pair left to-day, I had an errand on this floor, an' I just sauntered into their vacant room a moment, before the chambermaid cleaned it up, to have a look around. They hadn't left nothin' of interest, that I could see, except just this. I found it in the waste-basket. Maybe you'd like to have it."

He thrust a piece of torn and crumpled paper into Patricia's hand and was gone before she had time to say another word.

CHAPTER IX

A MESSAGE IN THE NIGHT

112

Patricia took the crumpled scrap of paper to the table and smoothed it out under the lamp. It was a single sheet and was torn almost in two, one way across and partially along all its edges, as if an attempt had been made to destroy it, an attempt that had not been totally successful, probably because the paper was rather thick and tough. It looked very much as if some one had tried at first to tear it in pieces, and, not having succeeded in this, had simply crumpled it and thrown it away. The writing was in a fine, cramped, almost foreign-looking hand. And the note, for such it appeared to be, was un-addressed, beginning abruptly, without a name, and signed at the end with only an initial. Patricia read it through wonderingly. It ran thus:

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"Mary and George have arrived. Heard they got home yesterday. Can it be true? Let no circumstances detain you. Need I say more to you? If they stay in town while here, I can no longer visit them. We go out every week to see cousins. Their house is quite new in the suburbs. See Hanford before you leave. At a store there once had good cream. Meet Mary soon and you will find Josephine there.

"F."

"Well of all the silly letters!" thought Patricia, after the first reading. "What can it all mean? Of course, it refers to people and circumstances I don't know anything about, but even so, it sounds sort of scrappy. I wonder why Chet wanted me to read it? I suppose I really shouldn't have done so. I feel as if I'd been prying into some one's affairs in a rather horrid way, reading the letter they thought they had destroyed. I suppose it was one of Madame Vanderpoel's. It isn't in the least interesting, anyway, and I do wonder why Chet saved it and asked me to read it. All I get from it is that somebody 'arrived' and she had to go, probably to meet them. Perhaps that explains why they left so suddenly. Well, Chester will have to explain later why he thought it worth showing to me."

114

Then her mind reverted to the strange, unnerving revelations the boy had made concerning her father, the unknown pair who had known so much about his affairs and had left before they arrived, and the terrible Franz and Hofmeyer who had doubtless been spying on them all the time, and who, even now, were probably in possession of the Crimson Patch. And Peter Stoger—spy without doubt and a disguised one at that—confirming her worst suspicions of him! By what a hideous net they were surrounded! And her father did not even know all these details. How helpful they might be to him in his search, if she could only put him in possession of the facts. But that was impossible till he was with her again in person. And meantime, there was all this long night to be got through, without her father to share her anxiety.

115

She took up the crumpled note once more and read it again, critically. At the second reading it struck her as even more foolish and disjointed than at first. It really meant very little when boiled down to the bare facts. It seemed scarcely possible that Madame Vanderpoel could find any very informing news in it.

While she was still studying it, the telephone rang with a sudden shrillness that caused her to jump, and she hurried over to take down the receiver.

"Hello! hello!" she heard from very far away. "Is that you, Patricia?" And she recognized her father's voice.

"Oh, yes, yes, Daddy! Where are you? Are you coming back to-night?"

"No, I cannot do that," came the answer. "I called up to see whether you were all right. I was a little worried about you. How are you getting on?"

116

Patricia was on the point of telling him all her troubles and her loneliness and the absence of Mrs. Quale, when something stopped her. Her father was having far heavier worries of his own. Why should she burden him with these lighter ones? It would help him far more if she put a brave face on everything and answered him cheerfully, so she summoned all her courage and answered brightly:

"I'm all right, Daddy. Fine as a fiddle. But tell me, are you succeeding? Have you had any luck?"

"We've struck something that looks very important," he returned. "But I'll have to tell you, dear, that it may keep me away another whole day, and possibly even over another night. You must get along somehow. Keep Mrs. Quale close to you. Tell her it's very urgent. I'll call up to-morrow night, if possible, but I may not have another chance before that. Now I must stop, for this is long distance and costing like Sancho. Can you manage, honey?"

117

"Yes, oh, yes!" she assured him in a voice from which she tried to keep a quaver of fear.

"Then, good-bye!"

Patricia hung up the receiver and walked back to the table in a daze. Not a single chance had she had to tell her father some of the important details revealed by Chester Jackson; and even if the chance had presented itself, she doubted if it would have been wise to divulge them over the telephone. But if her father were on the track of any important discovery, perhaps it was just as well that she had not. And by the way, he had said, "*we've* struck something!" now what in the world could he mean by "*we*?" She had not supposed that he would admit any one else into the secret. Well, it was all very mysterious, and it was growing more so every moment. And he was to be away at least twenty-four hours longer!

118

Again her glance fell on the foolish and disjointed little note lying on the table, and it vaguely disturbed her. Its very lack of meaning held something sinister in it. She looked at her watch and took a sudden resolution. It was not yet quite ten. She *must* see Chester Jackson once more before he went to his own home for the night, and she remembered that he had said he went off duty at ten-thirty.

"I don't know what the hotel people will think of my wanting so many things," and she smiled rather ruefully, "but I don't very much care. This is too important." She went to the telephone and ordered a glass of milk and some crackers to be sent up.

Jackson arrived in a few minutes with the tray and a broad grin.

"I thought you'd be needin' something else after a while!" he remarked, as he placed the tray on the table. "Make anything out of the nice little note I handed you?" 119

"Why no. It seems to me simply crazy. There doesn't seem to be any sense *to* it, not even if one knew all the people and circumstances it referred to. Can you make anything of it?"

"I didn't at first," he replied; "but I just naturally doped it out that there was something shifty about it. So I took it all to pieces, and put it together again, and turned it every which way, and all at once I got on to it. You can just *bet* it means something, and something pretty slick at that!"

"Oh, tell me. Tell me quickly!" cried Patricia. "How did you find it all out?"

"Well," began Chet, plainly enjoying very much his rôle of *Sherlock Holmes*, "there was just one word in the thing that made me sit up and take notice. And that word was 'Hanford.' Do you know what Hanford is?"

Patricia shook her head.

"Well, it's a little two-cent hole of a town about ten miles from here. Nothin' special to it at all, just a little, one-horse country town with about thirty houses and a couple of hundred inhabitants. There ain't any reason on this livin' earth why any one should 'see Hanford,' because there ain't nothin' in it *to* see! So I just shied at that, I did. An' I took Hanford as a startin' point, an' I turned and twisted that note inside out and upside down till, all off a sudden, I struck it! I gotta go now. I got another call to tend to on this floor. But you just take that note and put a pencil mark under every fourth word and copy them out afterward an' see what you get. I'll be back after a while to get this tray. Don't forget—*every fourth word!*" 120

When he was gone, Patricia got a pencil and paper and did as he had instructed her. She counted off every fourth word in the letter, underlined it, and feverishly copied down the sequence. The result caused her to drop her pencil and sit staring at the paper, while a shiver of fear ran icily down her spine. The reconstructed letter ran: 121

Have got it. No need to stay here longer. Go to house in Hanford at once. Meet you there.

F.

The meaning of the communication was only too clear.

Ten minutes later there was a knock at the door and Chet reappeared. He only glanced at the sentences she had written and remarked:

"Guess that made you sit up and take notice, didn't it?"

"Oh, Chester," she moaned. "It's awful! It just confirms my worst suspicions. Do you suppose some one sent it to Madame—Vanderpoel? Who—who could it have been?"

"We can be pretty plum sure of *one* thing," remarked Chet. "The note is signed 'F' an' it don't take much guessin' to dope out that F stands for Franz; but who Franz is, unless it's that slick Peter Stoger, I can't guess. But as Peter has lit out too, we wouldn't be so far off to take it for Peter, I fancy. But say, Miss, will you pardon me if I ask an awful personal question? *Did* you folks lose anything or miss anything before last night? If you haven't, I don't quite get what it means by those words, 'Have got it.'" 122

Patricia thought hard for a moment. Should she or should she not confide in this boy the secret she had been guarding for her father? What would her father wish her to do? It was plain that he knew a great deal about their affairs already, and was as honest and straightforward as even her father could wish. Perhaps, too, he might be of infinite help in unraveling the tangle. She would risk it. She would risk all and tell him. But she felt firmly convinced that the risk was not very great.

"Yes, Chester," she acknowledged. "We *have* missed something—the most important thing my father has. You wouldn't think so to look at it, for it is only one of those pretty sketches of butterflies that you were looking at yesterday. I didn't know about it at the time, or I wouldn't have left it around; but sometime during that afternoon or evening it disappeared, and Father is almost frantic about it. He is off hunting for it now, and has been ever since morning. I—oh, I just hate to think that Madame Vanderpoel or Mademoiselle de Vos took it or were in any way concerned with it. I—I think an awful lot of Mademoiselle Virginie. We—we were friends." 123

Chet scratched his head and thought deeply for several moments. "Which sketch was it, if I may ask?" he said at length.

"The one called the Crimson Patch," she replied. "Do you remember seeing it?"

"You bet I do!" he cried enthusiastically. "I remember that one particular because it had a queer name and was such a purty one. Gee! that proves one thing, at least. It didn't disappear *before* I come in, so the responsible party must have come afterward. Who was in here later?" 124

"Why, only Peter Stoger and Virginie. But *she* didn't take it, I know. I will never, never believe such a thing of *her*!"

"Sure she didn't!" agreed Chet. "It must have been Peter. Of course it was Peter, don't you see? 'Cause if he's Franz, he sends a note afterward to the madame that he's got it, an' they all beat it out of here. Can't get it any straighter than *that*!"

"But what has poor little Virginie to do with all this?" wondered Patricia, distractedly. "Surely—surely she can't be working with a lot of horrid spies. What *is* the explanation?"

"You can search me!" rejoined the boy. "I ain't on to the dope about that little mam'selle an' never was. She's a plum deep mystery, she is. But one thing is sure—"

At that moment the telephone bell rang again, and they both jumped nervously. Patricia went to it and took down the receiver. There was a faint, "Hello!" to which she responded, and then silence.

125

"Why, that's queer!" she said in an aside to Chester. "Nobody seems to answer. And the voice that said hello first seemed so faraway and scared—"

"Hello! hello!" she exclaimed again, turning to the receiver. "Yes, yes, this *is* Patricia.... Oh, Virginie! is it *you*?... Oh, I can't hear you very well. Can't you speak a little louder?... You can't?... What is that you say?... You want to warn me.... What about? I don't understand.... There is danger?... Who is in danger?... I am?... We *both* are?... Oh, can't you tell me more plainly? Where are you?... You are ... where?"

"Oh!" cried Patricia, turning to the listening boy. "She hung up the receiver without telling me!"

CHAPTER X

A COUNCIL OF WAR

126

They stared at each other a moment in bewilderment. It was Chester who spoke first.

"Are you sure it was the little mam'selle?" he questioned. "Did it sound like her voice?"

"Oh, it was Virginie! I'm absolutely certain of it. I'd know her voice a thousand miles away. But what does it all mean? She says there is danger—that both she and I are in danger, and she was trying to warn me about it. But she spoke so low, and she hesitated so, and then, just as she was going to tell me where she was, there was the click of the receiver being hung up and not another word. What *does* it mean?"

"It means," affirmed the boy, after some thought, "that the little un was speakin' to you over the 'phone on the q.t., an' she was probably scared stiff for fear she'd be caught, an' she had to leave off before she'd finished because some one was comin' along or somethin'. That's the way I figure it."

"I believe you're right!" declared Patricia. "That's just the way her voice sounded—'scared stiff,' as you say. But what on earth are we going to do? She's in danger and we don't even know where she is; and I'm in danger and I'm here all alone, except for Mrs. Quale's Delia, who is with me for to-night. It's dreadful. Just dreadful! I don't know which way to turn. I'd call up the police and put the thing in their hands if I dared. But I don't dare. It would spoil everything for Father if anything about this secret became generally known, and I don't even think I ought to speak to the hotel authorities for the same reason. What *am* I going to do?"

"Looka here, Miss," began Chet, quietly, "I believe we can fix things pretty near to all right. If you'd just be willin' to trust the matter to me. I know I'm only a bell-hop, but I know a whole heap more'n most folks think I do; an' bein' only a bell-hop is the very reason I can go and see an' do a lot that others couldn't, just cause nobody's suspectin' I'm up to anything. Do you get me?"

"Y-yes," faltered Patricia. "I think I see what you're driving at and I really trust you absolutely. But what is your idea? What do you think had better be done?"

The boy seemed to grow an inch taller with pride at Patricia's assertion of her faith and trust in him. His snub-nosed countenance fairly beamed. "Well, here's my idea. I gotta go off duty pretty soon an' go home. I oughtn't to be hangin' around here now. I'll get what-for down in the office for bein' away so long, anyhow. But I don't care. All in the day's work! Now, I figure it this way. There ain't anything dangerous goin' to happen to you to-night in this here hotel. You're as safe as a church here as long as you keep your door locked. If you feel nervous, better sit up as long as you can, an' read or something. Then if you should see or hear anything queer, call right down to the office on the 'phone. You'd have the house detective up here so quick it'd make you blink."

"But I'll tell you what I'll do besides. I'll beat it home as fast as I can (I don't live so very far off) an' let my mother know where I am. Then I'll take my motor-cycle (the one I bought for thirty dollars an' put in order an' it runs like a bird!) an' I'll cruise around all night. An' every once in a while I'll turn up in the park right below your windows an' hang around a while an' whistle, 'It's a long, long trail.' You'll hear me plain enough, for you're only on the third floor. An' if everything ain't goin' all right, pull the shade clean up to the top, an' I'll know somethin's wrong an' butt in here an' make it hot for every one generally."

"Oh, Chester, that's awfully good of you!" sighed Patricia, in mingled admiration and relief. "It will make me feel lots easier. I know I can't sleep a wink, so I might just as well sit up and try to read or sew. I'll keep the lights full on, and I'll follow your advice about calling up the office if I think everything's not all right. But it will be such a comfort to know that you will be nearby once in a while. Only it doesn't seem as if you ought to be up all night when you've got to work to-morrow."

"Don't you mind about me!" he assured her. "To-morrow's my day off, an' I don't have to show up here at all till ten-thirty P. M., when I go on night duty. You know I have one day a week."

"But, Chester," cried Patricia, in fresh alarm, "then I shall be all alone here to-morrow, for Mrs. Quale may not be back till night, and I'm sure Father won't. I suppose I'm silly, but this thing is so dreadfully mysterious and—and uncertain that I'm just as much afraid of it in the daytime as I am at night."

"You just quit worryin' about to-morrow," admonished Chet. "I got a scheme up my sleeve for to-morrow, but you'll hear more about that from me later. All I say about to-morrow is this: go down to breakfast as usual and as early as possible and ask for your mail at the desk before you eat. Then we'll see what to do next."

"But," objected Patricia, once more, "what about poor little Virginie? She is in danger too—and we don't even know where she is or what the danger is. Yet I feel as if we ought to do something about it. It isn't right to leave her, is it, without trying to do a thing—"

"You just leave the little mam'selle's affairs to me too, for to-night, an' don't worry about 'em no further," interrupted the boy. "I ain't got time to tell you all I plan to do, but you can bet your boots I ain't goin' to be idle. Good night, an' don't forget to go to breakfast an' get your mail *early!*"

And Chester Jackson retired, closing the door behind him.

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CHAPTER XI

AN ADVENTUROUS MISSION

133

The endless night was over at last. Through her windows, which faced east, Patricia noticed that the sky was faintly streaked with pale light, each moment growing more distinct. She had endured almost seven hours of unbroken, nerve-racking suspense, yet nothing alarming had happened. All night she had huddled in a chair by the living-room table, the electric lights full on, even to the farthest wall-bracket, listening breathlessly to the faintest creak or rustle, starting terror-stricken at a sudden flapping of the window-shade, crouching rigid at the slightest footfall outside her door.

Yet the cheering whistle of the war's most popular tune, every hour or so, in the park below, assured her that Chet was true to his promise, even if the loud chugging of his motor-cycle had not likewise informed her of his intermittent presence. He was certainly proving himself a friend, and a staunch one, in this time of her dire need.

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With the coming of daylight she turned off the lights and lay down awhile, exhausted by the night's vigil, but she did not sleep. She heard Delia go quietly out soon after six. At seven she prepared to go down to breakfast, and promptly at seven-thirty stopped at the desk in the lounge for her mail, as Chet had directed. She found that she had two letters, one a short note from Mrs. Quale, explaining that she had been called away suddenly to New York by the illness of a niece, but expected to be back that evening, and hoping Patricia had not needed her in the meantime.

"She little knows how much I did need her!" sighed Patricia. "But thank goodness! she's coming back to-night. I couldn't—I simply couldn't go through another night like last!"

135

The other letter was directed to her in a handwriting she did not recognize, and she prepared to read it while she was waiting for her breakfast to be served. To her immense relief, Peter Stoger was still absent. She had had the horrible suspicion that he might be there once again to spy on her, perhaps even to be the instrument of the threatened "danger."

While waiting for her cantaloupe she opened the second missive and read it through in startled wonder. It was written in pencil and marked midnight of the night before. It was inscribed also with a fine disregard of spelling, punctuation, and grammar, was only a few sentences long, and signed at the end, "C. J." It ran as follows:

Dear Miss,

I done a heap of scooting around last night on my moter-cicle and I found out quite a bit you will be intrested to no. If you *are* intrested will you please try to be at the sea wall in the park where you usully like to sit about nine this a m an we can talk it over. will wate for you their.

136

Yours respectkfully,
C. J.

"Bless that kind boy's heart!" thought Patricia. "He certainly is a trump! I don't know what on earth I'd be doing now if it weren't for his help. I'll be there without fail."

Promptly at nine she was at the tryst by the sea-wall, a bench shaded by an overhanging tree where she frequently came with her book or sewing to enjoy the beautiful view out over the water and the invigorating salt air. Chet was there before her, sitting unostentatiously with his legs hanging over the sea-wall, apparently absorbed in the occupation of fishing with a rod and reel.

"Hullo! Good morning!" he greeted her, with his usual infectious grin. "Catch any Hun spies lurkin' around last night?"

"No indeed!" she answered him quite gaily. "I didn't see one—not a single one."

"Well, I had better luck than you, then!" he replied, looking about cautiously to see that no one was approaching along the foot-path.

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"Oh, Chester! How? What do you mean?"

"Well, what do you think of this? Last night, after I left the hotel, I went right home an' got out my motor-cycle and made a bee-line for Hanford. I somehow figured that we'd better find out that queer dope about Hanford first of all. I hadn't a ghost of an idea where in the place that house might be, but I told you before that there weren't so many houses there, anyhow, an' I just figured I could mosey around an' take a squint at 'em all an' try to figure out which was the most likely.

"It's a lonesome kind of a place, 'cause there ain't no railroad nor even a trolley-line runnin' near it. I didn't want to go chuggin' through it on my cycle, waking the dead with the racket, so I hid it in a little clump of woods just outside the place an' went huntin' round on foot. First I went through the main street, an' every house an' store was shut up as tight an' dark as a graveyard. Nothin' doin' there. Then I gave all the rest of the houses the once-over. No better luck!

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"The only place left was one way out on the road toward Crampton. It's a lonesome kind of a hole, old farm-house with queer, dinky, green wooden shutters all in a piece an' a slantin' roof goin' almost down to the ground at the back. It used to be all sort of tumblin' to pieces an' deserted, but a man around here bought it an' fixed it all up modern inside an' painted it, an' rents it out in the summer to city folks for a few months. I didn't rightly know whether it was occupied this season or not, 'cause I ain't been that way lately, but I thinks to myself, I'll go past it an' see, before I give up the hunt.

"Sure enough, the place was lit up on the ground floor an' one room upstairs too. But the shades were all drawn down tight. So I just sneaked around quiet an' hid in the bushes near the front door an' one of the windows, an' lay low to see if anything would happen. I didn't want to stay too long, either, 'cause I wanted to get back an' give you the signal I was on the job. Well, nothin' did happen for so long I was just goin' to give it up, when all of a sudden the front door opened an' a woman come out an' stood on the little porch—"

"Oh, who *was* it?" cried Patricia, in a fever of impatience.

"You can search me!" he replied. "She ain't no one I ever see before. She was a queer-lookin' specimen, dressed like a maid in a black dress an' white cap an' apron. I could see her quite well, 'cause the light was shinin' out from the hall behind her. She was tall an' bony and sort of grouchy-lookin'. Well, she sat down on one of the little side-benches on the porch to get the air, I guess, 'cause it was pipin' hot. An' all of a sudden some one else slipped out of the door very quiet an' sat down on the bench opposite. An' I bet you can't guess who that was."

"Oh, *who?*" breathed Patricia.

"*The little mam'selle!*"

"Chester, you are a trump!" cried Patricia, springing up excitedly. "What did you do?"

"Why, I didn't do nothin' but lay low, of course. I sure would have spilled the beans if I'd jumped out an' hollered who I was, then. I just stayed and listened to what went on. The grouchy maid said: 'You better go in. The madame will not like it.' An' the little un' said: 'Oh, Melanie, let me stay just a few moments! It is so hot in my room. I need the air.' Then the grouchy maid grunted something that sounded like French. I couldn't get on to it at all. They didn't say no more, but sat a while, an' bimeby both got up an' went in. An' soon after all the lights went out in the place, an' I knew it wasn't no use to stay longer, so I beat it back here."



"Oh, Melanie, let me stay just a few moments!"

"Chester," exclaimed Patricia, at the end of this recital, "what are we going to do?"

"Well, I got a plan," he acknowledged. "I don't know whether you'll stand for it or not, but here it is, anyway. An' I can promise you that if you go in for it, you won't come to a bit of harm. It ain't possible, the way I got it fixed, an' we may do a whole lot of good, at least as far as the little mam'selle is concerned, an' maybe something about this here Crimson Patch beside. Here's my scheme:

"I got an older brother who owns a secondhand auto an' runs it like a jitney. That's his business. But sometimes he takes a day off when I do an' we go fishin' together or somethin'. He's off to-day, same as me. An' you can trust him just the same as me. He ain't a born detective like I am, but he's honest as honest an' he knows how to hold his tongue an' ask no questions. So I ain't explainin' everything to him.

"Now I figure that it ain't healthy for you to stay all day alone around that hotel if there's anything in this 'danger' business. Not that you wouldn't be safe enough if you sit tight, but you can't tell what complicatin' thing might come up, an' you ain't got a soul around to advise you, not even me. Now suppose you come out to Hanford with me an' Ted in the auto, an' we'll hang around an' lie low an' see if we can get hold of the little mam'selle somehow an' find out what this here mess is all about, anyhow. There can't any harm possibly come to us, 'cause Ted's goin' to keep out of things an' just lie low in the auto in that patch of woods back of the house an' I got a police-whistle in my pocket, an' if anything goes wrong I'll blow it like mad an' he'll beat it back to the city an' have the police out in ten minutes. Are you game?"

For one uncertain moment Patricia wavered. Was it right for her to engage in this harebrained escapade? What would her father say? Or Mrs. Quale? Then the thought of Virginie in danger, the possibility of locating the Crimson Patch, and the sheer adventure of the thing overcame all her scruples.

"Yes, I'll go, Chester. I trust you absolutely, and I'm sure you will not let me come to harm. But suppose Father should call me up at the hotel? What will he think if they say I'm away?"

"He'll think you're out somewhere with Mrs. Quale probably, won't he?" answered Chet. "And I'm almost certain he won't call you up till evening, probably, because you might be out an' he'd only be wasting time an' money."

But another thought had suddenly occurred to Patricia, who, truth to tell, did not feel at all easy about this expedition, nor about what her father would think of it. A solution of one side of its difficulties had all at once leaped into her mind.

"How would it do, Chester, if we take Mrs. Quale's Delia along with us?"

"*What?*" exclaimed Chet, in such obvious dismay that Patricia could not resist a laugh at his expense. "Gee whiz! you'd block the whole game with that white elephant on our hands!"

"Now, be sensible, Chester!" she urged. "It's perfectly plain to me that I've either got to take her, or else not go myself. Otherwise Father would not allow it. We can have her with us, and yet not tell her all about our plans. You know, Mrs. Quale won't be back until evening, so Delia hasn't a blessed thing to do to-day. I'll ask her if she'd like to go off on a little picnic with me this morning a ways out of town where we *may* pick up Virginie. She'll be delighted to have the outing, *that* I know!"

The explanation cleared the air for Chet. "All right, I'm game if you are!" he declared. "If you go back and get her and bring her over here, I'll be round with Ted and the jit in next to no time."

Twenty minutes later he appeared in a battered jitney, sitting on the front seat with a sheepish-looking, red-haired young fellow, who bowed and grinned inarticulately as Chet introduced him as his brother Ted. Patricia, accompanied by an obviously delighted Delia and a well-filled lunch basket, clambered into the rear seat, and in another instant they were off on their adventurous mission.

CHAPTER XII

THE HOUSE WITH THE GREEN SHUTTERS

146

It was a short and breathless ride out to Hanford, through a part of the country quite unfamiliar to Patricia, as it was off the regular trolley and railroad lines. They passed through the little town at a breakneck speed, purposely, as Chet explained. It was such a tiny place and so out of the world that every passing vehicle was apt to be an object of interest to the inhabitants and he didn't want their car to be specially noticed and commented upon. Twice Delia protested strongly against the pace, but Patricia pretended not to hear her, and they sped on.

Outside the town limits they slowed down and proceeded at a more leisurely pace, and presently turned into a rough little apology for a road leading through the woods. Under a dense mass of overhanging boughs they stopped, securely screened from the road.

147

"Now here's where we begin the great *Sherlock Holmes* act!" announced Chet, gaily. "The house is just beyond the edge of the woods. You sit here tight, Ted, an' don't you budge unless you hear this whistle or see us come runnin' back. Then you have the engine ready to beat it like blazes. You understand, don't you?"

Ted, still inarticulate, nodded vigorously.

"Now, come along, miss, if you're ready," went on Chet, "an' we'll scout around the edge of the woods nearest to the house for a spell an' see what's doin'."

Leaving Delia in the car, somewhat mystified, but still unquestioningly happy, Patricia, with pounding heart, followed his lead and, Indian file, they plowed their way through the deep underbrush and tangled vines till they stood at the edge of the clearing, protected from sight only by some overhanging boughs. Beyond them stretched the expanse of a couple of hundred feet of grass. It had once, doubtless, been only a rough meadow, but was now converted into a smooth, well-kept lawn running to the very steps of the porch where Chet had hidden the night before. The house was of the old-fashioned "salt-box" type, with long, sloping roof running to within a few feet of the ground at the back. It had been renovated and painted, with the addition of a wide, screened veranda on one side. But its distinctive feature was the shutters, doubtless the old original ones, of solid wood with little crescents cut in them near the top, and painted a bright green.

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There was no one about, not a sign of a living creature, though all the windows were open, their pretty draperies swaying in the morning breeze.

"What had we better do?" questioned Patricia. "We mustn't go any nearer the house."

149

"No, we must sit tight right here and watch what goes on for a while," agreed Chet. "What I'm trying to do is to see, by who goes in or out of the place, whose around, an' what chance we have of passin' the glad word to the little mam'selle."

They sat in almost absolute silence for nearly half an hour and nothing happened at all. No one went either in or out, no face appeared at a window, nor door was opened or shut.

"I believe it's deserted," whispered Patricia, impatiently. "I'm sure they've all gone away."

"Don't you believe it!" retorted Chet. "They ain't such geese as to all go off an' leave the house open like that. But if somethin' don't happen purty quick, I'm goin' to beat it around to the back an' see the lay of the land there."

Something, however, did happen, and very shortly after. A man in a chauffeur's outfit appeared from somewhere at the back of the house and went over to a small garage, barely visible from where they stood hidden. Five minutes later there was the sound of a motor starting, and an automobile shot around the curve of the drive and came to a halt before the door. Almost at once the door opened, a beautifully gowned woman came out, stepped into the motor, and was driven rapidly away.

150

Patricia clutched Chet's arm spasmodically. "It was Madame Vanderpoel!" she whispered. "Oh, it made me shudder just to look at her again. And I used to like her, too. But now there's something awful about her!"

But Chet was interested in something quite different.

"Hooray!" he exclaimed in an undertone. "If she's flew the coop, we got a fightin' chance anyway. Now, I may be wrong, but from what I seen last night an' the lay of the land to-day, I figure there's only that grouchy maid an' the little 'un left in the house. Let's wait a while longer an' see if we see anybody else."

151

They waited in another long silence. Then Patricia's heart almost stopped beating. The front door opened and Virginie de Vos stepped out, looked about her half cautiously, half languidly, and started to cross the lawn in the very direction where they were hidden. She had a book in her hand, and Patricia suspected that her intention was to sit and read in the cool shade of the woods.

"Oh, it couldn't have happened better, could it?" she whispered ecstatically to Chet. "I've been fairly praying for something like this ever since we've been here."

"Fine!" replied Chet, in ill-suppressed excitement. "Now, looka here. I ain't goin' to complicate things between you an' her by hangin' around while you have your talk. I'm just goin' to disappear in the woods back here a ways, but I'll be right within call, an' when you want me, you can get me. An' p'raps I'd better go an' entertain Delia a while, or she'll be wantin' to quit this picnic. See?"

152

Patricia nodded, mutely grateful for his tact, but her gaze was fastened on the girl, approaching so slowly and lifelessly across the lawn. Chet melted away into the leafy growth behind her, and she herself drew back a little farther into the woods, so that the meeting might not take place too close to the house. In another moment she and Virginia stood suddenly face to face.

Patricia sprang forward with a little cry of joy. For a moment an answering gleam leaped into Virginia's eyes. Then, to Patricia's unbounded astonishment, the girl shrank back, her eyes wide and terror-stricken, her hands outspread before her as if to push her friend far from her sight.

"Why, Virginia!" cried Patricia. "What is the trouble? Have I frightened you so? Aren't you glad to see me?"

153

"Yes,—oh, no, no! You must not come. I will not talk to you. I cannot! I cannot!"

Patricia was amazed at her incoherent distress, and could make nothing out of the contradictory statements she uttered.

"But I thought you would be glad to see me, Virginia. I was so delighted to find out where you were. And you are in trouble too, or danger, or are worried about something. Won't you tell me about it? I came all this way to find out how you were and what I can do to help you."

"You can do nothing," the girl answered dully. "Go back and never think of me or try to see me again. It is the only safe thing for you."

"But I do not understand!" cried Patricia, in despair. "What can you mean, Virginia? Didn't you call me up last night and warn me of danger and say you too were in danger, but you didn't have time to finish, or were cut off, or something. I was so worried about you and—and I—found out where you were, and have come to find out all about it."

154

"I tried to warn you not to come," Virginia answered, "but I—but I—did not get a chance to finish. I—I could not make you understand. When I said I was in danger I—I only—meant in danger of being overheard."

"But, Virginia," cried Patricia, in utter bewilderment, "what do you mean by 'warning me not to come'? How could you think I was coming, when I didn't even know where you were? It was only by an—an accident that I found out where you were—later."

The girl stared at her fixedly, a sudden light dawning in her face.

"But, tell me, how *did* you come?" she whispered excitedly. "Was it not with—with Madame Vanderpoel?"

"*With Madame Vanderpoel?* Indeed not!" exclaimed Patricia, and to her utter discomfiture, Virginia murmured a faint, "I am so glad!" and dropped in a huddled heap on the ground, hiding her face in her hands.

155

"But why should you think I came with Madame Vanderpoel?" questioned Patricia, determined to get to the bottom of this mystery. "I have neither seen her nor heard from her since she left the hotel."

"She—she has gone to the city to—to call for you," murmured Virginia, her face still buried in her hands. "She was going to urge you to come out to see me, saying I was quite ill and wished it. She was going to put the matter very urgently. Oh, I prayed that you would not come! And when I saw you, I thought you had come with her, and—and—" She stopped with a shuddering sob.

"Virginia," said Patricia, in a very firm, quiet voice, "won't you please explain all this to me? What is it Madame Vanderpoel wished of me? Why was she trying to get me here? And what have you to do with it all?"

156

The girl crouching on the ground looked up at her suddenly.

"Do you remember," she murmured, "that once you promised to—to love and—and trust me, no matter what happened, in spite of all—all appearances that—that seemed against me? Can you keep that promise—in spite of—of everything?" She looked so appealingly at her friend that Patricia went down on her knees beside the crouching girl and put both arms about her.

"I never yet failed to keep a promise, Virginia dear. Believe me, I love you and trust you just as much as ever, and always will. I think there is some terrible secret that is making you act very differently from what you would under ordinary circumstances. I won't ask you what it is, but if you ever want to tell me, you can be sure it will be safe with me."

The gentle words acted like magic on the crushed, unhappy girl. She sat up suddenly, as if inspired by some strong determination, put both hands in Patricia's, and looked her straight in the eyes.

157

"You are a darling! You are better to me, more kind, than I ever hoped or dreamed. I am going to tell you all—all I know, though I do not dare to think what would happen to me if they suspected it."

"Who are 'they'?" questioned Patricia.

"The *Boches*—the German spies!" answered Virginia, in a hushed tone. "That is a house full of them. Did you not know it?"

Patricia started back in real horror. This, then, was the confirmation of her very worst fears.

"But you—" she stammered. "Surely you are not one of them? You said you were a Belgian."

Virginia nodded lifelessly. "I am truly a Belgian—but I am their helpless tool."

"But your aunt?" cried Patricia, still unconvinced. "Surely Madame Vanderpoel is a Belgian too. Why does she not protect you? Is she, too, in their power?"

158

Virginie shuddered. "Madame Vanderpoel is no Belgian. She is a German by birth—and at heart. She married my mother's brother,—he is now dead,—and she lived for many years in our country and was to all outward appearance a Belgian. But she has been secretly, all these years, in the service of the German spy system. I never dreamed of such a thing myself, nor did my father, till she had brought me away to England and America and had me completely in her power."

A great light suddenly dawned on Patricia. Here was the explanation of many curious incidents that had happened at the hotel. But bewilderment on some points still possessed her.

"Madame Vanderpoel seemed very kind to you though, Virginie?" she ventured. "And you treated her rather abominably at times, if I must say so. Yet she never reproached you or said anything unpleasant."

"She was very kind to me in public—yes. But what she did and said to me in private, I would wish never to tell you." 159

"Well, but, Virginie, there is *one* thing I still cannot seem to understand!" cried Patricia. "You say that Madame Vanderpoel has you completely in her power. That seems unthinkable to me, especially here in free America. What is to prevent you from running away from her, from giving yourself up to the proper authorities, from informing them about her and having her and all the rest of them put in prison? You surely have had plenty of opportunity to do that. Has it never occurred to you?"

Virginie seemed fairly to shrink into herself at this suggestion. "Oh, you do not understand!" she moaned. "There is something else, something more terrible than you have any idea of. Gladly, only too gladly would I do as you suggest. Indeed, I would have done it long ago. I would have done it even had it meant my own death. But the safety of one I love depends wholly on my complete obedience to her—to them." 160

"What—oh, what do you mean?" breathed Patricia, a partial light breaking in on her bewilderment.

"*My father!*—they have him, too, in their power, 'over there'! He was captured by them after the siege of Antwerp, and is now in a German prison. Can you not see now where they have complete control over me? I must do their will without hesitation, or my father's life will be forfeited. The first act of disobedience, of rebellion on my part, and his life is ended by a secret code message sent by them through Switzerland. And so you see, my friend, that my life is a daily torture."

She said no more. Patricia sat petrified by this hideous revelation. No tale of horror that she had heard from her father could exceed the exquisite cruelty of the torment and misery meted out to this lovely, helpless girl, forced against her will, her patriotism, and her affections to act as their tool in order to save the life of her father! Patricia understood it all now—all the strange conduct that had so puzzled her in their days together at the hotel. How torn between her love, her sense of right, and her fears this poor girl must have been—must be now! And a great thankfulness filled her that she had been moved to assure Virginie of her love and trust, in spite of all appearances, before she had known the whole truth. 161

But there seemed to be no words in which she could express her horror of what she had heard. So she only kept both arms about her friend, and in this close contact they sat together, Virginie clearly grateful for the unspoken sympathy. At length Patricia broke the silence.

"Have they—have they made you do many things you—hated?" she asked hesitatingly. "I do not quite understand how they *could* use you—"

"They have spent, as they say, a long time 'training me'," said Virginie. "I was to pose before people as just what I am, a Belgian refugee, and arouse sympathy, and get into their confidence, and then—" she shuddered again, "draw from them any secrets of interest to the German government, or— or perhaps take from them any secret papers of importance, if I could manage it, or—or that kind of thing. They thought at first that I should be very successful, very helpful to them, but I fear I have not—that is, I do not *fear* it, I am glad of it—only I know that I risk my father's life with every act of resistance." 162

"Twice I have failed them. Once, in England, in a hotel there, they arranged that I should become acquainted with the wife of a prominent British general at the front. She took a great fancy to me and had me with her very often. They knew that she had papers of her husband's of great importance in her possession, and I was to obtain them somehow. But I *could* not do it—if for no other reason that she had been so kind to me; and soon she went away to do Red Cross work at the front, so I never had another chance. I was thankful from my heart, but oh, they were very, very angry! I thought they would surely fulfil their threat and take my father's life, but they gave me another chance." 163

"When your country declared war, we came over here and stayed for a time in a big hotel in Washington. There, a second time, I was made to form the acquaintance of an American diplomat and his wife who were staying at the same place. They were very sorry for me and interested in me because I was a Belgian refugee, and invited me often to their rooms. I did not care for them, as I had for the English lady, but they, too, were kind and good to me. Madame Vanderpoel had ordered me, on a certain day when I had been visiting in the lady's room and she had left me alone for a time, to go through her writing-desk and hunt for one particular document. And again I failed them. I could not do this horrible thing when it came to the moment, and I pretended to be very ill and obliged to return at once to my room. That night the diplomat and his wife removed to the house of a friend, where they were to visit for an indefinite time." 164

"The wrath of these terrible people against me knew no bounds. And I thought for a time that nothing could save my father. But they decided to give me one more chance—and that chance was

you!"

Patricia started in spite of herself. "But how—how do they know there is anything—about me of—of interest to them?"

"They know everything," declared Virginie, apathetically accepting what was to her a common, every-day fact. "Yes, they know everything. Though how they find it out, I cannot imagine. They seem to have a million eyes and ears watching and listening for them, in every country. They know that your father has a very important secret mission. Whether they know just *what* it is, I have not been able to tell. But they know that it is vital to understand that mission, to stop his work if possible. They wish to obtain a secret paper he has, at any cost. They knew you were both to come to the hotel. We ourselves came there the day before. We changed our room once, so as to be nearer to you.

165

"Then I received my instructions. I was to form an acquaintance with you—somehow. It should be easy, since we were about of an age. I was to be with you frequently, constantly. I was to discover if you were in your father's confidence. I was to locate that secret paper, and I was to obtain possession of it when the time seemed ripe. It was to be my last chance. If I failed—well, you can imagine the rest.

"I liked you from the first—yes, I loved you. On that first night when you caught me spying on you from the door across the hall and were so sweet and charming to me, I loved you. And that love made all the harder what I had to do. I determined that I would *not* get acquainted with you; I would pretend that you did not wish or encourage it. But my delay only angered Madame Vanderpoel. She took matters in her own hands on that morning when she told you I was ill with a headache, and forced the friendship on me in spite of myself. You know that I was not ill, nor did she have to go to New York. She merely went out and stayed out all day to give us a chance to get acquainted.

166

"Well, you know the rest of that history—how strangely I acted at times, how—how abominable I was to you. I do not yet understand how you could have been so sweet and forgiving. But the more you were, the more I hated what I had to do and delayed about it. And the longer I delayed, the more angry Madame Vanderpoel grew with me. Of one thing I was glad. I could discover nothing about any secret paper, and they were beginning to doubt whether your father really had it with him or whether it was concealed elsewhere.

167

"At any rate, much to my surprise, after that last night I spent with you, Madame informed me next morning very early that we were leaving the hotel to come here. She did not offer any explanation at the time, but I know now that it was because they had obtained the secret paper at last, I know not how, and there was no need to stay longer at the hotel. I tried so hard to get some word to you in spite of her. I had just whispered part of the message to the bell-boy when she interrupted and I got no other chance.

"But though I never expected to see you again, I rejoiced that the terrible necessity for constantly deceiving you was over at last. I could at least love you always and feel that I need no longer wrong you. But it was not to be. Last night I overheard them talking below, and it seems that though they had obtained what they believed to be the secret paper, they could make nothing of it at all, and so they were as much in the dark as ever. They talked and wrangled over it much, and at length Madame herself proposed a plan. She knew that your father had missed the paper and also that he was in New York searching for it on a false clue that they themselves had arranged. But she imagined that she had so well covered her tracks that neither you nor he connected us with any share in the matter. So she planned to go in to the city, call at your hotel, and try to induce you to come out here with her in the car to visit me for a few hours, telling you a sad tale of how I had been taken ill again and wished to see you. But while you were here, she was going to threaten you suddenly with dreadful things, both to yourself and your father, if you did not tell her the secret of the paper. And after she had frightened you into telling (as she was sure she could), she was to have you driven away in the car and left in some distant and unknown locality, and by the time you had at last returned to the hotel, we would all have disappeared and could not be traced."

168

"But I do not *know* the secret of it!" cried Patricia. Virginie only shrugged her shoulders with a foreign gesture.

169

"So much the worse for Madame, then," she went on. "She knew she was taking that chance. But she felt almost certain you were in your father's confidence. If you did not know, then the same program would be carried out. But first, before she questioned you, she wished *me* to try and draw the secret from you. If I were successful, it would be so much simpler for her. She summoned me to her this morning and instructed me in the part I was to play. And that is why I shuddered so when I saw you. I thought she had been successful in her ruse to get you here. I had tried so hard to prevent it. Last night I called you on the upstairs telephone, softly, so they might not hear, for they were still wrangling down below. But I could not finish. Melanie was coming up the stairs. I had to ring off. Now you know it all."

170

She ceased speaking and sat staring into her lap, her hands clasped so tightly that the knuckles showed white. Patricia also sat in stunned silence. Now that the whole terrible plot had been revealed to her, it all seemed so infinitely worse than anything she had imagined that she could scarcely collect her senses. Two things stood out in her mind with distinctness: the Crimson Patch was concealed somewhere in that house—she must get hold of it at all cost—it was vital to her father's, yes, even to the whole country's interests; and Virginie must be snatched somehow from the clutches of these terrible enemies who were using her against her will for their own ends. But how was it to be accomplished?

170

At that moment, Chet Jackson's head appeared suddenly over the bushes.

"If you'll excuse me, ladies, for mentionin' it," he whispered, "something's got to be done pretty quick. I figure the Madame'll be gettin' back any minute now."

CHAPTER XIII

VIRGINIE DECIDES

172

Virginie looked up in quick alarm. "Who is that?" she cried, in a low voice, and then, recognizing the bell-boy she had seen so often at the hotel, she gazed at Patricia in amazed surprise. "How did you get here?" she suddenly asked her friend. So absorbed had she been in other matters, that the question had not occurred to her before. Patricia sketched to her in hurried whispers the history of the previous night and the assistance rendered by Chet, while the boy himself stood by uneasily, watching the house and the road. When she had finished, he added:

"I gotta tell you that I heard a good deal of what the little mam'selle was sayin' just now, 'cause I had crept back to warn you folks you'd have to be a bit quicker if we're goin' to get anything done, so I pretty well know the lay of the land. Now I got a plan in the back of my head. It's kind of risky, but I think we can swing it if we work quick. But first we must find out what this here little mam'selle is plannin' to do. Are you goin' to get her to break away from that shady gang an' beat it with us?"

173

"Oh, that's just what I want her to do—just what I've been thinking of myself!" cried Patricia. "Are you willing, Virginie dear?"

The girl looked at her in some bewilderment. American slang was something she had yet to become acquainted with, and Chet's last remarks were as incomprehensible to her as if they had been uttered in Choctaw.

"We want you to come with us," Patricia explained. "You must not stay any longer with these dreadful people, Virginie. We think we can get you away from them, and you will have a happy life and never, never be tormented by them again."

But the girl shrank back in terror. "No, no!" she cried. "It must not be. I cannot do it, much as I long to. You must not ask it. *My father!*" whispered Virginie, brokenly, and she needed to say no more. Patricia understood. She had forgotten for a moment how deeply they held this helpless girl in their power. And after the many terrible tales she had heard of the enemy's cruelty, she had not the slightest doubt that they would carry out their threat. What could she say or do that would be of any avail in the face of this? She looked at Chet helplessly.

174

"Say," he declared at length, "this here's sure a bad lookout, but there must be *some* way out of it. You can't make me believe that in this here free country any bunch of Huns is goin' to get away with a come-on game like that. Why say, what's the matter with this? We'll bundle the little mam'selle into the car an' hustle back to the city an' get the police out here in a jiff an' raid the whole place before they have time to turn around. We'd sure find that Crimson Patch somewhere in the ranch. An' they'd have the bunch all in the jug before they had time to do any telephonin' or send any messages or anything. What say?"

175

"No, no!" cried Virginie, who had somehow taken in his meaning in spite of his slang. "It would not do. You do not understand. They are not all here—in this house. Only Madame—and Melanie, her maid, and the chauffeur, Hermann Klausser (they call him Jacques Thierrot in public) are here. But there are many, many others in New York—everywhere. They are all in these plots. They would find out what had happened, and *they* would send the message. I am not safe though you were to shut up a dozen of them in jail at once. Do you not see?"

They did see. Chet scratched his head in perplexed thought and Patricia stared at them both helplessly. It seemed an almost impossible tangle. It was Chet who presently shrugged his shoulders and addressed them in words of firmness and determination, thus:

176

"Say, this here does certainly seem *some* little puzzle, but you want to think ahead of things a bit, an' reason out how things are likely to go on if they keep runnin' in the same groove. Have you thought of this, miss—er—mam'selle? If you keep on like this, just knucklin' down to 'em all the time, are things ever goin' to get any better? Ain't they goin' to force you to do worse an' worse all the time just as long as they can keep you under? That's the Hun of it. They believe in terrorizing, they do! They think they got you cold as long as they can scare the livin' wits out of you. An' that's where America put it all over 'em. *They* didn't scare for a cent. All the Yanks ever thought of was, 'Lead me to 'em! Just let me get my hands on one of them 'ere Huns. *I'll* give 'em a little dose of 'frightfulness.' An' they did, too; an' the Huns are turnin' tail an' beatin' it this very minute at Château Thierry an' thereabouts."

177

"That's the spirit to have. Don't let 'em put it over you. An' another thing maybe you haven't thought of, miss—mam'selle. Do you really *believe* everything they're tellin' you? I bet they'd as soon fool you as eat their dinner! How do you know this is all true about your father? He may be well an' safe this very minute—"

"Oh, no, no!" interrupted Virginie. "If that were so I would have heard from him in some way. I have heard nothing in all these three years. No, he is not safe. He is surely in their power."

"Well, that may be so," insisted Chet, "but still I say, you can't trust 'em. An' there's one thing you *can* trust an' it's the most powerful thing in the world to-day, an' that's this little old U. S. Government. If anything on earth can help you, that can, an' you'd a great sight better put your trust in that than to knuckle down any longer to this beastly bunch of Hun spies. Ain't I talkin' sensible, Miss Patricia?"

178

"Indeed you are!" Patricia echoed enthusiastically. "Why, Chet is right, Virginie, absolutely. Can't

you see it? I only wonder we didn't think of it before! Your choice lies between these horrible, unscrupulous creatures, and the finest, most powerful Government in all the world. How can you even hesitate? You can't go on forever this way with Madame Vanderpoel. Some day they might put an end to your father's life for some reason of their own, and you couldn't do a thing to stop it, mightn't even know it. You'd be perfectly helpless. Whereas, if you get yourself out of their power, you stand *some* chance, at least, of rescuing your father too. *Take* the chance, Virginie. These people are not so powerful as they seem to you because you have been so shut up with them. They have let you know nothing. Take the chance. I believe it is your *only* chance to help your father and yourself!"

179

And Virginie, very much impressed, visibly wavered. She had, indeed, taken no thought for the future, hopelessly supposing her bondage would go on indefinitely, as at present, only serving to prolong her father's existence by her acquiescence. To her it was, indeed, a terrible chance, yet not quite so uncertain as it had once seemed. Perhaps the United States *was* more powerful than she realized. Perhaps—but suddenly she threw all hesitation to the winds.

"Yes, yes, you are right!" she exclaimed. "I will go with you. Perhaps I can serve him best—so."

"Hooray! Good for you!" cried Chet, overjoyed. "An' now about this here Crimson Patch. Do you think there's any chance of our gettin' hold of it? Where d'you suppose the Madame keeps it salted down?"

Patricia, too happy for expression at Virginie's decision, could only press her hand warmly. "Yes, Virginie, we *must*, if possible, get the Crimson Patch. Have you any idea where it is?"

180

"I saw it in her writing-desk this morning," replied Virginie, "while she was telling me what I must do. She was explaining to me how I must get you to tell me the secret of it if I could, without of course allowing you to think it was here. I do not think she put it back in the safe. She is so sure of herself that she has no fear of its being discovered."

"Then it ought to be possible to get it somehow or other," mused Patricia. "Who is this maid, Melanie, that you speak of, Virginie, and where do you think she is now?"

"Melanie has been Madame Vanderpoel's servant for many years," answered the girl. "She is the only one among them all who cares in the slightest for me. I think she is quite fond of me, though she has never said so. She is a strange, silent woman."

"Is she a German?" questioned Patricia.

"Yes, by birth, but she lived so long in Belgium that I think she came to feel more Belgian than German. I think she secretly hates all this spy-work, but she is bound to Madame Vanderpoel by many obligations and she dare not make a protest. Madame at one time gave her a great deal of money to help her family, who were in great need, and Melanie is very loyal to her. But she has always been fond of me ever since I was a baby, and I feel sure that she resents at times, the way they treat me. I only *feel* this for she never has said one word. I do not think she would dare let them know it. She is probably in the kitchen now, for she has to get the meals as well as wait on Madame. There are no other servants around. Madame will not have them, lest they discover too much. Hermann Klausser is not a servant. He is one of the worst of them,—the spies,—but he drives the car and acts to the world as Madame's chauffeur."

181

"Well, if Melanie is in the kitchen and the rest of them out of the way," said Chet, "it ought to be a pretty good time to swipe that sketch. Do you think you'd dare go in an' cabbage it, little miss, or shall I try? It would be safer an' quicker for you, if you think you don't mind, because you know where the desk is, an' this here Melanie wouldn't think it so strange to see you goin' in an' out. But if you don't care for the job, I'll try my hand at it. But we got to be quick, whatever we do, 'cause the madame may be back any minute. How about it?"

182

"Oh, I will try it," assented Virginie. "It would be far better for me, since I know its location and can go in and out freely."

Patricia gave her a hug and murmured, "You darling!" and she was just about to set forth on her quest, when Chet cried, "Hold on!" and laid a detaining hand on her arm. The sound of a motor was heard tearing madly up the road, and in another moment Madame's car had swung into the driveway.

"Can you beat that for luck!" snorted Chet. And Virginie huddled back against Patricia with a little moan of despair.

183

CHAPTER XIV

MELANIE

184

The car stopped in front of the door and Madame stepped out. She was in rare ill-humor, that was plain, and she stood talking long with the chauffeur. Then she went into the house. The chauffeur sprang into the car and drove off at a furious pace in the same direction from which they had come.

The three crouching at the edge of the woods watched it all with bitter disappointment and alarm.

"What shall I do?" shuddered Virginie. "It is now too late to carry out our plan. It can never be done. Oh, I fear that I shall never be free from her power."

"Now, just cut out all that!" said Chet, brusque, but well-meaning. "You could be quit of her this very minute if we wanted to beat it and take to the auto. But what we're trying to do is to save that there Crimson Patch, if possible. Perhaps we can't do it just the way we meant to first, but there certain is *some* way if we can just work it out. How about this? Suppose you go back to the house, just casual like, an' see what the fuss is all about. We will stay put right here. It's perfectly safe, an' we can stay here all the rest of the day if necessary. Then, later, perhaps after you've had your lunch, you'll find some chance of gettin' that sketch an' wanderin' off here to the woods again, an' then it will just be heigho, an' beatin' the speed-limit back to the city for us all! How about it?"

185

Virginie thought it over carefully. "I think perhaps that *is* a good idea. I will tell you why. After luncheon Madame always goes to her room to rest and sleep. Melanie will be busy in the kitchen, and if the chauffeur does not come back, it will all be quite safe. I think he will not come back. I have a feeling that he has gone to New York to consult with—with the rest of them. But Madame may not leave the sketch in her desk. She may lock it in her safe, but I will go back, though she is terrible when she is angry."

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"But remember this, always, Virginie," Patricia assured her; "she can do nothing now to harm you personally. Things have changed since you thought yourself completely in her power. We are here, and, if things get too bad, call to us, or make some outcry, and you'll have help there before you know it. You are not alone any more."

Thus cheered and comforted, Virginie took her book, murmured an inarticulate farewell, and stepped into the open. The two who remained watched her breathlessly as she crossed the lawn and ascended the steps of the little porch. Then the door closed behind her and they heard and saw no more.

A nerve-racking period of suspense followed. When it was plain that she would not, in all probability, reappear for two or three hours, Chet suggested that they go back to where the others were waiting, lest Delia become anxious and try to hunt them up.

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"We might as well as have some lunch, while we can," he added. "You can tell her that the little mam'selle will join us later, if she asks any questions. There's no telling how long we have to wait, and you'll feel better for some eats. Ted and I will keep watch. But be ready to beat it, any minute, if we give the signal."

They found Delia happily absorbed in arranging the lunch and very little concerned about Patricia's absence and the non-appearance of the Belgian girl. She had struck up a friendship with the inarticulate Ted, and the two were busily occupied in transforming the rear seat of the jitney into a luncheon table.

The food restored Patricia's courage and revived her hopes, which had begun to wane with the disappearance of Virginie. When the meal was over, she told Delia she was going to fetch Virginie. Then she and Chet went back to their post and resumed their long vigil.

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Meanwhile, what was happening in the house of the green shutters?

The wrath of Madame at the failure of her plan was all that Virginie had expected it would be, and the girl had to bear the brunt of it when she ventured in at last. Madame had called at the hotel and asked for Patricia. She was not in and had not been seen since breakfast, nor had they, the hotel authorities, any information as to her whereabouts. Neither did they know when she would be back. Madame had waited in the lounge for over an hour, but no Patricia had appeared. Then, fearing to be seen there any longer, she had come away. Where had the little idiot flown to, she inquired in a violent temper? Could it be possible she had joined her father? All her plans were now upset by this unaccountable action of her intended victim.

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Virginie, compelled to listen to it all, and fearful of betraying some knowledge of the matter, was more uncomfortable than she dared to show, and could only sit by with downcast eyes and her usual air of terrorized docility.

"It is your fault! I believe it is all your fault!" Madame stormed, and Virginie shrank back physically as well as mentally, though she knew that Madame in no way realized how very much "her fault" it actually was and was only venting her ill-temper on the nearest object.

"Well, let us go to luncheon," Madame at length announced when her ill-humor had spent itself. "It has been a bad day's work, but we must eat, and afterward I will rest and think what to do next."

The meal was consumed in utter silence. Madame was absorbed with her own thoughts, and Virginie was only too thankful for a respite from her angry accusations. All during the hour she was

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praying, hoping, wondering what Madame was going to do about the sketch still carelessly lying in the drawer of her writing-desk. Would she remember to put it safely away before she retired to her room? Every mouthful choked the girl, but she made a brave pretense of eating. It seemed as if Madame would never be done with this dreadful meal, the most trying that Virginie had ever endured.

But the ordeal was over at last. Madame rose, pushed aside her chair, and left the room without further remark. And Virginie, with loudly beating heart, heard her pass through the living-room and linger a moment at her desk, rustling the papers about. What was she doing? Oh, if she only dared to peep in and see! But Melanie was silently clearing the table, so she passed out to the screened veranda beyond, hearing Madame ascending the stairs as she did so. And she did not even know what had become of the Crimson Patch!

It seemed as if Melanie would never finish her work in the dining-room. Half an hour passed and she was still fussing about, washing, as she usually did, all the silver and glass in the butler's pantry, and passing and repassing in and out on her many errands. Not until she retired to the kitchen would Virginie dare to begin her investigations.

But all things come to an end if one waits long enough, and Melanie at length made her last trip into the dining-room. Virginie heard her retreating footsteps in the direction of the kitchen with a sigh of unutterable relief. Her one terror now was lest Madame might call to her to come upstairs and fan her and read aloud to her, as she frequently did when the mood took her. Besides being an utterly repugnant task, it would in this case put an end to every thought of escape, according to her prearranged plan with the two waiting in the woods. If she could only get away before that happened, all would be well!

The kitchen door closed at last. Virginie gathered all her courage and tiptoed through the dining-room and on into the living-room beyond. Her knees shook so that she could scarcely walk, and a mist seemed to float before her eyes. She felt sure that her pounding heart could be heard by Madame herself in the room above.

The desk stood in a big bay window, and was closed, but not locked. Virginie pulled open the drawer, which gave with a resisting squeak, so loud that her very heart stood still at the appalling sound. She stood motionless for what seemed an hour, but nothing happened and she gradually came to the conclusion that the sound must have passed unnoticed. Then she bent to look at the contents of the drawer.

The Crimson Patch was not there! At least, it was nowhere to be seen on the top. But the drawer was in some confusion, for Madame was by no means a methodical person. Virginie ventured to put in her hand and push the papers about. Could it be?—yes, it *must* be, that Madame had taken the sketch away, for it was nowhere to be found. Virginie could have wept as she stood there, with the terrible disappointment of it all.



Melanie stood in the doorway surveying her with stern surprise

But suddenly her heart gave a leap, for her searching fingers had come in contact with something that felt familiar, far down at the bottom of the drawer. It was the heavy watercolor paper that she remembered so well. Madame, indolent with the desire for her afternoon sleep and reluctant at the moment to go to the trouble of locking away her treasure, had carelessly tucked it away in a far corner of the drawer under a mass of bills and other papers. With a great sigh of joy, Virginie drew out the Crimson Patch.

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An instant after she had done so, a slight sound behind her caused her to whirl about in sudden alarm.

Melanie stood in the doorway between the portières, surveying her with stern surprise.

CHAPTER XV OUT OF THE NET

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Sheer terror at her awful position froze Virginia to an immovable statue for a moment. It seemed almost unbelievable, like the situation in some terrible dream. Could it actually be true? She knew not what to say, what to think, what to do. Her brain absolutely refused to work, her body to move.

It was Melanie herself who broke the spell. "What are you doing here?" she whispered. The sound of her voice released Virginia from the nightmare of immovable terror. A sudden determination was born in her, a wild impulse to throw herself entirely on the mercy of this strange, silent woman whose sympathy she had sometimes felt, though it had never been expressed. It was, she also realized, her only course now.

"Oh, Melanie! I can stand it all no longer! I am going to go away. I am going with friends who will love me and be kind to me. And to show my gratitude to them for taking me away from this terrible place, I am going to restore to them what *she* has stolen—this! It is all I can do. Help me, Melanie! I think you—care for me a little, do you not? I have always thought so. Do not drag me back again into this horrible life!" She crept over and clasped both arms about the woman's neck. 195

Melanie caught her breath in surprise. The contact of the girl's clinging body and the clasp of her soft young arms seemed to have a curious effect on the stern, repressed woman. Tears started to her eyes and her breath came in little gasps. She raised her arms and for an instant it seemed as if she were about to push the girl away. Then, to Virginia's surprise, she suddenly clasped her in a convulsive embrace.

"My little heart! The only baby I ever had to love!" she murmured brokenly.

Virginia was quick to seize her advantage. "Oh, Melanie, help me to get away from this terrible house. I can endure it no longer. I have suffered too much. *You* know what I have suffered. And now, at last, I have the opportunity to get away from it all. Do not prevent it, dear Melanie. Do not tell *her*! And I will love you always. Will you do this one thing for me?" 196

The woman hesitated for a long, tense moment. Then she shrugged her shoulders and pushed the clinging girl a little way from her.

"I owe much to—*her*—everything practically," she said. "My existence almost, and the lives of my family. My mother and my little sisters would have died of starvation had it not been for her. She saved us all, but she has made me pay a terrible price. She owns me, body and soul. I have done despicable things for her—because I had to. But one thing has been harder for me than all the rest—her treatment of you, my little Virginia, in these last four terrible years. I have loved you always, from a baby, when you were left motherless. I have felt all that she has made you suffer. Yet what could I do? I was helpless. 197

"But now you wish to escape, to get away from it all. Well, you shall. It will perhaps help to ease my conscience that I have done at least one good deed. I will leave the way clear. You shall take the paper if you wish—and go. I only pray you may be happy at last. Madame shall never know how you got away. But wait just one moment. There is something I wish to give you before you go. Stay where you are and I will be back immediately."

Virginia, only too grateful for the turn affairs had taken, consented to remain where she was till Melanie came back, and the woman hurried away in the direction of the kitchen. But Melanie was gone what seemed a very long time. The girl began to grow impatient and even alarmed at the delay. What if Madame should take a notion to call her now? What could Melanie be about? 198

And even as this passed through her mind, the languid voice of Madame floated down the stairs, calling to her to come up and read aloud and fan her till she got to sleep. In an agony of anxiety, Virginia stood, reluctant to answer, yet scarcely daring not to, till at length Melanie came hurrying back.

"Here it is," she whispered, and crushed a scrap of paper into Virginia's hand. "Now go!" she ended, pointing to the door. "I will tell her that you are not in the house. Have no fear and—good-by!"

They clasped each other in a last embrace. Then Virginia, the precious Crimson Patch clutched to her heart, slipped silently out of the door that Melanie held open and fled away across the lawn. And ere the door was closed, she had reached the edge of the woods and flung herself into the arms Patricia held out to her.

It was a mad ride back to the city, a ride in which they broke the speed-limit many times and slowed down to normal pace as the outskirts of the town appeared. Virginia sat with Patricia on the rear seat. So exhausted nervously was she, that she could say almost nothing, and only lay back with her eyes closed and her hand clasped in Patricia's. And Patricia was sensible enough not to urge her to talk, though she was burning with curiosity to know how the girl had made her escape with the Crimson Patch. The precious sketch now lay securely hidden, and she longed for the moment when she could restore it to her father. 199

And the thought of her father brought her suddenly face to face with the problem of what they were going to do when they got back to town again. She shrank from the idea of returning to the hotel with the half-fainting Belgian girl. It would arouse comment. Beside that, if her father or Mrs. Quale were not there, it might be a dangerous place for them to stay alone. Who could tell but what Madame might trace them there and demand the immediate return of the girl who was supposed to 200

be in her care? What, indeed, were they to do?

She leaned forward and confided her doubts to Chet. And again she was astonished at the foresight of this clever boy.

"You bet I worked that all out some little time ago. It sure wouldn't be healthy for you to go back there—at least not till your father gets back. But I got a scheme that'll work all right—that is, if you care to do it. You come right to our place and stay with my mother. I told her this morning she might have some company before night, so she's half expectin' you. I'll go back an' hang around the hotel, an' the minute your father or Mrs. Quale comes along, I'll tip 'em off to the lay of the land an' fetch 'em right over. How about it?"

"Oh, Chester, you're wonderful!" sighed Patricia. "You certainly do think of everything. I never saw any one like you." 201

"Don't take much brain to think of *that!*" protested Chet, modestly. "There sure is a chance that that bunch will try to trace the girl an' get her back, an' they'd probably guess right away that she's swiped the paper an' gone back to you. But, on the other hand, they may be scared stiff for fear she's given the game away, an' are tumblin' all over themselves tryin' to get out of sight before the Government gets on to 'em. However, we ain't takin' any chances."

Chet Jackson's home was in an unpretentious side street, a neat little box of a house, and as the car drew up at the curb, a large, comfortable, motherly woman, with a wide smile extremely like that of her youngest son's, appeared at the door. Patricia had been rather dreading the explanations and apologies that she realized must surely be in order on their arrival. So weary and overwrought was she, that she felt almost unequal to undertaking them. But much to her amazed relief, none seemed to be required. Mrs. Jackson acted as if a fugitive party of this nature was an every-day occurrence and needed no comment. 202

"Come right in, ladies!" she welcomed them, when Chet had made the introductions. "You look very tired. I'm going to put you right in this room by yourselves, and you can rest as long as you wish till some one comes for you." And she led them into a neat, ugly little bedroom and left them to themselves.

Patricia made Virginie lie down on the bed, while she established herself in a comfortable old rocker near by. Delia, having assured herself that her young charges were in good hands, departed for the hotel to be there when Mrs. Quale returned. For half an hour the two girls remained as she had left them, each too much overcome to utter a single word.

So quiet was Virginie at last, that Patricia thought she must surely have fallen asleep, till she noticed two tears stealing down her cheeks. 203

"Why, darling, what is the trouble?" she questioned, laying her head down beside her.

"My father!" sobbed Virginie. "Do you think I have—have killed him?"

To divert her mind from this distressing subject, Patricia begged her to tell how she had managed to make her escape, and, in the recital, the Belgian girl forgot her fears for a while.

"But what was it that Melanie gave you?" questioned Patricia, and Virginie opened her hand and disclosed the crumpled scrap of paper that she had held clenched in it all this time. So absorbed had she been in other things that she had not till this moment noticed or thought of it. Together they smoothed it out and bent to read the sentences hastily scrawled on it in lead-pencil.

There is something I must tell you [it read in French] and I am cowardly enough not to wish to say it before your face, but I cannot let you go away forever without knowing it. Would I had told you before, but I did not dare. You have been kept in this bondage by the threat that your father would pay with his life if you dared to disobey them. 204

Have no fear. The threat is powerless. Your father died during the siege of Antwerp—a painless death. A shell struck and exploded near his villa, damaging it. He was not injured, apparently, at the time, but the shock evidently affected his heart, for he was found soon afterward lying peacefully in his chair—dead. You should rejoice that this is so, for he is happy and at peace, and he never could have been so again had he remained alive. May God have some happiness in store for you in the future.

Good-by for the last time,
MELANIE.

Virginie uttered one sobbing, astonished cry and buried her face in the pillow. Patricia, without a word, walked away to the window and left her alone to the sacredness of her sorrow. But as she stood with clenched hands, staring out at nothing, she found herself murmuring over and over again:

"Oh, they are not human! They are not human!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE SECRET OF THE CRIMSON PATCH

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It was Mrs. Quale who arrived on the scene first. She came in a taxi, having received elaborate directions from Chet, who remained at the hotel to watch for the return of the captain. There was one comfortable thing about Mrs. Quale that Patricia had always particularly admired: she seemed to understand things and situations without any explanations. She came in now, took both Patricia's hands in hers, and kissed her quietly.

"You poor child! If I had only known what a tangle you were in, I would not have gone off so thoughtlessly yesterday without first letting you know. I supposed of course your father was with you. I am thankful, at least, that I'm home in time to help you out of the muddle."

That was all, but Patricia realized that whatever she knew or did not know about the affair, it made no difference whatever in her desire to be of help.

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She decided to tell her at once about Virginie, and did so while they were standing outside the door of the room where the Belgian girl was. Mrs. Quale had met her casually at the hotel, in company with Patricia, and had always cherished a liking for the lonely, diffident girl. When she had heard all the story, she stood thinking a moment and then said decisively:

"You simply cannot go back to that hotel. It is no place for you after all that has happened. Now, I have a plan, and I shall urge your father to fall in with it. Part of my house is at last habitable—at least three bedrooms and the living-room and kitchen are. I have had old Juno there for a week getting them in order and was going to leave the hotel for them myself in a day or two. I want you all to come with me and make your home there for a time. I do not believe it is either right or safe for you to stay any longer in that public place, especially after what has happened. We'll go right over now, and I'll send word for your father to follow as soon as he arrives. We can go back to the hotel some other time and pack up your belongings."

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"Oh, Mrs. Quale, it is lovely of you to propose it!" sighed Patricia. "You don't know what a relief it will be to get away from that place. I could never stand it again after the dreadful hours I spent there last night. But what about Virginie?"

"Never mind about her. Just take me to her now, if you will, and we'll settle about that later."

Virginie still lay on the bed, no longer sobbing or weeping, but with her head buried in the pillow, quiet, hopeless, and inert. She did not even look up as they entered the room. Patricia gently roused her, and she sat up to greet Mrs. Quale in a timid, half-frightened manner. But Mrs. Quale had long since settled in her own mind her plan of action. She sat down on the side of the bed and put one arm protectingly around Virginie.

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"Dear," she said softly, "I know your story now, all that you have suffered, all the brave sacrifices you made to save the life, as you supposed, of the father who was no longer living. All that is ended. And now, dear, I am a very lonely woman. I have no children and very few relatives left, and I have always felt a warm interest in you since first I saw you with that unscrupulous woman. I knew that you were not happy. Will you come and make your home with me and be my daughter? I will bring you up as my own. We are two lonely people. I have no daughter, you have no mother. Why should we not be happy together?"

The girl stared at her for a moment almost uncomprehendingly. Then, suddenly, she grasped the meaning and it seemed too wonderful to be true.

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"Oh, you—you are too good—too—" Her head went down on the motherly shoulder, and her arms crept around Mrs. Quale's neck. And so Patricia, tears of happiness standing in her own eyes, stole out of the room and left them together.

It was ten o'clock that night before Captain Meade himself arrived, tired, dusty, discouraged, and decidedly bewildered by the change his daughter had made so unexpectedly in her place of residence. Chet had encountered him in the lobby of the hotel and steered him at once to Mrs. Quale's house without any special explanations, as he felt that Patricia was the one best fitted to offer these. And it was not till after he had bathed and had some supper that Patricia, alone with him in the library, ventured to ask what success he had had in his search.

"None at all. Absolutely nothing to show for it!" he replied wearily. "We have raked New York from end to end without success. When we went there originally we were on a good scent—actually had the fellow spotted who we knew without fail must have had the sketch in his possession; but when we finally ran him down, he had nothing of the kind about him nor had he had any opportunity to dispose of it anywhere, so we had to give up that clue. I confess, I'm terribly discouraged."

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Patricia smiled cheerfully. "Well, never mind, Daddy. You've had a hard time, but perhaps things aren't as bad as they seem!"

He looked at her wonderingly. "I don't know how they could be much worse!" he exclaimed a little impatiently. "One of the most valuable of the Government's secrets is in the hands of the enemy at this minute."

Patricia lifted a book from the table, took something from it, and laid it on her father's knee.

"I hate to contradict you," she remarked gaily, "but I think the Crimson Patch is at this minute in the possession of the one who has most right to it!"

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It was long after midnight. The rest of the household was all asleep, but Patricia still sat with her father by the open fire, for the night had turned chilly. She sat on his knee, her head snuggled comfortably in his coat collar. The ensuing interval, after she had told her story, had been a confusion of telephoning and interviews, not only with Chester Jackson, but also with a mysterious Mr. Brainerd, a curly-haired, light-complexioned, athletic young man with whom her father had been closeted for three quarters of an hour in close conference. Patricia was glad when it was over and they had all gone and left them alone together.

"But, Daddy," she was saying, "there are still a whole lot of things I don't understand about this thing at all. You kept saying, 'We were hunting for it in New York.' Now who is 'we'? I thought you shared this secret with no one."

The captain laughed. "You are right. There's quite a little you've still to learn. 'We' is mainly Mr. Tom Brainerd, whom you saw here to-night. He's a government secret-service man, the best around these parts, and he's been near me for protection ever since we first came to the hotel."

"He *has*?" cried Patricia. "Why, I never saw him before in my life."

"Oh, yes, you have!" contradicted the captain. "You saw him every day of your life, only you didn't know him. I confess he looked a little different. Mr. Tom Brainerd was no other than your pet spy, poor Peter Stoger, my dear!"

Patricia's jaw dropped and her face was a study in bewilderment. "Then—then he—he wasn't Franz?" she stammered.

"He certainly was *not*! He elected to come here, disguised as he was, because his countenance in real life is a little too familiar to the German spy-system in general. The manager of the hotel is fortunately a good friend of mine and an ardent patriot, so 'Peter's' task was made easy. But there was a 'Franz' here, though he went by another name, and he, too, was one of the waiters. I do not believe you remember him. He was a short, thin, light-haired young fellow, who had a table at the other end of the dining-room. Curiously enough, both he and Peter rather suspected each other and were constantly watching each other's movements."

"On the day when the sketch disappeared, it happened in this way. When Tom, or rather, Peter, came into the room that evening with the tray containing your supper, he saw to his astonishment, lying carelessly on the table, the very sketch that he understood it was so important to guard. Immediately he saw the necessity of removing it to safety, as he knew that you were not in the secret about it, so he put his tray down on top of it, in apparent ignorance, and when you commanded him to remove the tray, he did so, cleverly concealing and holding the sketch underneath. When he went out of the room he still had it concealed under the tray, but once outside and the door closed, he dropped it to the ground while trying to transfer it to his pocket. It was this unfortunate accident that he feels sure led to its theft. In all probability, Madame Vanderpoel was watching from her nearly closed door and saw the sketch as it fell, and guessed it must be connected in some way with the secret we had been guarding. She immediately found some means to report it to her ally and companion-spy, Franz, and then the trouble began."

"But did Peter—I mean Mr. Brainerd—suspect Madame?" Patricia interrupted eagerly.

"He did not exactly suspect her, for she had done and said nothing of a suspicious nature. She certainly passed herself off very well for just what she wished to seem. She is an exceedingly clever woman. His only uneasiness about her arose from the rather peculiar actions of your little friend, Virginie de Vos. Still, as I say, Brainerd could not seem to connect her with any doubtful matters. Franz he *did* think was watching him, but even *he* did nothing to arouse direct suspicion. And, by the way, the 'Hofmeyer' that Chester heard referred to is none other than this precious 'Madame Vanderpoel.' It is, in fact, her real name, for she married, after her first husband died, a German named Hofmeyer. Little Virginie told me this to-night in a short interview I had with her. So there you have the famous two."

"Well, to continue. Peter intended to keep the sketch by him and return it to me at the earliest opportunity. But you know I got back very late that night, and so he thought best to retain it till morning, fearing it would arouse suspicion if he made an attempt to see me at so late an hour. He took the chance of my being a little upset at not finding it. He even thought it possible I might not discover its disappearance that night. Then, during the night, the sketch was stolen from his room; he does not even yet know how, but undoubtedly Franz was the culprit."

"Next morning at breakfast, if you remember, Peter jogged my shoulder with the tray, and I reprimanded him rather sharply. It was a preconcerted signal between us that he had something important to tell me. Later we met, and he told me what had happened and that Franz had disappeared from his accustomed post. We straightway went on a keen hunt after Franz, struck his trail at the railroad station, followed him to New York, pursued him from place to place all day, and finally had him arrested and searched, only to be disappointed in finding he had nothing of the sort on him. He must have got over to Hanford and left it there, or passed the sketch to Madame before she went, or something of the kind. At any rate, we had to let him go the next morning, as we had no evidence on which to hold him. After that, I came back here to find you and Chester had been the best detectives after all!"

"The boy actually had the gumption to set the police on the trail of that Hanford crowd when he got back here. They went right out to raid the place. But alas! every one of the birds had flown. Not a trace of them anywhere. Very likely the maid gave the warning after Virginie got away, and they knew that the authorities would be hot-foot after them in a very short time. One consolation is that Madame will be known and spotted wherever she appears, so her usefulness as a German spy is

over, in this country at any rate.

"I think that I have made a great mistake in keeping you in the dark about all these things, from the first. I might better have let you into the secret of the importance of the sketch and the fact that our waiter was only a secret-service man in disguise. But I wanted to spare you all worry about the matter, and I thought it would be perhaps safer for you if you knew nothing about my affairs. I see now that I should have done differently. But, at any rate, it has all turned out so well that we won't regret anything."

"But what a trump Chester has been! Did you ever see any one quite so clever?" cried Patricia, enthusiastically. "He is really the one who saved the whole situation."

"Yes, he is really a wonderful chap!" the captain agreed. "He beat Mr. Brainerd at his own job, and has done more for me than I can ever hope to repay. But he shall certainly have his reward, as far as I'm able to accomplish it. He wants to be a detective, but he is cut out for even better things if he only has the education and opportunities. I am going to arrange to have him put in a good school, and later he shall follow any line of work he seems best fitted for. He will certainly make his mark in the world some day."

"Well," murmured Patricia, with a little sigh of content, "Chester and Virginie have certainly lost nothing and gained much by the disappearance of the Crimson Patch, so I feel as if the adventure had been well worth while in every way, even though it did cause us an awful lot of worry!"

The captain reached over to the table and took up the sketch. "It's a simple little thing to have caused such a lot of worry, isn't it!" he said musingly. "It looks as harmless and innocent as any butterfly might seem, fluttering about on a May morning. Yet, it is in reality a very deadly little article, Patricia. I'm only thankful to goodness that its deadliness was so well hidden that those Huns never caught on to it. Its particular usefulness is practically over now, since the work I've been doing is all but complete. But it would have been a terribly dangerous thing had it fallen into the hands of the enemy and they had fathomed its meaning. My work would then have been almost valueless."

"And since you have done so much to aid in keeping this a secret, Patricia, I think the time has come to tell you the meaning of it all. You have earned the right, and all I ask is that you will communicate it to no one till I give you permission. I can trust you, I know."

"I have already told you how, when I was a prisoner in Germany, it occurred to me that if I pretended to have lost some of my wits, through shell-shock, as many have, the ruse might benefit me in a number of ways. I was strong and able-bodied at the time, and the Huns were particularly in need of husky prisoners to do their work, and they much prefer those who show symptoms of not having all their wits about them. I was unusually successful in the device, and was finally set to work in an outer section of one of their airplane factories—of course, under strict guard."

"It was here that I came in contact with a German mechanic, a man of somewhat finer caliber than most of them, to whom I was able to render a rather important service or two. He was ill and in want, and he had a serious grievance against his government. He had invented a certain device of immense importance, and he was trying to get them to accept it and pay him enough to assure him a decent living. The government wanted the device badly enough, but was so foolish as to haggle and bargain with him over the price, offering him scarcely enough to keep him for six months. He was too ill to work and earn a living, but he steadily refused to give up his secret till properly reimbursed."

"At length it came to the point where he knew he had but a little longer to live. Angered, perhaps, that his Fatherland should have been so ungrateful and mean-spirited, and hating to have his discovery, of which he was justly proud, lost to the world, he confided it to me, for I had, some time before, allowed him to know that I was not the stupid creature I seemed. I asked him whether he cared if America made use of it, and he replied: 'I care for nothing now. The Fatherland has proved unworthy. Do with it what you will.'"

"Later, as you know, I myself managed to escape and get through to the French lines. And so I arrived home. But, being of a somewhat mechanical turn myself, I came to realize that this device, still incomplete as it was, could be perfected into an instrument of the greatest importance to the aviation arm of the service. I cannot explain to you exactly what it is, nor go into all its workings. It would be much too technical for you to understand."

"But I can tell you this much about it. An aviator in a bombing-plane has had one great, and, till now, almost insuperable difficulty to contend with. The velocity of his machine is such that a released bomb will have for an appreciable time after it is dropped the same horizontal velocity. This means, in simpler language, that the bomb will be carried along for a time in the same direction and at almost the same rate at which the machine is going. Thus, you see that the aviator, if he is intending to drop his bomb on a certain building or object, cannot do so when he is directly over that object, but must calculate in some way at what point to release his bomb before he comes directly over the object, or it will not hit its mark."

"There have been many attempts to overcome this difficulty, but none very successful. The device I have perfected comes more nearly to accuracy than anything yet discovered, and our own Government is only too glad to make use of it."

"And now we come to The Crimson Patch. When the German mechanic gave me his secret, he also furnished me with a drawing or diagram of the instrument. This was absolutely necessary to have, as the invention was so complicated that I could not possibly have carried it in my head. But I realized, also, that it would be extremely dangerous to carry it around with me in the shape in

which it was. So I camouflaged the whole thing in a sketch of the Crimson Patch butterfly, and in this form it was safe enough, for I had made a point of sketching at times the various butterflies I had seen while in the prison-camp, and the Germans thought me only a harmless lunatic on the subject. The Crimson Patch was no more to them than any other pretty little sketch I had made."

"But, Daddy," cried Patricia, staring at the paper in his hand, "I can't see a trace of anything like the drawing of a mechanical instrument."

"It is all incorporated in the veining of the wings and shading of the body," he told her. "No one would understand it save myself, for it is so much a matter of lines and scale and angles. But it is all there, I assure you, at least, in its cruder form. Until the machine was completed, I had to have this sketch constantly where I could refer to it, at times I even had to carry it about with me. So you see how important it was, considering the abominable spy-system by which we are surrounded, that it should appear only the innocent thing it seemed.

"Well, now you know the history of the Crimson Patch. It has certainly had, as they say, a checkered career! I would like to keep it always as an interesting souvenir, but it is too dangerous to have about, and the time of its usefulness is past. Only a few days ago, at the place where we are to manufacture this device, it was tried out and proved that it will be a practical success after some necessary alterations are made. Look your last on it, for in a few minutes its existence will be over!"

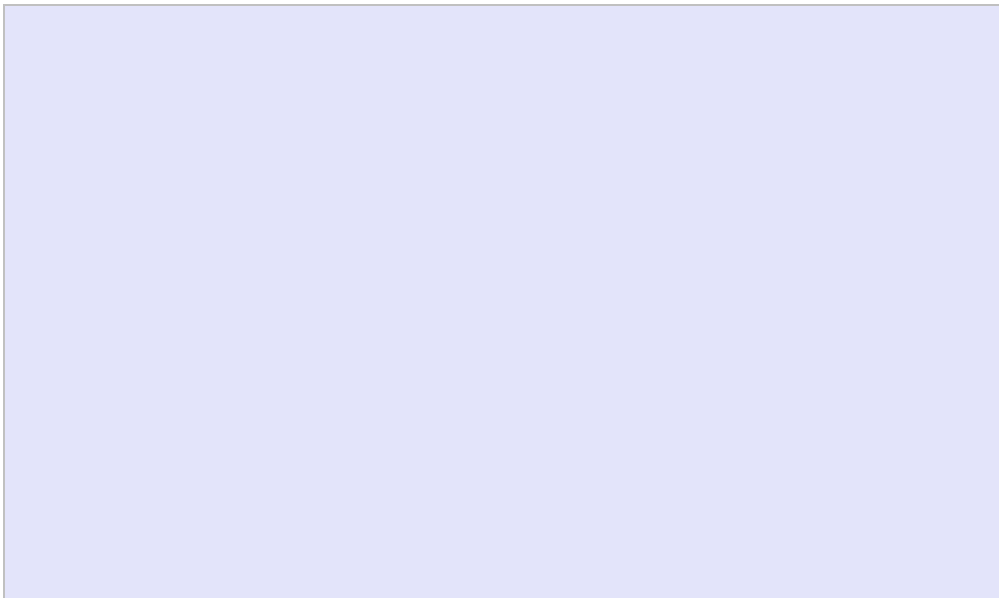
He held it up before her eyes a moment. Then, slipping her off his knee, he walked over to the fireplace, where a big log was still smouldering. Stirring the fire into a blaze, he tore the sketch into small bits and dropped the fluttering pieces into the flames. Together they watched while the charred fragments turned brown, curled over, blazed for a moment and shriveled into a gray crisp.

Five minutes later the fire died down. The big log rolled over, burying the ashes under its bulk. And so vanished the last trace of the mysterious Crimson Patch.

THE END

By AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

THE ADVENTURE OF THE SEVEN KEYHOLES
BLUEBONNET BEND
THE BOARDED-UP HOUSE
THE CRIMSON PATCH
THE DRAGON'S SECRET
THE EDGE OF RAVEN POOL
THE GIRL NEXT DOOR
MELISSA-ACROSS-THE-FENCE
THE MYSTERY AT NUMBER SIX
SALLY SIMMS ADVENTURES IT
THE SAPPHIRE SIGNET
THE SECRET OF TATE'S BEACH
THE SHADOW ON THE DIAL
THREE SIDES OF PARADISE GREEN
THE SLIPPER POINT MYSTERY
TRANQUILLITY HOUSE
VOICE IN THE DARK
THE VANDERLYN SILHOUETTE
THE MYSTERY AT LINDEN HALL



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