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, by Augusta Huiell Seaman**

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BY
AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN
Author of "THE GIRL NEXT DOOR,"
"THE SAPPHIRE SIGNET," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
C. M. RELYEA



NEW YORK
THE CENTURY CO.



"I'll tell you after we've had our swim," said the Imp

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TO
THE REAL HELEN ROBERTA

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THREE SIDES OF PARADISE GREEN

[Pg 1]

THREE SIDES OF PARADISE GREEN

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CHAPTER I THE JOURNAL IS BEGUN

November 22, 1913. It's all on account of Miss Cullingford that I'm beginning this journal. I never would have thought of such a thing by myself. Neither would Carol. Now we've both begun one, and it's just because Miss Cullingford is so sweet and lovely, and all the girls at Bridgeton High School want to please her,—Carol and myself most of all.

Miss Cullingford is our English literature instructor, and we all simply adore her. She's the sweetest thing! She's little and slight, with fluffy light hair and dark blue eyes. And she's *such* an inspiration about literature and English composition! She makes it seem actually like a romance. They always seemed terribly dull, those subjects, when we had Miss Trotter last year. But now we're just crazy about them.

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Well, one of the things she said yesterday in composition class was that every one of us ought to keep a journal, not the kind of diary affair that some people keep,—all about the weather and the number of jars of jam they put up, and how Cousin Hannah called that day!—but an occasional record, only written when we felt like it, of the things that happen around us and our ideas about people and so on. She said that the greatest minds of the ages had generally kept such a record, and that they had proved a big addition to history and literature, too.

Then, right there, I raised my hand and said that it was fine, of course, for the great minds to do it, especially when they lived in stirring times and had lots interesting to write about; but what was the use of just plain, ordinary people, as young as we were, doing it, especially when there wasn't anything going on that was interesting at all,—just the same old thing every day?

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Miss Cullingford answered that I mustn't make the mistake of thinking *any* life uninteresting, no matter how quiet and ordinary it might appear to be. You can always find something interesting to write about any kind of life, if you try hard enough. And that was where the advantage of a journal came in,—it made you look around hard to find what was worth while, and you always found it. Also, it was a great help to your style in writing. Then she asked if any of the girls would promise to keep a journal faithfully for a year. Carol and I promised.

Well, now I'm going to see. No life could possibly be more *uninteresting* than mine, here in quiet little Stafford where nothing ever happens or ever *has* happened that I know of, and in a family that's awfully nice, of course, but as plain and uninteresting and ordinary as all the rest of the families around here.

Carol doesn't feel the same as I do about it. She's more hopeful. That's because she has lots of imagination and is always romancing about people and thinking there's some story back of their lives that we don't know. I suppose her journal will be awfully different from mine. Well, anyhow, we've both begun, and now we'll see what happens.

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November 23. I had to stop short last night because I suddenly got so sleepy. Now I'll go on. I do wish we lived in Bridgeton, for things surely happen once in a while in a big town like that. Or even down in our own village of Stafford itself, and not way out, a mile off on the main road, on this silly little triangle called Paradise Green. Even the trolley doesn't run up this way; that would be *something*! But there's nothing in the world around here except this little triangle of a green, formed by the turning off of Cranberry Bog Road from the River Road, and the short road that connects the two at the head of the green. I'm sure I don't know why it was ever called Paradise Green. I suppose if I were Carol, I'd find out. She probably will. She's always hunting up historical facts.

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Even the automobiles don't come along this way. Nearly all of them keep to the State road over on the other side of the river. There are just three houses around the Green, one on each side, and not another dwelling anywhere within half a mile. So we haven't many near neighbors.

Our house stands at the head of the Green. It's a big square house, with a cupola on top and a

veranda around all four sides. Father's father built it when that style of house was just beginning to be popular, and everybody thought it very grand. I hate it myself, because it seems so old-fashioned and dreary compared to those pretty new bungalows they are putting up in Bridgeton. Mother and Father and the Imp and I live here. Father does intensive farming,—he is just crazy about it,—and every one comes to Birdsey's for ideas on the subject.

Dave is my brother. He's seventeen and a half, and a very quiet and thoughtful sort of person. All the same, he can do his own share of teasing in a quiet way. He left high school this year because his health wasn't very good, and is helping Father with the farming. Next year he's going to study scientific agriculture at one of the big colleges. I'm secretly awfully fond of Dave, but just at present he pretends to look down on girls as entirely unnecessary articles in the general scheme of things, so Carol and I are letting him severely alone.

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The Imp is my sister. She's twelve years old and a perfect nuisance. Carol and I have named her "The Imp" because she acts just like one. She likes to trot around with us all the time, but we won't have it. It's impossible to have a child of twelve continually hanging on to girls of fifteen or sixteen, and Carol and I simply won't stand it. The Imp is fearfully miffed about this and spends her time thinking up revengeful things to do to us. She makes our lives perfectly miserable sometimes, though we wouldn't let her know it for the world.

Carol's house is on the River Road side of the Green. She lives there with just her mother and her Aunt Agatha. The Fayres are distant relatives of ours, so Carol and I are really cousins. Their house is one of the old style, a real New England farmhouse, and they have a glorious big barn in the back, where we've all played ever since we were babies. One little room off the haymow Carol and I have fixed up as our private den and study. We keep our books and our fancywork there, and her mother gave us an old desk where we do our school work. We always keep the den locked with a padlock, because the Imp would like to get in and rummage around. She's as mad as a hatter because she can't. She threatens to climb in the window sometime, but I don't believe she could possibly. If she did, she'd probably break her neck.

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Carol is fifteen years old, and I'm sixteen. Her name is really Caroline, but she hates it and wants to be called "Carol" instead. She says it's so much prettier. And mine is even worse—*Susan*! Could anything be more dreadful? I've insisted on being called "Susette," which at least is a prettier French form. But no one except Carol will ever call me that. Every one calls me either "Susie" or "Sue," that is, all but the Imp. She, of course, knowing how much I detest it, will say nothing but "So-o-san" on all occasions. Carol she addresses by the horrible nickname of "Cad." Why are some children so irritating, I wonder? The infuriating part is that the Imp's own name is really lovely—Helen Roberta—and she knows it, little torment that she is!

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Well, I haven't yet told about the third house on the Green, so now I come to that. It's the one on the Cranberry Bog Road side. It's by far the most interesting of the three,—a long, rambling colonial farmhouse, built, they say, way back in seventeen hundred and something. It has the most fascinating additions in all directions from the main part, and queer little back stairways and old slave quarters, and I don't know what else. But the people who live in it are the interesting part.

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To begin with, there's Louis. His whole name is Louis Charles Durant. He is seventeen and goes to high school in Bridgeton with us. We have known him all our lives, and he's the nicest, jolliest boy we know. But the people he lives with I've never understood at all, and if there were any romance or mystery about any one around here, it would be about them.

Come to think of it, they *are* mysterious. Carol has always said so, but I never thought much about it. And that only goes to show that Miss Cullingford is right. Keeping a journal does certainly make you go about with your eyes open wider and gives you an interest in things you never thought worth while before. I never thought or cared a bit about Louis's folks before, and now I see they're full of possibilities.

November 24. Fell asleep again last night while I was writing. I guess it's because there's nothing very exciting to write about. However, I'll go on from where I left off about Louis's folks. First, there's the old man. Louis's father and mother have been dead a number of years. I never remember seeing either of them. So he lives with this old man, who, they say, is his guardian. His name is John Meadows, or at least that is what he is always called around here. But Louis says that he is French, and that his real name is Jean Mettot. He is very old; he must be eighty at least. And he is very feeble now, too. He sits all day long in a great armchair by the parlor window. He never reads anything but the papers and some great, heavy volumes of French history, but he spends a great deal of time thinking and dreaming, while he looks way off over the meadows toward the river.

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Then there's his daughter, Miss Meadows. She's about forty or fifty years old, I should think. Louis says her name is Yvonne. Certainly, that's a fascinating French name. She's very dark and handsome and quick in her ways, but she's very, very quiet and silent. I never had a *real* conversation with her in my life, though I've talked to her a great many times. I do all the talking, and she nods or smiles or says "Yes" and "No," and that is absolutely all. I feel as if I'd never really *know* her, if I talked to her a hundred years. They have one servant, a big French peasant from Normandy, who cooks the meals and takes care of the garden and house.

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All this doesn't sound very strange, however. And there *is* something very mysterious about them,—at least, so Carol has always said. I never paid much attention to the thing before, or noticed it.

The curious part of it all is the way they treat Louis. He isn't any real relative, so he says. His parents and their parents have just been dear friends from a long way back. It's plain that they think the world of him, too, just as much as if he were a relative. But there's something more. They are continually watching him with anxious eyes. They guard him as if he weren't able to take care of himself any more than a baby. They don't let him have half the liberty and fun that ordinary boys have. Lots of mothers and fathers, who love their children to distraction, aren't half as fussy and concerned about them as these two people are about a boy who isn't even a relative. It makes Louis awfully annoyed, for he hates like anything to be coddled. Once he fell out of an apple-tree and broke a rib, and they nearly went wild. He had a fever that night and lay in a sort of stupor. But when he was coming out of it he heard them talking awfully queerly about him and wringing their hands and whispering that "he would never, never forgive us if Monsieur Louis were to die."

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Who "he" was, or why his Aunt Yvonne and his Uncle Jean (as he calls them) should allude to him as "Monsieur Louis," was something Louis couldn't understand. And somehow, when he was better, he didn't like to ask.

They have taught him French, and with them he always has to speak that language. But he doesn't like it, because he says he's an American citizen and would rather talk "United States" than anything else. He's awfully patriotic and proud of this country, and he can't understand why this should bother Mr. and Miss Meadows. But it somehow does. He's sure of it, for they won't let him talk about it, and are always telling him that his great grandfather was born in France and that he should be very proud of it.

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Then there's another thing, too, that seems to worry them a lot. Louis is crazy about mechanical engineering. He declares he's going to study that exclusively, when he's through high school, and become an expert in it. This nearly drives them wild. They want him to be a "statesman," as they call it, and study law and history and diplomacy and all that sort of thing.

"You can serve your country best that way," they are always telling him.

Once he said to them:

"The United States has plenty of that sort already. *I* want to go in for something special." And he says they never answered a word, but just looked queerly at each other and walked off.

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Another time he found that the lock on their kitchen door wouldn't work, so he unscrewed it and took it out. He was fixing it when along came his Aunt Yvonne. When she saw what he was doing she burst into tears and rushed away, muttering, "The ancient blood! It will ruin everything!"—or something in French like that.

All these things do not happen frequently, of course, but when something like it does occur, it puzzles Louis dreadfully. He always talks it over with us when we come home together from Bridgeton High School on the trolley, so that's why I happen to know about it.

Well, now I've begun this journal by telling all about ourselves and our homes and everything else I can think of. But as I read it over, it doesn't sound one bit exciting or likely to become "an interesting contribution to history," as Miss Cullingford would say. I wonder what she'd think about it. I'm glad I didn't promise to *show* her my journal, for I'm not very proud of this sample. I'm crazy to see what Carol has written. We're going to compare our journals to-morrow.

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One thing is certain, though. I'm not going to write another word till I've something more interesting to talk about, even if I have to wait six months!

CHAPTER II

NEW DEVELOPMENTS

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December 1, 1913. I haven't written a thing in this journal for over a week, for a number of reasons. In the first place, I'd made up my mind not to write till I had something worth writing about. In the second place, we've been having some exams at school that took a lot of work to prepare for. Third, Thanksgiving holidays came along, and we were all pretty busy and had a lot of engagements. Altogether, I haven't had a minute till now—and something has happened that's rather interesting to write about.

Carol is ever so much better at this journal business than I am. She writes nearly every other day. But then, she doesn't mind writing about all the little ordinary occurrences,—the things she does about the housework and her studies and so on. But I simply can't do it. If I can't tell about something a little out of the ordinary, I won't write at all. And as nothing besides the usual ever happens in either one of our two households (or at school or in the village!), I find myself turning more and more to Louis and his affairs for interest.

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It's strange (I've heard other people speak of the same thing, too) that when you once get to thinking about a certain thing, all sorts of other ideas and events connected with it will suddenly begin to appear. I never gave a thought to Louis and his affairs before I began this journal. He has always lived here, and we've always known him and never thought there was anything strange about his folks. But now so many queer little things have happened and so many strange

ideas have come to us (Carol and myself, I mean) about that house across the Green that it seems as if there *must* be some mystery right near our commonplace lives after all.

Before I tell what happened, however, I must remark that the Imp has been particularly exasperating lately. She got wind somehow or other (at first we *couldn't* think how) that Carol and I are keeping journals. Later I discovered that it was because Carol had carelessly left hers on the desk in our den, and had forgotten to padlock the door. Carol is so thoughtless at times, because she gets to going about with "her head in the clouds," as her Aunt Agatha says, and doesn't remember half the things she ought to do. It's generally when she's thinking up some verses. Carol *does* compose very pretty verses. Miss Cullingford has praised them highly. But she's always awfully absent-minded when she's thinking about them.

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Well, the way we learned that the Imp had discovered our journals was by a large sheet of paper pinned to Carol's barn-door. This was written on it:

November 29. How these precious autumn days fly by! Each one is like a polished jewel. I made my bed and dusted my room at eight A. M. Then I composed a sweet little poem on "Feeding the Pigs." After that I slept in the hammock on the porch till lunchtime. The days are all too short for these many duties!

Of course we were furious. Carol confessed to me that she had left her journal open on the desk in the den, and the last entry was awfully like what that little wretch had written, only Carol had spoken of composing a poem on "Feeding the Pigeons." She *had* slept on the porch all morning, because it was a lovely mild day and I was away with Mother at a luncheon in Bridgeton. But she hadn't mentioned this in her journal.

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It is perfectly useless to argue with the Imp, or to scold or reason with her. She can go you one better every single time. We concluded that the best thing to do was ignore the incident entirely. So we left the paper hanging on the barn-door till the wind blew it away. A course of action like that makes the Imp madder than if you got purple in the face with fury. I've advised Carol not to leave her journal in the den any more, but to keep it in her room, and she says she will.

All this, however, isn't telling what happened to Louis. He told us about it this afternoon while we were resting on our veranda after a hot session of pitching the basketball about. After a while we just had to sit down and get our breath, and the Imp strolled off by herself somewhere. It was then that Louis told us the strange thing that happened yesterday.

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It seems that his Aunt Yvonne has gone to New York on a visit for a few days, and he has been alone with his Uncle John and the servant. Yesterday afternoon, about five o'clock, a boy rode up from the village on a bicycle with a telegram for his uncle. The old gentleman opened it, but couldn't read it because he had mislaid his glasses. So he got Louis to read it to him. Louis says the thing was a cablegram from some place in France—he can't remember the name—and that it was the queerest message. It ran like this:

Time almost ripe. Have you the necessary papers? Sail next month.

When his uncle heard this he became terribly excited and began to walk up and down the room very fast. But when Louis asked him what it all meant, all he would say was:

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"It is not for you to inquire or for me to explain just yet, Monsieur!" Louis says his uncle often calls him "monsieur," and he can't understand why. He thinks it's generally when the old gentleman forgets himself or is excited. But it makes Louis feel very queer.

After that his uncle wouldn't say anything more, but Louis says he began to rummage around through all his letters and papers, and looked through all his books and in all the closets, evidently hunting for something he couldn't find. And the more he hunted, the more nervous and excitable he grew. Every once in a while he would exclaim, "Ah, why is not that Yvonne here?" By bedtime he was pretty well worked up, for it was evident that he couldn't find what he was searching for. Louis tried and tried to get him to explain and let him help in the hunt. But the old gentleman would only mutter, "No, no! That cannot be!" Louis says he doesn't think his uncle slept all night, because he heard him rummaging about in all sorts of places till nearly morning. To-day he seems terribly used up. He just sits in his chair by the window, staring out and watching for his daughter to come. Louis says he had to go down to the village at eight o'clock last night with a telegram, telling his Aunt Yvonne to come home at once.

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How mysterious it all sounds! Louis declares he can't imagine what it means, and it makes him very uneasy, because he is almost certain that it is something concerning himself. He says he sometimes thinks his uncle is planning to send him to France before he gets much older, to complete his studies there and to become a French citizen, and he doesn't want to go.

My idea was that perhaps he had some relatives there and that they wanted him to come back. But Louis says his uncle has often told him that he hasn't any relatives living. And if he had, he says there's no reason why there should be all this secrecy about it. But he can't understand who the people are with whom his uncle is corresponding.

Carol's opinion was that perhaps Louis was a descendant of some titled person,—a count or a marquis or something like that,—and that these people are trying to bring him back to his legal title and estates. Louis simply hooted at that. He says that his great grandfather was a plain "monsieur" when he came over here long ago; that he never had been anything else and didn't

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want to be. So that Carol's idea was all nonsense. Carol is always romancing like that, and generally getting laughed at. Just at this point the Imp came suddenly around the corner of the veranda and demanded:

"What are you talking about? I warrant dollars to doughnuts it's about Louis."

That child has a perfectly uncanny way of lighting on just the thing you don't care to have her know about. She's a veritable mind-reader. None of us cared at that particular moment to explain what we were discussing, so no one said a word. Meanwhile the Imp eyed us with a grin. And before any one could think of something to say that would change the subject, she exploded this bomb in our midst:

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"Louis' Aunt Yvonne has come home. She's having a fit!"

Louis just scooted for his own house as fast as he could. We asked her how she knew Miss Meadows was having a fit, and she said:

"Because I saw her drive up and get out of the hack and run up the steps. I had climbed a tree in their side yard to look into an oriole's nest, and I heard her open the door and call out a lot of things in French to old Mr. Meadows."

The Imp is terribly quick about picking up languages, and she has teased Louis into teaching her quite a little French, which he declared to us she picked up with lightning speed. It makes Carol and me furious sometimes to feel that she has this advantage over us, for we haven't come to French yet in high school, and are so busy digging out our Latin that we haven't either time or interest to learn another language on the side. Well, it humiliated me to pieces to have to ask her what Miss Yvonne said, but I swallowed my pride and did so. All the little wretch answered, as she walked away, was:

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"Wouldn't you like to know?"



"Wouldn't you like to know?" she replied, exasperatingly

We didn't see anything more of Louis to-day, and Carol and I are just burning up with curiosity. I could shake the Imp till her teeth chattered!

There was a cosy group gathered about the open fire in the Birdseys' big, comfortable, and not too tidy living-room. At a large center table, drawn close to the blaze, sat Carol and Sue, scribbling away for dear life in two large, fat note-books and covering the table with many trial sheets of mathematical figuring. They were exact opposites in appearance. Sue was tall and slim to the point of angularity. She had dark eyes, and her dark hair was coiled heavily about her head. Carol was short and plump, with dreamy blue eyes and wavy auburn hair that still hung in a thick braid.

On the davenport, curled up like a kitten in one corner, sat the Imp, or "Bobs," as she was

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generally called,—her chin propped in her hands, a book balanced against her knees. In sharp contrast to the other two girls was her tiny body and dark, straight hair, and the big blue eyes that could at one moment gaze with liquid, angelic candor, and at the next snap with impish mischief. There was mischief in them at the moment, as she stared reflectively at the two girls bent over the table. Unaware of her gaze, they scribbled on, comparing notes at intervals.

"Do you get the answer $4ab(ab+2bm)$ $\frac{1}{2}$ to your third problem?" presently inquired Sue, without looking up.

"No, I don't!" moaned Carol in depressed tones, pushing aside her work and running her fingers through her hair. "I don't get anything at all."

"Well, don't worry. Let's see what's wrong. Hand over your work and I'll compare it with mine," said her companion soothingly. She dragged Carol's note-book toward her and compared it with her own.

"Oh, I see what you've done!" she exclaimed in a moment. "In the first equation you didn't put down—" [Pg 29]

At this instant the Imp, whose eyes had been smoldering with suppressed mischief, yawned loudly, stretched herself, and remarked with apparent irrelevance:

"It's a long day when you don't go to school, isn't it?"

Both girls sat up with a jerk and surveyed her sternly.

"Do you mean to say that you haven't been to school to-day?" they demanded in a breath, and Sue added, "I'd like to know why not."

"I had a bad headache this morning, Susan," explained the Imp sweetly. "Mother let me stay home. I was all right by two o'clock, though. Louis and I had a game of basketball before it began to rain."

Her companions glanced at each other with a meaning expression, none of which was lost on the Imp. With a grin of satisfaction, she proceeded:

"His aunt called him in just before we finished, and he didn't come out again." [Pg 30]

With a visible effort, Sue inquired:

"Did he say why he wasn't at school to-day? We thought it rather queer when he didn't come, but perhaps, after the strange thing that happened yesterday—"

This was precisely the trap into which the Imp had planned that they should fall.

"I didn't ask him," she remarked, with exasperating calm.

"No doubt you didn't," retorted Carol heatedly, "but perhaps he told you without being asked."

"Perhaps he did," returned the Imp, "and perhaps he told me a lot more. However, I must say bye-bye for the present. I've got to go and study my lessons somewhere where I won't be disturbed!"

She scrambled down and sailed out of the room, waving airily to them from the doorway.

"Isn't she simply maddening!" exclaimed Sue. "The idea of saying she had to go and study! I never knew her to study a thing in my life. She seems to know her lessons by instinct." [Pg 31]

"But what *do* you suppose Louis told her?" mused Carol.

"Not much, or I miss my guess," returned Sue. "She's only trying to tease us. But it is strange that he stayed home to-day. Something serious must be the matter. He hasn't missed a day this term before."

"But if it was serious," argued Carol, "why should he be out playing with the Imp?"

At this moment the door opened and a tall, slender boy of seventeen or eighteen strolled in, his hands in his overcoat pockets, his cheeks and overcoat still wet with the driving rain.

"Hello, girls!" he remarked, warming his hands by the blaze of the open fire.

"Hello, Dave!" they replied. "Where did you come from?"

"Been over to Louis's. Queer thing about it, too," he commented, dropping down on the vacant davenport.

"What?" they gasped in breathless chorus.

He looked at them inquiringly. [Pg 32]

"Why all the astonishment on *your* part?" he demanded. "What do you know about it, anyway?"

"Oh, a lot of queer things seem to be happening to Louis lately," explained Carol. "But go on! Tell us all about it."

"Well, Father didn't need me to-night, so I thought I'd stroll over to Louis's and see if he wanted a

little session with that higher mathematics course that he and I are working at together on our own hook. I rang at the front door several times, but didn't get any response. Then I tried the back door, with no better luck. There was a light in the parlor, too, but, on glancing in the window, I saw that no one was there. Mr. Meadows had evidently gone to bed. I had just started out to the barn, thinking that Louis might be in his work-room there, when I noticed a light in one of the cellar windows. I then felt sure that Louis was down there, clearing up or getting vegetables for his aunt, so I went over and peeped in, thinking to give him a surprise. It was I who got the surprise, though!" [Pg 33]

"What did you see?" demanded Sue in an awestricken whisper.

"Funniest sight ever! There Miss Yvonne was standing with a lamp in her hand, and Louis, with a pickaxe and shovel, had pried out one of the stones in the foundation near the big chimney and was poking around in the hole he'd made, while Miss Yvonne stared into it, those big black eyes of hers as round as saucers. While I was still looking, she shook her head, motioned Louis to put the stone back, and pointed to another a little farther along. I began to feel as if I'd lit on something that wasn't any business of mine, so instead of knocking on the window as I'd intended, I just got up and came away. Guess they must be hunting for buried treasure or something. Never knew they suspected the presence of any in their old ranch. Louis didn't look as if he were particularly enjoying the job, however."

"Well, that's about all," he ended, suddenly remembering what, in the excitement of the little adventure, he had momentarily forgotten,—his superior pose toward all girls and toward his sister in particular. Then he vanished swiftly out of the room, lest they be moved to ask him any further questions and lest he be tempted to answer. [Pg 34]

After he had gone, Sue and Carol stared at each other in a maze of excited conjecture.

"What do you make of it?" sighed Carol.

"I don't make anything of it," declared Sue. "It sounds too mysterious for words. But I know this much. They weren't hunting for buried treasure. It's for papers of some kind. I'm sure of it. But what can they be about, and why should they be in the cellar?"

But Carol was off on another tack.

"At last we'll have something worth while to write about in our journals," she remarked. "Don't you ever think again, Susette Birdsey, that nothing exciting happens in our lives! I can fill up three or four pages about it."

Her companion assented absently.

"Do you realize," she suddenly exclaimed, "that here's where we got way ahead of the Imp? Serves her right for playing us such a mean trick and going out of the room. I call it a piece of downright luck!" [Pg 35]

CHAPTER III

THE IMP HAS THE BEST OF IT

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December 31. This is New Year's Eve and it's nearly twelve o'clock. Carol and I promised each other that we'd sit up and see the old year out, and write in our journals. Carol is finishing a lovely poem she's been writing, called, "On New Year's Eve." It begins:

The silent snow is falling light,
On New Year's Eve, on New Year's Eve,—

That's all I can remember of it. The only trouble is that there isn't any snow falling to-night. There's a regular thaw on, and it's dreadfully warm and mushy.

There's something awfully solemn about New Year's Eve. It makes you feel sorry for all the mean things you've done, and you form all sorts of good resolutions for the future. At least, I do, and so does Carol. But I have my doubts about the Imp. I don't believe she is sorry for a single thing she's ever done. She doesn't act so, anyway. [Pg 37]

And speaking of her, I've made it my principal resolution for the new year to be more patient with her. I suppose every one has to have some great trial in life, and the Imp is certainly the chief one for Carol and me. Lately she has been more than usually infuriating. Every afternoon during the past month she has inquired of us, "Have you written in your journals to-day, my dears? If not, run and do so at once."

When she first began to say that, I made the mistake of asking her how she knew I was keeping a journal. She retorted:

"Oh, that's easy. I found out that Cad was, so of course I knew you were up to the same trick. You're as like each other as two penny hat-pins."

All I could think of to answer was:

"Well, I don't see that it is any one's affair but our own, if we *are* keeping them."

To this she returned:

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"Who said it was?"

"You did," I retorted, "and I'll be obliged to you not to take it upon yourself to remind us about writing in them."

All she replied to this was:

"Louis's folks got another cablegram this morning. You'd better put that in."

Then she walked off and wouldn't say another word. That's just exactly like her. She's bound to light on the very thing you'd rather she didn't know about. And she always seems to have inside information about something you'd give your head to know about and never seem to get hold of. How she knew about the cablegram, I can't think, unless she saw the messenger-boy come up with it and questioned him afterward.

We've never said a word to Louis about the queer thing Dave told us he saw on that rainy night nearly a month ago. At first I wanted to, but Carol said that it would look as if we had been spying on them, and, in thinking it over, I agreed with her. Another thing, I felt sure that if he wanted us to know, or thought we ought to know, he'd tell us himself and explain what it was all about. But he never has, so either he thinks we oughtn't to know, or his folks have warned him not to speak of it. I'm quite certain it must be the latter, because several times he has almost been on the point of speaking of something and suddenly stopped short, as if he remembered he oughtn't to. Dave, of course, has been as mum as an oyster ever since. He's a dear fellow in lots of ways, but he does act too absurdly at present about us girls. You would think we hadn't any more sense than babies in a nursery, the way he treats us,—not exactly unkind, but just sort of condescending and superior. Mother says he'll grow out of it soon. He and Louis are still great chums, but they don't see as much of each other since Dave left high school.

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Nothing further that's strange seems to have happened over at the house across the Green, except for one little thing. A few days before Christmas I went over to return to Miss Yvonne a package of spice that Mother had had to borrow in a hurry, and I found the place in the greatest upset. Miss Yvonne seemed to be giving the whole establishment a thorough housecleaning, which is rather strange, for she gave it the usual autumn cleaning only this last October. I can't for the life of me see why she wanted to do it all over again so soon. I spoke to Louis about it next day, and he said she was having some papering and painting done, too.

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They were all upset during the Christmas season, and had to eat their Christmas dinner in the kitchen. Louis says it was a miserable holiday for him, all except our party in the evening. I can't imagine why Miss Yvonne should do such a curious thing. And Louis says she's having one big room that they've never used fixed up in great style,—fresh, handsome wall-paper and new furniture and a brass bed, and everything to match.

"Do you think she expects any visitors?" I said.

"Why, no!" he answered, looking awfully surprised. "She hasn't said anything about it to me."

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Then I asked him if he knew they had received a cablegram two weeks before, and he was astonished and said that he didn't, and asked how I knew. I told him what the Imp had said, and as soon as he heard this, he answered:

"It's more of that beastly mystery, Sue, and I suppose I oughtn't to talk about it, because I've promised them I wouldn't. I hate it! *I hate it!*"

I never saw Louis so worked up before. But he wouldn't go on talking about it any more,—because of his promise, I suppose,—so there matters rest for the present.

New Year's Day, January 1, 1914. I just stopped a while ago to listen to the village church-bells ring twelve o'clock. I turned out the light and opened the window and leaned out. It all sounded very solemn, but it would have been much more impressive if there had been a lovely white fall of snow, with full moonlight glistening on it. Instead of that, it was raining and everything smelled damp and drippy. I like things to seem appropriate, but somehow they never seem to be,—at least, not the way you read about them in books.

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While I was looking out, I happened to glance over at Louis's house and saw such a queer thing. Way up in one of the little attic-windows there was a light. After a moment I made out that it was from an oil-lamp that some one was carrying about, for it didn't remain steady long at a time. I hated to be spying on our neighbors, but I couldn't have taken my eyes away from that sight if I'd been offered a thousand dollars. It was *too* uncanny. In another moment I discovered that it was Miss Yvonne moving slowly about in front of the immense chimney that is opposite the window, feeling carefully of every brick and picking at them with her fingers, as if to learn if any were loose. It seemed the strangest thing to be doing at midnight on New Year's Eve, but all of a sudden it dawned on me that she must be trying to discover if any brick was loose *because*—something might be hidden behind it!

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I got so excited about it that I could hardly stand still. But the next minute the light disappeared, and I realized that she had given up the search and gone downstairs. Whether she found what she was looking for or not, I don't know. Probably she didn't, or she would have stayed longer.

After that I shut my window, lit my light, and now am finishing this. I wonder if Carol saw what I did? She was going to look out of her window at midnight, too. But she couldn't have seen it, I'm sure, because her house is on the other side of Louis's, and that attic-window wouldn't have been visible to her. My, won't I have something exciting to tell her to-morrow!

Mother has just opened her door and called out "Happy New Year!" to me. She told me to put out my light and go to bed, or I'd fall asleep at Anita Brown's party to-morrow night—no, I mean *to-night*. I guess I'll have to end this for the present, but I don't believe I'll be able to sleep. Life is certainly growing more and more exciting, with your neighbors receiving mysterious cablegrams from abroad and digging in the cellar and hunting about in the attic at midnight and all the other curious doings. I hope it doesn't seem like prying into their affairs to have discovered all these things. Each time it was quite by accident. But Mother and Father have always taught us how horrid it was to be curious about your neighbors. Well, as long as I don't deliberately pry or talk about it to any one except Carol, I'm sure no harm will be done.

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As this is my first entry in my journal for 1914, I'll wish everybody a "Happy New Year" and hope this will be a glorious *good* year for every one in the world.

Sue Birdsey lay on the davenport by the fire. She was covered by an afghan and her face was propped up on a hot-water-bag. On the table near her was a huge packet of absorbent cotton and several bottles of medicine. Near her hand lay a book, unheeded. Unheeded, also, was the brilliant mid-January sun streaming in at the west windows. Of what use are books and sunlight, indeed, in the face of a raging toothache! On the opposite side of the hearth sat Carol, disconsolately urging a renewal of some one of the medicines.

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"It's no earthly use!" moaned Sue. "I've tried it a dozen times. Wait till the Imp gets back with that stuff your Aunt Agatha recommended. I'll try that, and if it doesn't stop it, I'll walk straight down to the dentist and have it out."

"I believe it's going to ulcerate," remarked Carol, like the "Job's Comforter" she was always inclined to be.

Sue's only reply was to hurl a sofa-cushion at her and subside again on the hot-water-bag. No further remarks were exchanged. The sun sank in a few moments and the room grew dark. Carol turned on the light and muttered something about how long the Imp was. After a few more gloomy moments, punctuated by groans from Sue, the door was flung open and the Imp rushed in, bringing a blast of chilly air with her.

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"Here it is!" she cried. "I had to wait an awful while for him to get it ready. You fix her up, Cad."

While Carol administered the remedy according to directions, the Imp straightened out the rumped afghan and refilled the hot-water-bag. She could be singularly helpful in case of sickness or an emergency, and seemed actually to delight in being of use,—a change of demeanor that never failed to astonish the other two girls. So accustomed were they to regard the Imp as their sworn enemy that this angelic demeanor quite disarmed them.

Five minutes after the remedy had been applied Sue sat up with a jerk.

"Hurrah! The pain's all gone. It went like magic. I feel like a new creature. No more of this for me!" She rose from the couch, pushing away the signs of her temporary invalidism. "Imp, you certainly are a trump. Come, Carol, let's get at our work for to-morrow."

Ten minutes later they were busy at the long table, and the Imp again settled on the couch, apparently deep in a book. It was Sue who looked up after a while, to find her eyeing them with the pleased, quiet, provoking smile whose meaning they had come to know so well. The desire to investigate its cause proved, as usual, irresistible.

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"What are you grinning at, Bobs?" Sue demanded. "You look as pleased as Punch. Anything happened?" It was well always to placate her by appearing agreeable.

"Oh, nothing special!" she replied, in a manner that made them perfectly certain there was something very special. "I happened to notice a while ago that an automobile drove up to Louis's gate, and that Miss Yvonne got out and began to give the chauffeur a regular tongue-lashing in French, because he'd driven up from the station over the jolliest road, instead of taking the smooth one. He doesn't understand French, so he didn't in the least get what she was driving at. It made me laugh."

"But what under the sun was Miss Yvonne coming up from the station in an automobile for?" Carol exclaimed. "She hasn't been away. She hasn't even been to Bridgeton, for I've seen her around early this afternoon. She always walks up from the village. You must be crazy."

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"She walked down to the village about four o'clock," the Imp informed them. "I saw her start off. And I guess she had good reason to come back in an auto." The Imp went on reading after this, just as if she hadn't any idea that she was driving them wild.

"Well, what *was* the reason?" inquired Sue, trying to look only mildly interested. "Was she ill, or did she have a lot of bundles to carry, or was she in a great hurry?"

"I'll tell you the reason," answered the Imp, "if you'll give me that nice, fat, new blank-book you bought the other day. It's worth it, too."

"I'll do nothing of the sort!" Sue cried indignantly. "I have a special use for that book,"—as a matter of fact, she was going to re-copy her journal in it—"and I'll find out some other way."

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"You won't find out anything before to-morrow afternoon, probably," the Imp returned, "for Louis isn't going to school. He told me so."

Sue made up her mind that she wasn't going to give in to her, but Carol broke up that intention.

"Oh, give it to her!" she whispered. "I've another just as good that you can have. And I'm wild to hear what's up across the Green."

Sue handed the blank-book across to the Imp, and said, as witheringly as she could:

"Here, take it, if you want it as badly as that! Of course you know you're taking a mean advantage of us, but that's nothing to you. Fire away!"

"I thought you couldn't wait till to-morrow," the Imp retorted. "Well, here goes. Miss Yvonne rode up in an auto because—she had some one with her."

"Who *was* it?" cried Carol impatiently. "Don't dole out your information in little drops. Tell us the rest."

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"I didn't ask the person's name," said the Imp, in that maddeningly polite way she sometimes assumed. "It didn't seem any affair of mine."

"Naturally," Sue answered, as calmly as she could. "We'd only be much obliged to know whether it was a man, woman, girl, boy, or baby. Please remember you've got the book and that you haven't paid for it yet."

"I always pay my debts," she answered, trying not to giggle, "and I only agreed to tell you the reason why Miss Yvonne came up in the auto. I've done that. But since you're so hard up for information, I'll hand out a little more small change—just because I'm sorry for you. It was a man, a very old man, all wrapped up in a big fur coat."

"Did Louis know he was coming?" Carol demanded.

"Oh, no! Louis didn't know," answered the Imp, "but I did; for I heard Miss Yvonne telling old Mr. Meadows yesterday, when they were out by the barn, that all was ready for 'Monsieur's' arrival to-morrow."

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"You're a mean little thing to be always eavesdropping about," cried Sue, "and meaner yet never to tell us a word of what you hear."

"You're quite mistaken if you think I eavesdrop, as you call it," retorted the Imp indignantly. "I was in plain sight all the time yesterday, patching up that snow-fort of Louis's, and they both saw me. Only Miss Yvonne spoke in French, and I guess she doesn't know that I understand it. As for not telling you two anything, I'd like to know why I should. You never tell anything to me, that is, if you can possibly help it." This was entirely true, as they were bound to confess.

The Imp took up her book and marched huffily to the door. But before she left the room she turned and called back:

"It's a thankless job trying to be nice to you two. You're absolutely ungrateful. And I'll tell you right now, I know one piece of information, besides all this, that you'd give your eye-teeth to hear,—but you won't. It's about who this mysterious 'monsieur' *is!*"

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With that she went out, slamming the door behind her.

CHAPTER IV THE MYSTERIOUS "MONSIEUR"

[Pg 53]

There had been a heavy fall of snow during the night. It lay on trees and hedges in great, powdery clumps, and drifted over the Green in huge, wind-swept hillocks. But the sky that afternoon was blue and cloudless, and the click of snow-shovels rang out on the still air. In front of the Birdseys' gate Carol and Sue were frantically shoveling a footway, not because they had to, but for the sheer joy of exercise in the invigorating air.

"It's queer we haven't seen anything of Louis since that visitor came," commented Carol. "He's missing a lot of time at school, and I'm sure he hates that."

"Yes, it's three days since 'Monsieur,' as the Imp calls him, came. We haven't seen anything of *him*, either," added Sue. "Do you suppose he's going to stay shut up and invisible all the time? Who do you suppose he is, anyway, and doesn't it make you furious to think that the Imp knows,

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or says she does, and that we don't?"

"There's Louis now," was Carol's only reply. "He's just come out to shovel his walk," and she waved her own shovel to him in greeting.

In another moment Louis had strolled over to join them. He was of medium height, a slenderly-built fellow, with short-cropped, wavy, chestnut hair and fine brown eyes. He also possessed a smile that was peculiarly winning.

"Hello, you strangers! I thought you'd be out this afternoon. Isn't it ripping weather?" he greeted them. "Where's Dave?"

"He's gone to Bridgeton with Father," answered Sue, "but where have *you* been all this time? Not sick, I hope?"

The boy's face clouded and he dug his shovel viciously into a snowbank.

"No, not sick, but dilly-dallying around the house, helping to wait on that old gentleman. They don't seem to care how much time I lose." [Pg 55]

It was the first time the girls had ever heard him speak so bitterly.

"We heard that you had a visitor," said Carol, striving hard to seem only politely interested.

"Oh, we have a visitor, all right, but I'm blest if I know why he's taken up his abode with us, nor even who he is, for that matter."

At this rather astonishing statement both girls looked somewhat startled.

"I know it sounds queer to say it," went on the boy, "and I'm not sure they'd thank me for saying it, either, but it's the honest truth, and I've got to say it to some one, or I'll explode with indignation."

"But what do you call him, if you don't know who he is?" queried Sue.

"Well, he *says* his name is Monsieur de Vaubert, but I strongly doubt it. I found his handkerchief lying on a chair yesterday, and it had the initial F on it. Later I asked Aunt Yvonne what his first name was, and she said 'Philippe.' So can you figure out where F comes in? I can't." [Pg 56]

"All that Aunt and Uncle will tell me about him," he went on, "is that he is a descendant of an old friend of my father's family in France; that he has always been much interested in me and has come over here to visit and make my acquaintance. It sounds all right as far as it goes, but I'm morally certain that that isn't the whole of it. They treat him as if he were some sort of high mogul, and he treats them in the most politely condescending manner you ever saw. But the way he acts toward me is a caution. In some ways you'd think I was the Grand Lama of Tibet, and that he was my most humble slave. Then at other times he gets so dictatorial about my studies and work and the way I spend my time that I just have to hold on to something to prevent going up in the air. I confess that I don't know what he's driving at, and I could chew his head off sometimes, I get so mad. And yet in other ways he's a fine old chap, and I can't help but admire him. Here he comes now. He said he would come out a few moments this afternoon." [Pg 57]

They all looked across the Green as he spoke, to see the figure of an elderly gentleman, very much muffled up in a fur coat, slowly pacing down the walk. He seemed about seventy-five years of age, and he walked with a visible stoop, his hands clasped behind his back, his head bent slightly forward. His eyes were black and piercing, and his hair and mustache were almost white. His nose was sharp and eagle-like, and his whole appearance was very distinguished and foreign. Both Sue and Carol were decidedly impressed.

"Well," added Louis, "I must go back and be polite, I suppose, and also shovel my walk. By the way, I'll be over at your house, Sue, to-morrow evening, if it's convenient, and get some idea from you girls of what I've been missing at high school all this week. Tell Dave I'll spend an hour or two with him afterward. So long!"

After he had left them the girls went on with their shoveling, but they could not, for the life of them, keep from gazing occasionally across at the mysterious stranger on the other side of the Green. They saw Louis return and speak to him for several moments, pacing along at his side, and later he left him to commence a vigorous attack on an unshoveled path. [Pg 58]

Then they saw a curious thing. Monsieur de Vaubert, stopping short in his pacing, stared almost aghast at Louis. Next, striding up to him and snatching the shovel from his hand, he spoke loudly and rapidly in French, as if in remonstrance. They heard Louis expostulating in the same language and exhibiting every sign of disagreement and dismay. At length he shrugged his shoulders hopelessly and turned to go into the house, leaving Monsieur to continue his pacing alone.

"Well!" exclaimed Carol. "What on earth do you make of *that*?"

"It looks very much as if 'Monsieur' didn't approve of Louis's snow-shoveling," commented Sue, wonderingly. "But why? Do you know, I believe he thinks Louis is delicate and oughtn't to exert himself. What a crazy idea! Louis is really as strong as an ox, even if he is slender. He can throw Dave at wrestling every time, even if he is lighter in weight. I can imagine how furious it must make Louis to be coddled that way." [Pg 59]

They went on digging industriously. Suddenly Carol whispered to Sue:

"For pity's sake, look at that!"

It was the Imp, who had evidently walked up from the village and was just passing Louis's house. On beholding the visitor still pacing up and down the walk in the sunlight, she had called out, "*Bon jour, Monsieur!*" She had been answered by the most courtly of bows, and "*Bon jour, petite Mademoiselle Hélène.*" Then she passed on, turning the corner of the Green toward her own house.

The two girls stared at each other, speechless.

"Will you tell me how under the sun she came to know him?" gasped Sue, indignantly. "And she never has said a single word to us about it!"

"Don't ask me," returned Carol. "Find out from her, if you can. She's the most exasperating mortal I ever came across." [Pg 60]

The Imp came on gaily, waving to them as affably as if she were quite unaware of the shock she had just given them. They did not acknowledge her salute,—a mistake they were sorry for later.

"How long is it since you became acquainted with 'Monsieur'?" demanded Sue, as soon as she had joined them. She did not try to keep annoyance out of her voice.

"Oh, a whole twenty-four hours has elapsed since the event!" grinned the Imp, more impishly than usual. "Didn't I tell you?"

"You know perfectly well that you didn't!" cried Sue.

"Well, I'm sorry,—since it seems to worry you so much. Louis introduced us yesterday afternoon. We met just outside of Louis' gate. Monsieur was taking the air just before the snow began, and, as it happened, so was I. You two might have been, also, if you hadn't felt so lazy and hung about the fire indoors." As usual, she had hit them on the raw. They might have known it! [Pg 61]

"I think he is quite charming," went on the Imp amiably. "We had a long talk. He praised my French accent, and says that he prefers to call me 'Mademoiselle Hélène,' instead of 'Bobs' or 'Bobbie' or even 'Roberta.' He asked me a lot of questions about this place and the village and all that, and finally he told me why he came here."

"He *did*?" gasped the two girls. "What was the reason?" At that moment they could have hugged her for seeming so communicative.

"I'll tell you," she answered with dangerous sweetness. "He came over to see Louis!" Their faces fell, but they tried hard not to show their indignation.

"Of course," agreed Sue, "but *why* did he come over here to see Louis? That's the question."

"If I told you *that*, I wouldn't have any interesting secret of my own," answered the Imp loftily.

Then, feeling her revenge complete, she sped away into the house, leaving the puzzled and indignant pair behind her. [Pg 62]

January 20, 1914. Louis told us the *strangest* thing to-night. I must write about it before I go to bed. It makes this mystery about the queer old gentleman at his house deeper and deeper. He came over (Louis, I mean) to our house to-night, as he said he would yesterday. But he seemed perfectly furious about something, and instead of wanting to study, he said he'd just have to tell us what had happened, or burst. Fortunately, Carol and I were alone. If the Imp had been around, I just couldn't have stood having her hear everything that we did. She knows too much already,—sometimes I think a great deal more than we do,—about all this, and I'm glad to get ahead of her on something. Anyhow, this is what Louis told us:

"This morning was the limit," he began. "I thought I'd take a spell at working on that little motor-boat I'm building in the old feed-room at the back of the barn. I haven't done much at it lately, because the weather's been so cold. But to-day was mild, and I thought I could make a lot of progress. You know I've saved up enough of my pocket-money for the engine, and I'm going to send for it next month. Well, what must Monsieur do, but trail out to the barn after me. I couldn't very well prevent him, so I let him come along, but I didn't explain what I was doing there till we got into the room." [Pg 63]

"And, if you'll believe it, no sooner did he lay eyes on that cedar hull, and realize that it was my work, than he flew into a towering passion. He stamped around the room, muttering a lot of things in French that even I couldn't understand, though I caught the expression, 'The blood of that mechanic—*always—always!*' repeated several times. I was simply speechless with astonishment, and just stood staring at him open-mouthed.

"All of a sudden he raised his cane and hit the boat a horrible whack right on the gunwale. It made a dent that I don't suppose any amount of tinkering or painting will ever remove. Then I 'saw red,' as they say. The idea of his presuming to do such a beastly thing! I just rushed at him, tore the cane from his hand, and threw it straight through the window. It smashed the glass and sash and everything. And I shouted, 'How dare you! How dare you!' I guess I was really too [Pg 64]

furious to think what I was doing. But it had the strangest effect on Monsieur.

"He stopped suddenly, and his face, from being a brick-red with anger, went perfectly white. He drew himself up in a sort of military way, as stiff as a poker, and then bowed very low and made a military salute. 'I beg a thousand pardons, Monsieur. I am deeply sorry!' he said. I asked him what in the world he meant, anyway, but he only kept repeating that he was 'deeply humiliated at his fit of temper,' and begged me to think no more of it. Then I asked him if he didn't approve of my making the boat, and he said, 'No; that I was cut out for something better than that laborer's work.'

"That remark made me madder than ever, and I asked him if it was not a good piece of work, and oughtn't any one to be proud of doing a thing like that so well. He only replied that I had far other things to be proud of, but I noticed that he didn't say what. So I just faced him.

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"'Look here,' I said. 'Just tell me one thing, like a man, won't you? What are you here for, anyway? Am I the descendant of some duke or marquis or that sort of thing, and are you here to try to get me to go back to France and be one myself?' You see, what Carol said the other day sort of stuck in my crop, and that boat business rather confirmed it. I went on to say to him, 'Because if that's so, you needn't bother. I won't go!'

"He didn't say a word for a minute or two. He just stood staring at me as if he'd never seen me before. Then he said, very quietly:

"'No, Monsieur. You are quite mistaken. It is something vastly different, and I cannot explain it now. You must be content to wait. But, be assured, it will both astonish and delight you when it is disclosed.' And with that he walked off and took to his bed again, I guess, for I haven't seen him since. But I've been 'hot under the collar' ever since at the damage he did to my boat."

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"Well, all that is mighty strange," I said, another idea suddenly dawning on me. "He doesn't seem to want you to do any work. Was that why he objected to you shoveling snow yesterday?"

"The very thing," replied Louis. "I was astonished when he said to me, 'Where is that Meadows and his servant? Why are you required to do this menial work?' I tried to explain to him that I liked it and was doing it for exercise, but he simply couldn't understand. He kept exclaiming, 'It is not fitting!' till I got so disgusted that I gave it up. If this sort of thing keeps up, I'll run away to sea or do something desperate. I declare I will!"

"Are you glad, Louis, that you're not a duke or a marquis or anything like that?" I asked. "I should think you'd have thought it fine."

"I'd simply detest it, Sue," he answered. "I don't want to be anything but an American citizen — *ever!* But if this mystery business doesn't clear up soon, I'll be a raving lunatic."

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Well, I'm disappointed myself to have Carol's nice theory all knocked to pieces, for it would have been so romantic and unusual. But if it isn't that, what on earth *can* it be?

And *how* much does that wretched little Imp know?

CHAPTER V TWO ACCIDENTS AND A MYSTERY

[Pg 68]

February 17. I'm writing this under a good deal of difficulty, for my left hand is in a sling and this blank-book slips around dreadfully. The truth is that I had quite an accident the other day, and have been laid up ever since. It was the day after I last wrote in my journal. We'd had a heavy fall of snow overnight, followed by a hard frost. The coasting on Eastward Hill was gorgeous, and we spent the whole of the next afternoon there. Just at the last the Imp suggested that we try the slide down the north slope of the hill. It's ever so much steeper than the one we usually take, and is considered rather dangerous.

Louis said we'd better not, but the Imp begged so hard that we agreed to try it just once. So Louis took Carol on his bobsled, and the Imp and I had the other. She was steering, because she's awfully good at that. They went first, and we followed. Everything went finely at the start. It's the most exciting thing going down that steep slide, and I was just enjoying it when suddenly something went wrong. I'm not sure yet just what it was, but the Imp says there must have been a buried branch or something under one of our runners.

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Anyhow, the first I knew I was lying with my head in a snowbank and my left arm doubled under me in the queerest manner. The Imp had been landed in the bank, too, but she wasn't a bit hurt and was up in a jiffy, dragging me out. First I thought I was all right, but when I stood up my left arm began to hurt me so that I thought I'd die with the pain of it. They put me on one of the sleds and hustled me home in a hurry, and Louis went for the doctor.

He said it was only a sprain, but that I must stay in the house for a while and take good care of it. So here I've been ever since. The Imp has been an angel. That sounds funny, but I mean it! She nearly died of remorse at having been the cause of my accident, and she can't do enough for me.

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She waits on me hand and foot, and hasn't teased or been a bit exasperating once. To show how angelic she can be, I must write what she told me yesterday. She came in from a walk to the village, where she'd been to get me some grapefruit, and announced:

"What do you think? I walked back most of the way with Monsieur. His things have come."

"What things?" I asked, astonished, for I knew that his trunks came the day after he arrived.

"Oh, didn't you know? A few things he brought with him. Two or three pictures and a big lot of books."

"But what did he bring over things like that for?" I demanded. "If he's only here for a visit, it's rather queer for him to be carting books and pictures about with him. I shouldn't think he'd be staying long enough to make it worth while."

"I think he's going to stay quite a long while," the Imp replied. "Perhaps it will be a year or more, judging from what he says." [Pg 71]

"How do you know all this?" I asked. It aroused all the old, jealous feeling again to think that she knew so much more about it than I did.

"Why, this way. You see, we were walking up together, and we'd got about as far as Louis's gate when we both noticed a cart, with those things piled on it, standing there. Miss Yvonne was talking to the driver. Monsieur suddenly said, 'Ah, my things have come! That is well!' Then he turned to me and said, 'They are my most precious possessions. I never travel far without them.' I said it was too bad that they'd been delayed so long getting here from the steamer. For you know he's been here nearly a month. Then he said, 'They were not delayed, Mademoiselle Hélène. I did not send for them at once because—I was not sure I should stay. Now I feel that my stay may be long.'

"Wasn't that queer?" added the Imp. "Why do you suppose he first thought he mightn't stay long, and then decided that he would?" [Pg 72]

"Perhaps he likes it here better than he thought he would," I suggested.

"Nothing of the sort!" answered the Imp. "He hates it. He told me the climate was abominable. He didn't see how any one could exist in it."

"Then it must be because he likes the Meadows' and Louis so much," I decided.

"I don't think that has anything to do with it," replied the Imp. "I'm certain it's something else. He's staying on because things haven't gone the way he'd planned. If they had, he'd have gone right home. I've figured that much out about him."

We didn't have any more time for talk just then, for Mother came in to say that dinner was ready. But I've been thinking and thinking ever since about what the Imp told me. She was never so communicative with me before. It's worth while to have a damaged arm, but I wonder how long it will last. I wish Carol were over here right now, so that I could tell her. But she has a cold, and I haven't seen her for two days. [Pg 73]

It has seemed rather curious to me, right along, that we young folks were the only ones who seemed interested in Louis's affair and the new visitor. I wondered why. But something that was said at table last night made me realize that we are, after all, the only ones who know much of the *inside* of that affair. For instance, Mother said to Father:

"Who is that queer old gentleman visiting across the Green? He seems like a foreigner."

"Monsieur something-or-other," Father answered. "I didn't catch his name, though Louis tried to introduce us the other day, when they were passing where I was working in the north pasture. I've never quite understood the Meadows' household, anyway. They seem queer and foreign—all but Louis. He is a true American boy. I've often wondered where John Meadows hailed from. He brought Louis here as a small baby, and I never knew where he came from. He would never say much about it. By the way, Simpson wrote that we could have that new fertilizer next month." [Pg 74]

And that's all they thought or cared about it. But, at any rate, their conversation had given me one bit of news—about Louis having been brought here as a little baby, and that folks didn't know the Meadows' people before. I'd always supposed that they had lived here all along, too. I wonder if Louis knows this? I wonder if I had better tell him? I don't know. Somehow that, and the news the Imp brought to-day, has made me feel about as mixed up as possible. I can't make head or tail of anything. I wish Carol were here.

I've just been looking over this journal from the beginning, noticing all the queer things that have come up about Louis since I began it. I think I'll put them down in order and see if it will help me to make anything out of the strange situation.

First, the queer way that Louis's folks have always treated him and the fact that he isn't any real relation. That looks to me very much as if his antecedents or his forefathers or whatever you call them must have been of some different station of life from the Meadows people. And yet Louis says their families have always been old friends. At any rate, they must feel, for some reason, responsible for him to some one, or they wouldn't be so careful about him. By the way, that some one must be "Monsieur"; who else *could* it be? [Pg 75]

Next there were those mysterious cablegrams. Of course they were from "Monsieur," but what did he mean by saying, "The time is ripe"? Sounds as if some sort of plot was being hatched. And then about those papers. *What* are they, and *where* are they? Have they anything to do with Louis? I suppose they must. Does Louis himself know anything about them? He has never said a word to us.

Besides, there was that queer performance when Miss Yvonne had Louis dig in the cellar at night. I'm simply positive she must have been hunting for the papers then, and also on New Year's Eve in the attic. I believe they must be documents to prove that Louis is to come into a great fortune, perhaps one that his ancestors left him. Yes, that's a brand new idea, and I'm certain it's nearer the truth than anything we've thought of yet. "Monsieur" is probably the family lawyer in France, and has come to straighten everything out. Hurrah! I do wish Carol was here, so that we could talk this over. It's a much more sensible idea than the one that Louis is the descendant of some titled person. It would explain a number of things,—why "Monsieur" doesn't like Louis to do any work, and that sort of thing. And probably, too, that's why they would like him to go back to France and be a statesman, since he can't be a duke or a marquis and flourish around with the nobility. I suppose it's the next best thing, in their estimation.

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It might even explain, too, why "Monsieur" expects to make so long a stay here to get things all straightened out. Oh, I'm so glad I thought of this! I can hardly wait for to-morrow to come, so that I can tell Carol. And I believe I'll even tell the Imp, too. She's been so decent to me of late that I'm willing to do 'most anything for her.

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"Ahoy, girls! Come over and see the big smash!"

It was the Imp who thus hailed the two girls as they were coming home from the village one Saturday afternoon early in March. She was one of a group that was standing in Louis's front yard, and the girls hurried over to see what it was all about. They found that a fine old cherry-tree had been half blown over by a high wind the night before, and now it threatened to fall at the slightest jar. Its fall would do serious damage to the fence near which it stood. Louis had decided to chop it down so that it would fall in the opposite direction. It was not the first time that he had had the experience, and he rather enjoyed the thought of the task before him. It was quite evident, however, that "Monsieur" did not at all approve of this scheme. He paced back and forth on the path, muttering impatiently to himself in French and occasionally urging Louis to be extremely careful.

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As this was the first time that either Sue or Carol had met "Monsieur," Louis stopped long enough to make the introductions. Monsieur bowed formally and murmured that he was "charmed to meet mesdemoiselles," but there his interest in them ended, and he continued to pace back and forth and mutter to himself.

Once the Imp poked Sue and whispered:

"He says, 'Always, always this servant's work!' He's been having a fit about this ever since they came out. But Louis was determined to get it done. Monsieur certainly does make him mad and nervous, though."

The tree was almost ready to topple over, when an unfortunate thing happened. It may have been that Louis *was* nervous, or that his foot slipped on a patch of ice, or that it was a combination of both. At any rate, just as the ax was raised for one of his most telling blows, he missed his aim and brought it down directly on his left foot. With a slight groan, he dropped to the ground. An instant later blood began to pour from the wound in sickening spurts. So sudden had it all been, that his watchers hardly realized what had happened till the spouting blood revealed the accident.

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Immediately all was confusion. Monsieur uttered a cry that was almost a scream and, stooping down, tried to lift Louis in his arms. Miss Yvonne rushed out, wringing her hands and screaming, too, in her excitable French fashion. Old Mr. Meadows raised the parlor-window and stood calling out all sorts of impossible directions, half in French and half in English. Carol turned as white as a sheet and looked as if she were going to faint away. She usually did at the sight of blood. Only the Imp seemed to have any sense left. She called out to Carol:

"You run to our house and telephone for any doctor you can get, either in the village or at Bridgeton!"

Then she said to Monsieur:

"Please let Louis alone. He'll bleed to death if you lift him that way."

Lastly she turned to Miss Yvonne:

"Don't you think that between us we could manage to carry Louis into the house? I'll hold his poor foot so that it won't bleed so much."

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It was almost absurd to hear that small child giving everybody orders, but it was rather fine, too. And somehow it restored them to their senses. Carol went flying off to telephone, only too glad to get away. Miss Yvonne stopped screaming and lifted Louis in her strong arms, while Sue held his head and Monsieur his uninjured foot.

Louis had fainted by this time. The Imp held his injured foot in such a way that as little blood as possible escaped. Sue admitted later that she would scarcely have had the nerve to do it, even if she had been able. She was very much hampered, because her left arm was still in a sling, so that all she could do was to hold up the boy's head with her right hand.

Somehow or other they got Louis into the house. Monsieur insisted that they carry him up to his (Monsieur's) room, though the others thought it would have been better to take him to his own room on the ground floor. But Monsieur would have his way, and they got Louis there somehow. By the time they had laid him in the big brass bed, Carol came flying back to say that she couldn't reach a single doctor in town. Every one was out. But she had managed to get a promise from Dr. Langmaid in Bridgeton that he would come over directly in his car, as soon as he could leave a serious surgical case that he was treating in his office.

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Meanwhile Louis's foot was still bleeding horribly. Something had to be done at once. Miss Yvonne had got his shoe and stocking off and was bathing the horrid wound, but that didn't help much. No one but Sue seemed to know how to stop the bleeding and she was practically helpless because of her hand. The reason she knew was because she had just finished a course of "First Aid to the Injured" lectures that had been given to the Young Girls' Club in school by a trained nurse. Carol didn't take the course, because she hated all that kind of thing and it made her sick. But Sue had enjoyed it. One of the principal things she had learned was about the tourniquet and bandaging. But how was she to do anything with only one hand? Suddenly the idea that she could give the Imp directions and let *her* do it dawned on Sue. The Imp was so quick that she would understand in a wink.

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So Sue asked Miss Yvonne if she'd tear up a sheet for some bandages, and told the Imp that if she'd do as she told her, she thought they could stop the bleeding. Miss Yvonne went right to work, and the Imp followed Sue's directions well, while the latter did what she could with one hand. They used a buttonhook for a tourniquet, and in five minutes Louis's foot was bandaged roughly and not bleeding any more. Monsieur had been spending the time in bathing Louis's head and holding ammonia to his nose. Presently Louis came to and tried to ask what was the matter. But they made him stop talking, because he was so weak from loss of blood.

After that there wasn't anything to do but wait for the doctor, so they sat around the room, not talking and all looking nervous and embarrassed.

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At last Dr. Langmaid arrived. He came jumping upstairs two steps at a time. After he had taken one look at Louis's foot, he said:

"Whoever did that bandaging had good common sense. Perhaps it saved his life."

That was all, but it made Sue feel proud for the Imp. The Imp, however, declared that it was Sue's work, for she would never have known how to do it herself. At any rate, after that the doctor turned out every one but Miss Yvonne, and they stayed there with Louis for an age, while all the rest waited downstairs for news. At last the doctor came down and told them that Louis had almost severed an artery, but that he had broken no bones. He sewed up the wound and left directions that Louis was to stay in bed for some time and have careful attention, lest blood-poisoning set in. But he said it was a miracle that nothing worse had happened, and left his compliments for the two young ladies who did the bandaging. At which the Imp and Sue pinched each other and took their departure.

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It was after they had left the house and were walking across the Green to their own home, their knees still shaking with the excitement they had experienced, that the Imp remarked:

"Did you see the queer thing that hung on 'Monsieur's' wall, right opposite to the bed?"

"Why, no," answered Sue. "That is, I suppose I did, but I was so nervous and worried that I can't remember anything about it. I hardly took my eyes from Louis. What was it, anyway?"

"Three pictures, but the only one that I could see was the middle one. It was a life-sized picture of a little boy about six or seven, I should think. He had big brown eyes and brown wavy hair, and was quite a pretty little chap, but he was dressed awfully queerly. I guess the picture must be quite old, for his clothes weren't like anything that's been worn for years. I wonder why 'Monsieur' carts it around and has it hanging there. Must be some relation, I suppose, or some child of whom he was very fond."

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"But I thought you said his clothes were so queer and old-timey," suggested Sue. "I imagined from the way you spoke that they must be of a fashion more than a hundred years old."

"I guess they were, too," admitted the Imp. "I had thought that perhaps the boy was a son or a brother, but I guess he was from way before *that* time."

"Must be some famous ancestor, then," said Sue. "By the way, what did you mean by saying that the boy's picture was the only one you could see? If the three pictures were all hanging on the wall at the foot of the bed, you could see the other two just as well, I should think."

"No, I couldn't; and for a very queer reason," replied the Imp darkly.

"Oh, for gracious sake, don't begin to tease!" cried Sue impatiently, suspecting that the Imp was up to one of her usual tricks. "Things have been so exciting, and you've been such a dear, that I hate to have you spoil it by beginning that 'mysterious' business."

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"But it *was* mysterious," argued the Imp, "and you'd have seen it for yourself, if you'd only had your eyes about you."

"Well, what was it?" sighed Sue. "I'm afraid you're making a whole lot out of nothing."

"I'm *not*!" cried the Imp. "And I'll prove it this minute. I *couldn't* see those two other pictures because—they both had a heavy, dark silk covering of some kind stretched completely over them, frames and all! *Now* will you believe me?"

At this curious bit of information even doubting Sue had to admit that the Imp was right.

CHAPTER VI IN MONSIEUR'S ROOM

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March 8, 1914. I thought the last entries in this journal were pretty exciting, with two accidents to tell about, but they were just nothing to what's been happening since. My arm is all right again; no trouble at all, except for a slight stiffness. So that's all about that. But *Louis*!

For the first two days after his accident he seemed to be doing nicely. None of us saw him, for the doctor had ordered that he be kept very quiet. When we went to inquire, Miss Yvonne said he was better and in no pain, and that he wanted to see us all, but that he must be quiet for a while. Then, on the third day, her face was very grave.

"He has fever," she said. "It is not high, but the doctor is not pleased. Louis is restless, and his foot is swollen. We are all anxious about him."

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I repeated her words to Father, and he said:

"Poor boy! Blood-poisoning, probably. I'm sorry for him. Was that ax very rusty?"

I replied that it was, for I remember that Louis remarked about it at the time and said he could do better work if the ax was cleaned and was sharper. Father shook his head and said they'd have to keep a careful watch on him now.

Next day matters became worse. From then till this evening we have been frightfully anxious, and the Meadows' family and Monsieur grew almost frantic. It was blood-poisoning, and the doctor said it was so bad that he doubted if he could save Louis's foot. At that, Monsieur sent post-haste to the city for a famous surgeon, and after days of working over him Louis is to-night pronounced out of danger. When I went over this evening to get the news, Miss Yvonne cried when she told me. I cried, too, and I saw Monsieur coming downstairs, his eyes suspiciously moist. What a relief!

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They have had two trained nurses, and one of them will stay till Louis is much stronger. Miss Yvonne is quite worn out with work and worry, and she looks like a shadow of herself. Old Mr. Meadows appears to have grown ten years older in a week, and seems very feeble. As for Monsieur, in the few glimpses I've had of him he looks as if he hadn't had a wink of sleep for four days. As a matter of fact, I heard that he hadn't gone to bed and slept since Louis became so ill,—just napped while sitting in a chair.

I haven't slept well myself, and neither has Carol. Even the Imp has been very much concerned. She continues to be awfully decent to us, but I wonder how much longer it will last. Not long, I'm pretty sure, after Louis is well again. I know her too thoroughly to be deceived into thinking she has turned over a new leaf for good!

Now for bed and a long, peaceful sleep for the first time in a week!

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March 13. To-day, for the first time, I have seen Louis. He was much better, and he wanted to see us so much that Miss Yvonne sent over the servant to tell us that we three could come over (Dave had gone yesterday), but that we all had better not see him at once. Carol and the Imp and I went over. One by one we were allowed to go up to the room. But we were warned that no one must stay more than five minutes, and that we mustn't talk to Louis about anything exciting.

Carol went first, but she didn't stay anywhere near her five minutes, for I timed her by the parlor clock. It seemed as if she had scarcely had time to go up and walk into the room before she must have walked out again. She came down looking awfully solemn and scared, and whispered:

"He looks awful,—as if he'd been *so* sick! I was frightened. The trained nurse was there, and Monsieur, too. I didn't know what on earth to say, so I didn't stay but a minute."

Then the Imp went up, and I guess she was more successful, for she stayed two minutes over her time. We heard her say, "Hello, old sport!" as she entered the room, and we even heard a sound like Louis's laugh. Then there was a great chattering in French, and I knew that she and Monsieur were talking together. When she came down she said that Monsieur had been thanking her for what she did on the day of the accident, and that she had been trying to convince him she hadn't done anything, except to obey my directions. He wouldn't stand for that, however, and

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insisted that she had been the means of saving Louis's life. Nothing she could say would persuade him differently.

Then it came my turn, and I went up with my knees shaking, like the silly goose I am, for there was nothing on earth to be afraid of. But somehow it always did seem a solemn thing to me to see a person for the first time after he has been so near to death. But they shook worse when I got into the room and saw how really awful Louis looked. He is like a thin shadow of his former self, and *so* white and hollow-eyed. He's never been sick before, to any extent, so I never dreamed he could look like that.

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I murmured something or other to Louis,—I can't remember what,—and then Monsieur began to thank me in very elaborate and formal English for what I had done on the day of the accident. I tried to answer that it wasn't anything, and I could easily see that he didn't think it *was* so much, compared to what the Imp had done. But Louis spoke up in the weakest voice, and declared:

"Sue is a trump! *I* know what she did, for I wasn't unconscious *all* of the time. Between them they patched me up beautifully."

But Monsieur wasn't much impressed. It's plain to be seen that the Imp is *his* favorite. I don't care a scrap, however, since Louis said what he did!

Well, I couldn't think of another thing to say, so I bade Louis good-bye and took my departure. But before I left the room I snatched a good long look at those pictures. I've been thinking of them constantly, ever since that first day, and longing to see them. It certainly was queer to see those two so tightly covered. There's something about the one of the boy that haunts me, though. I don't know why. Carol and I have talked it over and over, and we can't make it out. The trouble is that she practically hasn't seen it at all. That day of the accident she didn't come into the room, for she was telephoning the doctor. She didn't want to come in, anyway, because she knew she couldn't stand it. And to-day she only caught the smallest glimpse of it, because she was so upset when she came out of the room.

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The nurse says that next time we go to see Louis we can probably stay a little longer, if he continues to improve.

March 15. We all went in again to-day. Monsieur was not there, to Carol's and my great relief, but the nurse was. I warned Carol beforehand to take a good look at the portrait this time, and she did. She says she feels as I do about it, as if she'd seen it, or some one like it, somewhere before. And yet she's *sure* she hasn't, really. I don't understand it.

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Louis is beginning to make all sorts of plans about what he will do when he's well again. He's wild at having to be away from school and lose so much time, but we've promised to keep all our notes for him, and that will help a lot when he goes back.

The Imp has returned to her old tricks again. I knew she would when the excitement was over. She told me that she met Monsieur on her way to school this morning, and that she walked all the way to the village with him. He was going down to get some medicine for Louis. But she startled me to pieces when she added:

"I asked him who that nice little boy was whose picture he had in his room. He said he'd tell me if I'd promise to keep it a secret. I said that I certainly would, cross my heart."

"So he told you?" I asked, trying not to act as if I cared a bit.

"Why, certainly," the Imp answered, with that wicked gleam in her eye. "He did as he said he would. I'd be glad to tell you, but, of course, I've promised not to."

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"Did you ask him why he kept the other two pictures covered?" I inquired.

"Yes, I asked him that, too, but he said it was for a reason he couldn't explain at present."

The Imp wouldn't have told me if he *had* explained. I'm positive of that. And what's more, I simply can't believe that he told her all about the other one. She can make things sound so mysterious, when there's really nothing to them at all. However, I can't be certain, even of this. Maybe he really did explain, though why he should make her promise not to tell is a puzzle.

I'm not going to think about it any more just now. It makes me too furious.

March 22. Such a strange, strange thing happened to-day. Dave went with me to see Louis this afternoon, for the Imp had to go on an errand to the village, and Carol was in the house with another severe cold. Dave went up first, stayed quite a while, and then went on home.

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Miss Yvonne took me up and told me that the nurse was out for the afternoon, and that Monsieur was lying down in Louis's room. So, for the first time since his accident, I actually saw Louis without a lot of other people in the room. We chatted for a while about school matters and what we had all been doing while he was laid up. And Louis told me how much better he was, how he was soon going to be allowed to get up, and that the nurse was going in a few days. After that we were both quiet for a few moments. It was one of those pauses that sometimes come in

conversation, which get so prolonged that you hardly know how to break them. Then, just to end the silence, I asked Louis why Monsieur had insisted on his being in this room, and how inconvenient it must have been for Monsieur. To my surprise, Louis became much excited and said:

"I can't think whatever made him do it that day! *I* didn't want to be here. I'm horribly uncomfortable about it all the time. I *hate* it! It would have been so much more sensible to have put me in my own room on the ground floor. And, Sue, what do you think?" Here Louis sank his voice to a whisper. "I came to myself one day, out of a sort of stupor that I'd been in, and found him kneeling by the side of the bed and actually *kissing my hand*! I was so astonished and disgusted that I snatched it away, weak as I was. He never said a word, but rose and walked out of the room. What does it all mean?" [Pg 97]

"I'm sure I don't know, Louis," I replied; "but tell me, do you know anything about those portraits that hang on the wall opposite your bed? Why are two covered up, and who is that boy in the middle?"

To my astonishment, Louis seized hold of my arm and whispered:

"Sue, Sue, I hate those pictures. I hate that one in the middle. I'm *afraid* of it! I—"

Before he could say any more we heard Miss Yvonne coming up the stairs to tell me that my time was up and that Louis must rest. And so he couldn't go on. [Pg 98]

But why, *why* does Louis hate the picture of that boy, and why, above all things, is he afraid of it? Was there ever so curious a mystery?

CHAPTER VII THE IMP MAKES A DISCOVERY

[Pg 99]

Despite the fact that Sue and Carol boiled with impatience for over a week, conjecturing what it could possibly be that made Louis afraid of the picture in Monsieur's room, they found out nothing new on the subject, for the simple reason that there was never a moment when they again saw him alone. To ask him about it when others were in the room was impossible. Two days after Sue's last visit he was allowed to sit up, and a day or two after that he was permitted to walk about for a few steps. Then the nurse took her leave, and Louis insisted on returning to his own room on the ground floor.

"And only to think," sighed Sue, when she heard of it, "now we'll probably never see those strange pictures on Monsieur's wall again. I could cry with vexation when I think of it. Carol, do you feel as if there were something terribly mysterious about them,—not only the two covered ones, but the boy's, also? I wonder if it haunts you the same as it does me?" [Pg 100]

"It certainly does," admitted Carol, "and yesterday I wrote a little poem about it. Here it is. What do you think of it?"

She handed Sue a scrap of paper on which the verses were written. The two girls had dropped off the trolley on their way home from high school, and were bound for the library. Sue took the paper and studied it carefully as she walked.

"I like it a lot," she acknowledged, as she handed it back. "Especially those last two lines:

'O boy of nut-brown hair and smiling eyes,
Speak out and tell the secret that you know.'

Really, it's awfully pretty and the best thing you've done yet. Why don't you show it to Miss Cullingford. It hasn't any direct reference to Louis's affairs in it, and I'll warrant she'd recommend it to be published in our high school paper, *The Argus*." [Pg 101]

"Well, perhaps I will," agreed Carol, visibly pleased with Sue's unstinted praise. She folded the paper back into a book as they went up the steps of the library.

It was while the two were wandering round the big, sunny room, scanning the shelves for an interesting book, that they made a startling discovery.

"Will you look at that!" whispered Carol, suddenly pinching Sue as they were passing the door of the smaller reference room, a spot they themselves seldom entered. There, near a shelf of immense volumes, stood—who but the Imp! She was deeply engrossed in the pages of a tome nearly as large as herself. The sight was the more amazing because the Imp was neither a member of the library, so far as they knew, nor did she ever enter it, if she could help it, except rarely to get a book for the girls.

The two stood rooted to the spot with astonishment. Suddenly the Imp caught sight of them. She promptly closed the book and slipped it back on the shelf. All she would admit in reply to what she felt to be their intrusive inquiries was the statement: [Pg 102]

"I'm looking up something on the advice of Miss Hastings. I guess I don't have to explain everything to you." After which remark she marched majestically out of the room.

The girls tried to guess from the shelf where she had stood what book she had been consulting, but as it was a long row of encyclopedias, all exactly alike, they could not glean the least inkling. Giving up that course, they questioned the librarian on the way out, and found that the Imp had joined the library several days before.

"Did you ever know anything to beat it?" demanded Sue, as they passed down the steps. "What can she be up to? I know she's awfully bright and reads lots of books that interest grown-folks, but she's so lazy about things and so crazy just to be outdoors that she never thought it worth while to join the library before." [Pg 103]

"She said," Carol reminded her, "that her teacher, Miss Hastings, advised her to look up something. You know she always tells the truth, at least."

"That's true," admitted Sue, "but it must be something out of the ordinary, or she would simply have come to us and bribed us to go and do it for her. And besides, in her class they don't have to look up things in encyclopedias; they haven't got to that yet. No, I'm certain it's something else."

Wondering about the Imp's strange behavior, they harked back, as they walked homeward, to that other subject that was constantly puzzling them.

"Do you know," said Carol, "I believe that I've come to agree with you in your theory about Louis and Monsieur. You know I didn't when you first told me, because I was awfully disappointed about his not being a count or a duke. But now I think that you're right. Monsieur is probably the family lawyer, and Louis is going to inherit a big French fortune. But if that is the case, why is it that Monsieur seems to be trying so hard to make Louis like him? You remember, Louis said the other day that he constantly feels as if Monsieur were doing everything in his power to win his affection, for some reason or other. If he were only a family lawyer, he wouldn't care a penny whether Louis liked him or not. And why was he kissing his hand the other day? I'm half-inclined to believe that he's some relative—a grandfather or an uncle or something. Yet he could scarcely be that, and the lawyer, too. Isn't it a puzzle?" [Pg 104]

"But don't you remember that Miss Yvonne told Louis he wasn't any relative?" Sue reminded her; "only an old friend of the family."

"Susette," remarked Carol solemnly, stopping stock still in the middle of the road, "you may call me all kinds of an idiot if you like, but I want to tell you one thing. I've been feeling lately that there's some mystery here, bigger than anything you or I imagine. It's just a feeling I have, but it haunts me continually. I'm *certain* something is going to happen that will make us gasp with astonishment. And when that does happen, I want you to remind me of what I've said to-day. I'm sure I'm right. I feel it in my very bones, as Aunt Agatha often says." [Pg 105]

And Sue, much impressed, as solemnly promised to remind her.

March 27. There's something that the Imp is up to,—something that she has discovered. I'm as certain of it as I am that my name is Susette Birdsey. The reason I know this is because of what happened to-day.

Carol and I had gone down this afternoon to Anita Brown's to go over some English history with her for an exam we're going to have in a day or two. Anita is great on history, and somehow can make it seem so simple and sensible and easy to remember. I don't know how she does it, but we always like to study that subject with her and get her to explain all about the succession of kings and what relation they were to each other. She has the knack of making them seem like real people. [Pg 106]

Well, we had stopped at her house on the way from high school, so we hadn't been home this afternoon. About half-past four we left, and happened to come out of her gate just a little behind two people who were walking up the road. (Anita lives about half-way between our house and the village.) It didn't take us an instant to recognize those two people as Monsieur and the Imp. Carol was all for hurrying along to join them, but I said no, we might just as well keep to ourselves, for they probably didn't care for our company, anyway. So we kept on behind them, and they were talking so fast and hard that they didn't even notice us.

Presently the Imp did a queer thing. She opened her school-bag, took out a book—it wasn't a school-book, either!—opened it at a certain page, and showed something to Monsieur. Whatever it was, it had the strangest effect on him. He gave one look at the page, then stopped stock still in the road and stared at the Imp, making a queer sound in his throat, as if he were trying to clear it and didn't succeed very well. Then he said something in French that we caught the sound of but couldn't understand. But the Imp was evidently so excited that she forgot to speak French, for we heard her say in English: [Pg 107]

"Then I'm right, Monsieur? It's the same? I was sure it was."

And he answered:

"*Oui, oui, petite mademoiselle!*" (I know enough French to translate this as "Yes, yes.")

After that the Imp went right on to chatter in French. But by this time we'd made up our minds that it was high time we were let in to that little secret, so we hurried to catch up with them. But the Imp saw us too quickly. She shut the book, slipped it back in her school-bag, and by the time we had joined them they were conversing sedately in English about the weather.

When we reached our own gate the Imp went off about her own devices, with never a word about the queer performance on the street. But Carol and I made up our mind that we'd take a peep at that book in her school-bag when she wasn't around. So when she had gone upstairs for a while, we opened the school-bag that she had flung down on the couch in the living-room. [Pg 108]

But when did we ever manage to get ahead of the Imp? She had carefully removed that book, and it was nowhere to be found. I remember noticing that it was a thick book with a light green cover, and there was nothing even faintly resembling it anywhere about, so far as we could discover. What she could have done with it, or when she could have taken it out without our notice, beats me. Leave it to the Imp, however, to accomplish that sort of trick.

Of course we plainly saw that there was nothing we could do, except to question her, and we debated the longest time about whether to do so or not. It's such a hopeless performance, if the Imp has made up her mind beforehand that you're not going to find out anything from her. Carol suggested that we ask her right out what she had discovered that Monsieur was so interested in. I told her there was only one kind of answer to expect to *that*, so what on earth was the use? [Pg 109]

I thought I had a better scheme. The Imp has been wild for a long time to have a fountain-pen like the one I bought in Bridgeton two months ago for a dollar. I was going to save up and give her one for her birthday. But that's a long way off yet. So I suggested to Carol that I offer to let the Imp have mine, and then buy a new one with the dollar Uncle Ben gave me at Christmas. She said it was an awful waste of a good pen, and might not accomplish what we wanted, anyway, but that I could try it if I liked.

So a little later, when the Imp came in where we were studying, I began on the subject, but very carefully, so that she wouldn't suspect something right at the start and spoil everything. After she had settled herself to read—it was *my* book, by the way!—I began thus:

"You and Monsieur seemed to be having a nice time while you were coming up the road this afternoon. Does he think you talk good French?" [Pg 110]

The Imp glanced at me warily, but replied in an amiable manner:

"Oh, yes. He says I'm the only person he's met in America, except Louis and his folks, who speaks it with a decent accent."

Then she went on reading. It was plain that *she* wasn't going to give us any opening, if she could help it.

"Do you always talk to him in French?" I went on cautiously.

"Yes, always. He likes it best," she answered, without looking up again.

"But we heard you say something to him in English this afternoon," I ventured, for I had a scheme as to just how I was going to trap her. For a wonder, she fell into it.

"I didn't! I don't remember saying a word in English."

This was just what I had thought. She was so excited at the time that she *hadn't* remembered.

"Oh, but you *did*!" broke in Carol. "We heard you say: 'Then I'm right? It is the same? I was sure it was.'" [Pg 111]

"You horrid things!" burst out the Imp. "Always tracking me around and eavesdropping! You once accused *me* of that, but I think the tables are turned now."

"Look here," I said, and I felt downright mad, "you know perfectly well we weren't doing anything of the kind. We happened to come out of Anita's house right behind you, and we refrained from joining you at first because we knew you didn't want us. We couldn't help it if you talked so loud that we could hear what you said."

She calmed down at that, and I seized the advantage and determined on a bold stroke.

"Bobs dear," I said, in as friendly a way as I could, "we know you've discovered something about Monsieur or Louis or some one from what you said and did this afternoon. Won't you tell us about it, too? You know we're awfully interested. And just to show you that we only mean to be friendly, I'll give you that new fountain-pen of mine, if you care to have it. I don't mean it as a bribe, but only to make you feel that we aren't really hateful." [Pg 112]

At this her eyes fairly sparkled for a moment. Then she shook her head.

"I can't do it, girls, much as I'm crazy to have that pen. Honest, I can't. I'm not teasing you about it this time, either. I really *have* discovered something quite important, and it just happened by accident, too. But Monsieur was so upset about it, and asked me so politely not to say anything to any one, that I just feel it wouldn't be right. I think I took him terribly by surprise. I don't know what it all means yet myself. There's something awfully mysterious about things over at Louis's. And really, you've been so decent to me lately that I'd tell you if I could, even without the pen."

Well, that was too much for me. I knew she meant every word she said, and I could understand, too, why she felt she couldn't tell us. So I just gave her the pen, anyway, and she was so happy and grateful. She said:

"It's all right, girls. You're trumps! And I'll do something for you yet, never you fear."

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But only to think that it was the Imp who made the first real, important discovery about this mystery! Well, things do happen queerly. I wonder what in the world she can have discovered?

CHAPTER VIII THE PORTRAIT OF MYSTERY

[Pg 114]

It was well into April before Louis came back to school, looking a trifle thin and pale, but otherwise not impaired by his serious accident. Carol and Sue traveled back and forth with him on the trolley several times, but never once picked up courage to ask him the question, the answer to which they were burning to know,—why had he been afraid of the strange portrait in Monsieur's room?

It was not till one evening when he had come over to see Dave that the subject was broached. Dave was detained out in the barn, helping his father with a sick farm-horse, and while they were waiting for him in the living-room the talk drifted to Monsieur and his devoted kindness during Louis's illness.

"He simply couldn't do enough for me," the boy asserted. "Beginning with his insisting on my having his room, he loaded me with delicacies and attentions of every sort the whole time. I began by quite despising him, but he's been so jolly good to me that I've just *got* to like him, whether or no! Honestly, it's almost pathetic sometimes, he tries so hard. I feel like a brute if I don't respond in just the way he wants me to. He's stopped talking about all the things he knows I don't care for, and even stands for my talking about mechanical engineering and that sort of thing. And that's going some for *him!*"

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"Louis," ventured Sue, a little timidly, "do you mind telling us now why you hated and were afraid of that portrait? You were going to tell me that day, if you remember, when we were interrupted."

The boy looked hesitant for a moment. Then he replied:

"I believe I might as well. It can't hurt any one that I can see. I've had the most peculiar feeling about that picture ever since my accident. Before that I'd seen it, of course, but had never thought much about it, and those two others that are covered I only thought were just another eccentricity of Monsieur's. He's awfully eccentric, anyway, about a number of things. But after I landed in that room with my chopped foot, and had to stay there when I didn't want to and lie staring day and night at that picture at the foot of my bed, first I began to hate it and then I actually became afraid of it. You'll hardly believe me, girls, when I tell you that I covered up my head with the bedclothes at times, when I was alone in the room, so that I wouldn't have to look at it."

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"But *why?*" interrupted Carol. "What was strange about it?"

"Well," Louis answered, "it's not so much that there's anything strange about the picture *itself*; it's more the way it made me feel and the way Monsieur acted about it and—well, a dream I had about it one night."

"A *dream?*" the girls exclaimed. "What was it?"

"I'll get to that presently," he said. "But first I want to tell you what Monsieur said about it. A day or two after I was taken to that room I asked him whose portrait it was. He said he would tell me all about it some time, but that all he could say at present was that the child had been one of the world's heroic martyrs. That, of course, didn't give *me* much information, but it made me a little more interested, and I used to lie and stare at it by the hour, wondering how in the world a youngster of six or seven could have been what he said."

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"Then came the time when I took that turn for the worse, and they thought it was all up with me. I had a terrible fever and was delirious, too, I guess. And that wretched picture haunted me the whole time. Sometimes it seemed to be coming toward me rapidly, growing larger and larger, and the eyes would glow like balls of fire. I used to scream out loud, because it somehow seemed as if it would wrap itself round me and crush me. Then it would seem to retreat way off where I could hardly see it, and almost disappear through the wall. At other times it would turn over, hang upside down, and cut up all sorts of antics. And all the time I couldn't seem to take my eyes from it."

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"The last night that I was so very ill I had an awful dream about it. I thought that suddenly I looked at it, and a queer change had happened to the whole thing. Instead of the youngster being dressed up in that natty little silk coat with lace frills at his neck and wrists and the jewelled star on his chest and the little riding-whip, his clothes were all queer and ragged. He had a bright red cap of some kind on his head, and his hair was matted and tangled. Instead of being plump and smiling, he was thin and half-starved looking, and the tears were running down his cheeks. And

while I looked, he suddenly held out his arms to me, as if for help. I felt as if I must get right out of bed and give him some assistance,—I simply *must*. And I guess I tried, too, for I remember the nurses held me down. Even after I was much better, I couldn't seem to get over the horror of that dream. I hated to look at the picture after that, for fear I'd see it again the same way."

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"But you also said," Sue reminded him, "that Monsieur acted queerly about the picture, too. What did he do?"

"Oh, yes, that's another thing," added Louis. "He used to stand in front of it the longest time, gazing at it as steadily as if it were the most wonderful thing on earth. Next he would turn and stare at me, and then look back again at the picture, till I could have yelled, it made me so nervous. It was mostly when he thought I was asleep or in a stupor, but I wasn't either one of those things half as much as they thought I was. Once he came and stood over me, after I had had my eyes shut for a long time, and I heard him muttering something about 'the temple look,' whatever he could have meant by that. It all seemed horribly uncanny. I didn't like it at all. I never was so glad of anything in my life as to get out of that place and back to my own room at last."

"But, Louis," began Carol, in an awed tone, "whatever do you suppose caused you to have that queer dream? It's one of the queerest things I ever heard. Did Monsieur ever say anything to you about the picture that would make you think of a thing like that?"

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"Not a single thing," declared the boy stoutly, "except what he said about the 'heroic martyr' business, and I can't believe I would have made up the rest out of my head. It's singular—"

At this moment, however, Dave came in, and the conversation shifted to other topics.

April 8. Carol and I debated a long while as to whether it would be a good idea to tell the Imp what Louis had told us last night. At first Carol was shocked at the idea of such a thing, and she looked at me as though I'd proposed to dynamite her house. But I reminded her that the Imp had been awfully amiable to us of late, and really it mightn't be such a bad scheme to let her into this, especially as she had some inside information of her own that some time she might be able to give us the benefit of. This settled Carol's doubts, so to-day we told the Imp.

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When we came to the part about Louis's dream, she grabbed my arm and said:

"Are you making this up, or is it really true?" I never saw her so excited before.

"Of course it's true!" I said. "It's just exactly what Louis told us."

"Then it's the queerest thing I ever heard of," she exclaimed. "O girls, I wish I could tell you what I know! You'd be so startled that you'd jump out of your boots. If only Monsieur hadn't asked me not to mention it to any one!"

"Haven't you even told Louis?" I asked.

"No. Monsieur particularly asked me not to speak of it to Louis. He asked me to promise him that I would not, and he seemed *so* upset about it. But I think I know why now. I've tracked down a whole heap of things lately. Some time I'll let you two in on it, if I can do so without breaking any promises."

The Imp can be a trump when she wants to be. I wonder if we have *permanently* got on the right side of her at last?

[Pg 122]

To-day I persuaded Carol to show her poem, "The Mysterious Portrait," to Miss Cullingford. She only agreed to do so for this reason. Our paper, *The Argus*, is offering a prize of five dollars for the best poem handed in by any member of the freshman class. I don't believe there's another one who can write as well as Carol, and this is her best piece of work. So at last she consented to let Miss Cullingford criticize it for her, before she submits it to the contest committee. I'm just crazy to have Carol get the prize.

She says Miss Cullingford took it and read it over,—it's not very long,—and then began to ask her some questions about it. They were principally about where she'd seen this portrait. Carol told her it was in the house of a friend, but didn't say anything that would give Miss Cullingford any clue as to where it really was. Miss Cullingford told her that the poem was very good, and asked her to describe the portrait to her a little more in detail. Carol did this as well as she could from memory. At last Miss Cullingford told Carol to leave the verses with her for a day or two, as she would like to consider them at her leisure. It looks rather promising for Carol, I think.

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April 9. Another awfully strange thing happened to-day. Our last hour for the day was English literature, and when it was over Miss Cullingford asked Carol to come to her after dismissal, as she wanted to talk to her a while about her poem. So Carol went to her room, but I didn't wait, because I was anxious to get home and help Mother with a new dress she's been making for me. I told Carol that I'd watch out for her when she came home, and run out to the gate to hear what Miss Cullingford had said about the poem. Carol said she wouldn't have but a minute to spare, because her mother and her Aunt Agatha were going to take her to dinner with some friends at Bridgeton, and so would be anxious for her to hurry and dress so they could catch the four

o'clock trolley.

I went home by myself and sewed hard for an hour or so. About five minutes of four Carol came rushing up the road and dashed in at her gate, late as usual. I grabbed up my coat, and hurried out to catch her before she went into the house. She was breathless with running, and her eyes had the wildest look. I thought it was because she was so late, but she panted out:

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"O Susette! I'd give *anything* if I only had the time to talk, but Mother and Aunt Agatha will be wild at me, as it is. I'm *so* late! But what do you think? You'll never guess. I've found out *whose portrait that is in Monsieur's room!*"

I was simply stunned.

"I don't believe you!" I cried. "This is just a trick. You can't catch me that way."

"No, no! It isn't a trick. It's *true!*" she panted. "You'll have to wait till to-morrow. I'll tell you all about it then." And she was gone into the house without another word.

This is simply *horrible*. Can I *ever* wait till to-morrow?

CHAPTER IX CAROL MAKES A DISCOVERY OF HER OWN

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To Sue, the night that followed seemed endless. The mere idea that Carol had actually discovered something, and then hadn't even had a chance to give her the faintest inkling about it, was enough to keep her from a wink of sleep. But dawn came at last, and with the first light she was up and dressing frantically. If she had thought of it, she might have known that her chum would not be about for the next three hours. Breakfast on that day was only an empty form, and no sooner was it over than Sue snatched up her books and rushed madly from the house, much to the amazement of the rest of her family.

Never doubting that she would hear the whole story from Carol as they walked to the village, she was filled with despair when she found that Carol's Aunt Agatha proposed to walk down with them, in order that they might assist her to carry a heavy basket of things she was taking to some sick woman in the village. Aunt Agatha's progress was slow, and to Sue's agonized signals Carol could only shake her head and dumbly signify that her friend must wait till later for revelations.

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But even this was not the end. Also waiting for the trolley was Louis.

"Do you mind telling him, too?" whispered Sue.

"I'd rather not," returned Carol. "I really don't think I ought to yet!"

This only added to the mystery. Louis wondered much at their unresponsiveness that morning, and, in fact, during all the school day and the returning trip that afternoon. For not another moment offered itself as entirely suitable to the tale that Carol was to unfold. Once they had reached the Green, however, Louis betook himself about his own affairs, and the two girls were left alone with their secret.

"Come up to the den in our barn," said Carol. "That's where I want to tell you."

"But it'll be cold," objected Sue. "Can't you come into the house?"

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"No. I don't want to be interrupted, and I've something to show you," insisted Carol darkly.

Consumed with wonder, Sue obediently followed her up the hay-loft ladder, and they locked themselves into the chilly, hay-scented den.

"Now do begin at once!" exclaimed Sue. "I never spent such an awful, maddening day of suspense in my life. Don't wait a minute!"

"I'm just as crazy to tell you as you are to hear it," responded Carol. "Do you think *I* haven't been boiling with impatience all day? Well, here goes! Susette, it's the queerest thing in the world, the way I happened across this. It's all through Miss Cullingford. That day, after I'd described the picture to her as well as I could, I remember that she looked puzzled and said, 'That somehow sounds familiar to me.' But I didn't think anything of the remark at the time, because I was too interested in what she was going to say about my poem, and I soon forgot it. But yesterday, when I went to her after school, she asked me if I'd recognize the picture if I saw it again, and I said that of course I would. Then she suddenly drew a book out of her desk and opened it at a certain page. And, Sue, will you believe me when I tell you? There was a copy of that *very same picture*, right before my eyes!"

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"Well, for goodness sake, tell me who it was, or I'll die of curiosity!" cried Sue impatiently.

"That's just what I don't know," Carol answered. "But I have the book here. It belongs to Miss Cullingford, and she offered to lend it to me. Of course, when I saw it, I acted surprised, but not half as much so as I felt, because I didn't want to have to tell her anything about Louis. I only said that it seemed to be the same picture, and she said it must have been some copy that I'd seen, for

the portrait was a famous one, painted by a famous artist. Then she went on to criticize my poem, and made one or two suggestions about some little changes in it. She said that if I made them, she thought the poem stood a fair chance of winning the prize. Then she offered to lend me the book to take home and read, because she thought I might be interested in it. She little knew how *desperately* interested I was! But come! Let's look at it for ourselves, and see if we can find out anything we'd like to know."

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Carol took the book out of a desk where she had locked it, and opened it at a certain page. And there, staring right up at them, was the selfsame picture that hung in Monsieur's room,—the "boy of nut-brown hair and smiling eyes." Only of course the picture was in black and white, not colored as in the oil-painting. But it was the *same*; you couldn't mistake it. And underneath the portrait it said, "The Dauphin of France."

"Carol," said Sue, after she'd read it, "will you tell me what on earth a 'dauphin' is?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," answered the other. "I never heard the word before, and I haven't had a chance to look it up anywhere. It looks something like the word 'dolphin.' Perhaps it's the French for it. And yet I don't think that is likely. A dolphin is some kind of a sea-creature, like a porpoise, isn't it? So it *couldn't* have any such meaning here."

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"But what is this book?" asked Sue.

They looked at the title, and it was, "Memoirs of Madame Lebrun." Carol said that Miss Cullingford had told her that it was an account of the life of a famous French artist and of the pictures she had painted. As that didn't give them any special help, they turned the pages eagerly, but couldn't seem to find out a thing about this particular picture that interested them.

"Wait a minute," said Carol. "I'll run into the house and look up the word in our big dictionary. Maybe I can find it there."

She came flying back after a few moments, all excitement, panting:

"It *was* there! I didn't dare hope it would be. It gave a whole lot about how the word originated. We weren't so far off the track when we thought of 'dolphin.' It *did* come from that! But anyhow, the principal meaning was, 'The eldest son of the King of France. The heir to the throne.' It also says that there isn't any such title in France now."

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After that they just sat and stared at the picture in silent amazement. What in the world could it all mean? If they'd been confused before, they were now more muddled than ever. Suddenly an idea occurred to Sue.

"Which dauphin do you suppose it was?" she questioned. "There must have been a lot of them."

"Maybe we could find out if we read the book through," suggested Carol helplessly.

The task, indeed, appeared herculean. Neither of the girls were in the least interested in memoirs, or in any other literature of that "dull" class. Both had frequently acknowledged that only stories of adventure and mystery and excitement contained the least interest for them. There seemed, however, no other way out of this tangle.

"Well, all right! If we must, we must, I suppose," said Sue. "I'd attempt 'most anything for the sake of solving this mystery. Suppose we read it aloud, turn and turn about. But for goodness sake, don't let's try to do it up here. We'll freeze. What if people *do* see us with it? They'll probably only think we're reading it for study. The Imp might suspect something, but she—"

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Suddenly Carol interrupted with:

"See here! Why not *tell the Imp*? She's evidently found out a lot of things on her own hook, and she even said she might tell us about them some time, if she could. Perhaps we've got ahead of her on this. I'd just enjoy getting ahead of her for once! Let's tell her and see what happens."

It was now Sue's turn to demur. Carol was so insistent, however, that she finally gave a reluctant consent, and they went out to hunt up the Imp. A little triumphantly Sue led her younger sister up to the loft, and with just a touch of patronage she promised her the surprise of her life when she got there. But to their intense chagrin, the two girls found, as they had discovered many times before, that they had, so to speak, to get up very early in the morning to get ahead of the Imp.

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"Look!" cried Carol, exhibiting the picture. "What do you think of that?"

The Imp gave it only one disdainful glance.

"Huh!" she sniffed. "Aren't you a little late in the day? I discovered the same thing about a month ago in the same book, or in one just like it!"

The two sat staring at her in stunned silence. Then Carol glanced at the book.

"It's so, Sue," she murmured. "It's the very same kind of a book that we saw her showing to Monsieur that day. Look at the light green cover."

It was indeed the same! But the Imp had had her triumph and now could afford to be magnanimous.

"Since you've discovered the same thing," she said, "I'll tell you how *I* happened to come across it. Our teacher, Miss Hastings, recently brought and hung up in the schoolroom some pretty new pictures. One that I liked very much was called 'The Girl with the Muff.' One day I asked Miss Hastings something about it, and she told me who the artist was and said there was a book in the library about her, with pictures of her other paintings in it. Next day she brought the book to school and let me look at it. And, girls, it was this book, or one like it, and while I was looking it over I almost jumped out of my shoes to come across this very picture. I didn't say a word about it, though, but just went and joined the library and got the book out and read it all."

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"And did you find out who this dauphin was?" Sue asked breathlessly.

"I certainly did," answered the Imp, "and a whole lot more besides."

"Well, who *was* he, then?"

"I wonder if I ought to tell you?" said the Imp reflectively. "You see I promised Monsieur I wouldn't say anything about what I had discovered. As you can guess now, I showed it to him, and it quite took him off his feet with surprise. He begged me to say nothing about it to any one."

"Look here!" exclaimed Sue suddenly. "You told us once, quite a long while ago, that you asked Monsieur one day who the picture of the 'nice little boy' in his room was, and that he told you then. So how could he be surprised when you found it out later?"

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Sue thought she'd surely caught the Imp *that* time. But the other only laughed.

"He only told me just what you said he told Louis—that it was one of the world's 'heroic martyrs.' I was teasing you girls into thinking I knew it all. You'd been pretty hateful to me just around that time."

"I thought as much!" said Sue. "But we'll forgive you now, if you'll tell us what you know. There can't be any harm in it, since we've discovered just what you have."

But the Imp wouldn't have been herself, if she had acted in a way like ordinary folks. She stood and thought it over for a moment, keeping them on tenter-hooks all the time. Then she remarked:

"No, I don't honestly think it would be keeping my promise, if I said a word to you about it. I'm going to keep *that*, whatever else I do. But I'll open the book at one picture before I go, and that's all the hint I'm going to give you." She took the book and laid it open at a certain place, and then dashed down the stairs before they had time to say another word.

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The two girls almost fell over each other in their hurry to see what the picture was. It was a beautiful woman, and underneath it were the words, "Marie Antoinette."

"What in the world has *she* got to do with it?" demanded Sue. "Of course we all know who *she* was. Didn't she get killed, or something, in the French Revolution? But what has that to do with this dauphin?"

"Perhaps she was some relation," suggested Carol. "If she was the queen, maybe he was her son?"

"Tell you what!" Sue interrupted. "Let's go to the library to-morrow and hunt up some book on the French Revolution, or some other French history, and see if we can clear this thing up. I'm not going to wade through *this* book. It doesn't seem to say a thing about what we want to know."

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Carol agreed that this seemed the best course to pursue. Plainly, it would be useless to consult "Madame Lebrun" any further. They took the green book that had given them its startling revelation and hid it safely in the desk. Then they turned to go. Suddenly Carol faced her friend.

"Susette Birdsey, what do you make of all this, anyway? What has it to do with Monsieur and—with Louis?"

"I'm as much at sea as ever," admitted Sue.

"Well, you remember what I told you the other day," remarked Carol impressively. "There's more here than we have ever dreamed. I'm more firmly convinced of *that* than ever!"

CHAPTER X JOTTINGS FROM THE JOURNAL

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April 12, 1914. Well, we've found out all about that dauphin, and an exhausting piece of work it was. I never waded through so much history before in all my life. If the Imp hadn't given us that hint, though, it would have been far worse, for we wouldn't have had the least idea where to begin.

We went to the library this morning and spent till lunch-time there, and then went back again this afternoon. As it was the Easter holidays, we fortunately had all the time to spend on it that we wanted. But I must tell all about what we've discovered. Some of it is very, very confusing. We can't understand what it can possibly have to do with Louis, and yet there are things about it that

make us sure that it somehow has *something* to do with him.

To begin with, there isn't a shadow of doubt that this portrait is of the dauphin who was the son of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, king and queen of France around the time of the French Revolution. They seemed to be having a pretty mixed up and bloody time in France just about that period, and everybody had it in for the royal family and all the nobility. The common people somehow got control of things, and first they put the king and queen and dauphin and his sister in prison, and then they killed the king and queen. The dauphin was a little boy of six or seven at the time, and they didn't kill him, but kept him a prisoner for three years in a place called the Temple Tower, till finally he died of neglect. I think it said that he died in 1795.

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It just made us wild to read about how shamefully they treated that poor little fellow. They gave him in charge of a horrible, cruel cobbler, named Simon, who beat and ill-used him abominably,—just because he happened to be the child of a king,—and then afterward they shut him up in a room by himself, where he never saw a single soul for six months, and handed him his food as they would to a dog in a kennel. At the end of that time they appeared to be a bit sorry for the way they'd acted, and let him come out into a decent room and tried to take a little better care of him. But it was too late, for he died soon afterward,—as I should think he would after standing that kind of treatment for three years.

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Carol and I got so worked up over the thing that we almost cried. We felt awfully to think that a poor, innocent, little chap should be treated that way by people who were fighting for liberty and justice, as the French were. It didn't make any difference if he *was* a king's son. He had just as much right to be fairly treated as any one, and *more*, because he was so little and helpless. I don't wonder that Monsieur said he was one of the world's heroic martyrs. One book said that he was always so sweet and gentle and winning. His pretty manner at times even softened the hearts of some of his cruel jailers.

Well, that's the history of the dauphin. He would have been Louis XVII, if he had lived to become a king. The portrait of him must have been painted before all the trouble broke out. At that time the poor little fellow could not have dreamed what he was going to suffer later. It's well that he didn't know.

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As there didn't seem to be any more to find out, we decided we'd better go home.

I was longing for a chance to tell the Imp what we'd discovered, but she had a bad sore-throat from getting her feet wet this afternoon, and Mother had put her to bed. So I must wait till tomorrow. But since I've had an opportunity to sit down and think this all over quietly, I've been trying to see what connection all these things can possibly have with affairs across the Green. So far, however, nothing but unanswered questions has been the result.

For instance, I can *not* understand why Monsieur should consider that portrait as one of his most treasured possessions. Of course the story about the boy is terribly sad, but unless he was some relative of Monsieur's (which is quite impossible), why should Monsieur cherish the picture? He never saw the child, and can't possibly have any affection for him. I don't understand it. And what are those two other pictures, so carefully covered? Perhaps they are more portraits of the same child, painted later and too sad to be looked at? I'd love to know.

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I wonder, too, if Louis knew about this dauphin, would he still continue to hate the picture? Or would he be afraid of it? I'm just crazy to tell him, yet I suppose it wouldn't be fair,—at present, anyway. Good gracious! An idea has just occurred to me. I happened to think of that strange dream Louis said he had when he was sick. Was there ever anything so curious? I remember that he said the little fellow seemed so changed, with ragged clothes and matted hair and tear-stained cheeks and a red cap on his head! Why, that is just the way one of those books described him after he was put in charge of the cobbler. Simon took away all his nice clothes and made him wear a red "liberty-cap," and forced him to sing the songs of the revolution and dance for him. And Louis dreamed all that change in his appearance, yet he doesn't know who the subject of the portrait is and very little, if anything, about this dauphin, in all probability. This is simply uncanny! I must tell Carol in the morning.

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April 19. I haven't had a chance to write a thing in this journal for a week. We have been having the dressmaker. She's getting all our spring things in order, and I've had to help her and Mother with the sewing every spare minute that I've had. Father's been laid up, too, with an acute attack of rheumatism, and was in bed several days. For nearly half the week I didn't even go to school. So, altogether, I've been having a rather strenuous time.

But, all the same, I haven't forgotten our mystery for a single minute. Carol has kept me posted on anything new that has happened, though nothing special did happen till yesterday. She has been madly reading history ever since. She always did have a taste for it, and this has given her the inspiration to read up French history from the very beginning. She says she's finding it as interesting as a story. Well, maybe she is, but I'm sure *I* wouldn't.

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One thing she said was that the more she read, the more she felt that the French weren't much to blame for what they did while getting rid of their kings and queens in that revolution. Of course they might have used gentler means, but they were probably too exasperated by the way they'd been downtrodden. From almost the beginning the reigning monarchs were a *precious lot*, evidently considering it their chief business in life to squeeze the most they could out of their

subjects. Each one felt he'd lived in vain, apparently, if he hadn't gone his ancestor one better at that occupation! Carol says that Louis XVI seems to have been a lot better than most of them, but by that time the French were too furious to consider that, I suppose. Anyway, he had to suffer for what his ancestors had done.

We haven't seen much of Monsieur lately. Louis says he hasn't been well. This climate doesn't agree with him, and he has rheumatism and gout, and has caught a dreadful cold. I don't see why he stays here, if it makes him so miserable. Anyhow, he was in such bad shape that he decided to go to New York to spend a few days at a sanitarium, and Miss Yvonne had to take him there, for he was too sick to go alone. He went yesterday, and last night a queer thing happened. Carol told me about it this afternoon, giving the account as Louis told it to her while coming home from school on the trolley. [Pg 145]

It seems that he and his uncle were sitting downstairs in the living-room when, about nine o'clock, they heard a dreadful crash upstairs, directly over their heads. They couldn't think what in the world it could be, and were so startled that neither of them moved or spoke for a moment. Then Louis jumped up, exclaiming:

"Something's the matter in Monsieur's room! That's right overhead. I'll go up and see."

At first his uncle didn't seem to want him to go, saying he'd rather go himself. But as he's very feeble and doesn't go upstairs often (his bedroom is on the lower floor), Louis wouldn't hear of it and insisted that at least they go together. So up they went. [Pg 146]

When they reached Monsieur's room and struck a light, they saw that the picture of the boy had fallen to the floor and that the glass was broken. Evidently, the wire by which it was hung had become rusty and given way, for the picture is very heavy. Louis didn't think much of the occurrence. He merely remarked that he'd clean up the broken glass and get a glazier to come in the morning and put in a new one. Also, he said he'd get some new wire and rehang it.

But for some unknown reason old Mr. Meadows was nearly wild. He stood and wrung his hands, and walked up and down, as if something perfectly awful had happened. Louis couldn't make out what in the world was the matter with him. Finally he said:

"It's all right, Uncle. What are you so excited about? I'm going to have it all fixed up to-morrow. It will be as good as ever. The picture itself isn't damaged a bit." [Pg 147]

But even then his uncle couldn't seem to calm down, and all Louis could get from him was this remark, repeated over and over:

"'Tis an evil omen! An unfortunate sign! On no account must Monsieur know of it!"

Louis said that was all right; he needn't know of it. The picture would be all fixed up long before Monsieur came back. And even Miss Yvonne needn't hear of it, for he'd see that it was in place before she came home to-day. This seemed to calm Mr. Meadows somewhat, and he finally consented to have it so. But all the evening he kept muttering, "An evil omen!" to himself, and acted uneasy. Louis says he doesn't see any sense in it. I can't say that I do either, even with what I know, and yet it does seem sort of queer.

I'm too tired to write much more to-night, and yet I must tell about how the Imp acted when we told her of what we'd unearthed in the histories about the dauphin.

We were awfully enthusiastic over telling her, for we felt sure she would think we'd done a good piece of work. As a matter of fact, Carol and I doubted very much whether the Imp could possibly have found out as much as we had, for we'd dug into things so thoroughly. We felt sure we were giving her some points she hadn't discovered, and we were rather proud of ourselves. Imagine our disgust when she remarked, after we'd finished: [Pg 148]

"Well, you've done very nicely, children!" She always calls us "children" when she wants to be patronizing and unpleasant. I thought it strange that she should suddenly turn horrid, when she's acted so friendly of late.

"Don't be hateful," I said, "but admit that we have given you some good points."

"I don't mean to be hateful," she retorted, "but it makes me mad to see how little you girls use your brains."

"I don't think that's a nice remark," I said, "but I'll forgive you for it, if you'll be kind enough to explain what you mean."

"Why, just this," she answered. "There are one, two,—yes, three points in things you know about that you haven't connected with this picture or this history at all, so far as I can see." [Pg 149]

"What are they?" I demanded.

"You know that I can't tell you," she replied. "I can only advise you to use your brains and your memories."

"Anything else?" I inquired, as mildly as I could, for by that time I was getting furious with her.

"Yes, one thing more," she said. "You were trying to be patronizing, weren't you, when you asked me if you hadn't given me some good points. As if it wasn't *I* who put you on the right track in the

beginning! I've always said that you two were an ungrateful pair, and now I'm sure of it. I'll give you just one more piece of information, and then I'm through. You thought you had discovered more than I have? Why, I've unearthed so much more that you haven't even touched or suspected that you'd be perfectly amazed, if you knew what I do!" With that, she flounced out of the room.

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I can't help but believe the Imp, mad as she has made me. Goodness knows when she'll come round to being amiable again, for once she goes off on a tangent like this, she *stays* off for a good long while. It's too bad!

What in the world can those three things be that she was talking about?

CHAPTER XI

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LOUIS SPRINGS A SURPRISE—AND THE CONSEQUENCES THEREOF

May 1, 1914. Nothing special has happened during the last two weeks that is worth writing about. Carol and I haven't made the least progress in solving the riddles I last mentioned. The Imp fulfilled all my expectations, and has been most objectionable ever since that day. Queer how she turns completely around at times, especially when she feels the least bit touchy, and acts as if we were her mortal enemies. She has hardly spoken to us lately.

Monsieur came home from his sanitarium, and seems a lot improved. The weather is lovely, anyhow, and he stays outdoors a good deal, so I suppose that helps, too. Carol and I have had several interesting talks with him. You can't help seeing a good deal of your neighbors in this shut-off spot around the Green, when the weather is nice, and even Monsieur seems to have become used to strolling over and having little friendly chats with us. He has "thawed out" a lot, and actually seems quite human *now*. The Imp is still his favorite, of course, but he has come to realize *our* existence when she isn't about.

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What I wanted specially to write about to-night was the delightful time we had to-day. Louis gave us all a treat, and besides providing such a good time, he also gave us the surprise of our lives. There was to be a big aviation exhibition over in Bridgeton this afternoon, and yesterday Louis gave us all invitations to go with him and see it. He said he had unusually good seats on the flying field. It was something we wouldn't have missed for anything, and so we all went,—Dave, Carol, and myself, and even the Imp. Louis said he had invited Monsieur, too, but Monsieur did not care to go, not feeling as well as usual to-day.

I've never seen an *aéroplane* near by before. To tell the truth, the nearest I ever *did* see one was probably a thousand feet up in the air, sailing over our house one time. We had gorgeous seats right in front, and could see everything plainly. I was so thrilled when the first one rolled out and soared up majestically that I could have risen and shouted myself hoarse. Carol had to pull me down once, to keep me from tumbling right over the railing in my excitement. But that was nothing to what was to come. We were so absorbed that we didn't notice that after a while Louis slipped away and disappeared. What was our astonishment to see him suddenly strolling down the field in a regular aviator's costume, with a helmet in his hand. He came over to us, laughing, and said:

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"I know I've given you all a shock, that is, all except Dave. He's been in the secret. But I might as well up and confess my crimes now. I've been mad about this aviation business for a year or more, and I have been studying it secretly for some time. A fellow I know here in Bridgeton has a machine and is to fly to-day. His name is Page Calvin. He hasn't gone up yet. I've studied and worked on his machine till I know it by heart, but I've never been up in it yet. To-day he's going to take me up, and if I stand it all right,—some people can't, you know,—why then it's aviation for *me*, in preference to everything else!"

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Well, we were so thunderstruck that we couldn't say a word for a moment, and just gasped. At last I managed to stammer:

"And—and is Dave going in for this, too?"

"Not I!" said Dave. "I haven't any head for it. I get too dizzy. But I'm going to help Louis build a model *aéroplane* when we've finished that motor-boat. I'm interested in the mechanical part of it."

"But what about Monsieur?" Carol asked Louis. "Have you told him about this?"

"No, I haven't," said Louis. "That's why I wanted him to come to-day, so that I could surprise him, too. I'm sorry he couldn't—"

Just then some one came and told Louis that the biplane he was to go up in was ready, so that he said good-bye and walked away. We watched him put on his helmet and climb into the machine, and I confess now that I never expected to see him alive again. It's all right when some one you *don't* know is going up; you're just excited and thrilled. But when it's some one that you *do*, you're simply frozen stiff with fright, and you're morally certain that he'll come crashing to earth any second!

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Carol and I gripped hands and held our breath, and I believe it was the longest fifteen minutes I

ever knew or expect to know. They sailed completely out of sight for a while, and then the suspense was worse. But at last the biplane came back and settled on the field as gracefully as a bird. Louis was wild with excitement when he returned to us, and he says it's the most wonderful experience imaginable. The Imp was so worked up over it that she wanted Louis to persuade his friend to take her up and "loop the loop"! He laughed, and told her it was not allowed, but I believe that for a while she really thought she could tease him into it.

There was one other exciting thing that happened. Toward the last a machine went up and something went wrong with the engine when it was about two hundred and fifty feet in the air. It began to droop over in a sort of lopsided fashion, and then began to settle, like a bird that has been wounded in the wing. Before it reached the ground it was almost upside down, and every one was nearly frantic, thinking the man in it would fall out. But he didn't, and at last it came to earth with quite a crash. A lot of people rushed to help the aviator out, Louis among them. He wasn't killed, but they said he had a badly fractured arm, and we saw him being fairly carried off the field. It made me actually sick to think what a horribly dangerous career Louis was letting himself in for. But it didn't seem to disturb *him* a bit. All he would say was that a careful aviator would never let a thing like that happen.

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It was late when we came home, so we invited Louis and Carol over to our house to tea, and had a jolly evening afterward.

I've had a gorgeous day and, as Louis said, "the surprise of my life." But I cannot help wondering how Monsieur is going to take this piece of news.

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It was the day after Louis's great surprise, and, since it was Saturday, he was out in the barn hard at work putting the finishing touches to the motor-boat that was to be launched on the river during the coming week. Carol, Sue, and the Imp had also drifted over to admire the "toot-and-scramble," as the Imp insisted on pronouncing Louis's favorite French expression, *tout ensemble*.

"Won't it be jolly to have our first picnic up the river in her?" remarked the boy, stopping to glance critically at a stroke of varnish he had just administered. "Do you know, I really began this boat just to get my hand into that kind of mechanical work, but I believe we're going to have a lot of fun out of her, too. However, just you wait till I begin my biplane—"

At that moment a shadow fell across the doorway, and the figure of Monsieur entered unexpectedly behind the group.

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"*Bon matin*," he began, as was his custom. Then suddenly and sharply he added in English to Louis, "What is that you say?"

"Good-morning," said Louis, politely. "I haven't seen you, sir, since our expedition yesterday, or I would have told you what I told the girls at the aviation field. I hope you'll be pleased."

With a visible effort, for, in reality, he greatly dreaded this revelation to Monsieur, yet simply and directly he told the old gentleman what he had said and done on the previous day.

The result was as unexpected as it was distressing. Not one of the listeners but was fully prepared to see the excitable French gentleman rage and storm and attempt to forbid Louis to engage in so dangerous a pursuit. From all they had heard of him, they could imagine no other course of action. They were entirely unprepared, however, for the strange quiet with which he received the news. It was not till Louis began to tell of yesterday's flight that Monsieur suddenly raised his hand and cried in a low voice:

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"Stop! A chair, if you please! I—I feel very—ill!"

Not till then did they notice the strange, gray pallor that had crept into his face. Louis hurried into the main part of the barn and came back with a rickety chair. When he had placed it, Monsieur sat down heavily and, groaning slightly, pressed his hand to his side.

"Hurry in—to—Mademoiselle Yvonne!" he gasped. "Tell her—bring my medicine. My heart! It—it has been weak for years!"

Louis dashed out of the barn to obey his command, and Carol dashed after him, glad to get away from the sight of physical suffering. But the Imp and Sue stayed with the old gentleman, the Imp steadying him in his chair with her strong young arm, for he seemed to be slipping down. Sue began fanning him frantically with a newspaper. It seemed as if the other two were gone for an age, and, in fact, they were gone longer than might have been expected, for Miss Yvonne was not about the house and had to be hunted up in the big garden.

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Before they came back, however, Monsieur appeared to grow a trifle easier. But the only word he said during the absence of the others was just before they came back with Miss Yvonne.

"It is useless!" they heard him murmur, and the Imp, bending over, asked him what he had said and if they could do anything. But he acted hardly aware of her presence, and went on murmuring something in French. Then the others returned, bringing Miss Yvonne, breathless and excited, but carrying a bottle and spoon. A few moments after taking the medicine Monsieur seemed easier, and with the help of all he managed to get back to the house.

"It's all right now," Louis told the girls. "He says he will go to bed and rest, but the worst of the

attack is past. Don't you worry."

The three girls wandered back across the Green, subdued and upset by what had happened. Even the Imp was apparently forgetful of her past grievances toward the others. [Pg 161]

"I wonder what he was trying to say?" marvelled Sue, as the three roamed aimlessly toward Carol's barn. "Did you catch it, Bobs? You were nearest to him, and I think he spoke in French."

"Yes, I caught it," said the Imp, turning to them suddenly. "And look here, girls, I believe I might as well tell you the whole thing now, if you care to hear. I'm getting tired of the worry of carrying this thing around by myself!"

If she had exploded a bomb in their midst, she could not have startled them more.

"Gracious! What has made you change so?" demanded Sue, wonderingly.

"Well, I feel kind of upset by what has happened this morning," admitted the Imp, "and so I feel like getting this thing off my mind. Do you know what he was muttering in French, as he sat there? It was this: 'It is useless to try any longer to keep the secret. I must tell him at once!'"

"So you see, if he tells Louis," went on the Imp, "there's no reason, so far as I can see, why I shouldn't tell you *now*. Come up into your den, and I'll tell you all I know!" [Pg 162]

She began to climb the ladder to the haymow, and the two followed her, silent with amazement.

CHAPTER XII

WHAT THE IMP KNEW

[Pg 163]

The three filed into the den off the haymow, and Carol solemnly padlocked the door on the inside. As there were only two chairs, the Imp perched herself on the old desk, curling her feet up under her. The one window was wide open, and through it was wafted the scent of lilacs and the sound of a lawn-mower propelled by Dave somewhere across the Green. For a moment after they were seated no one spoke.

"Well?" said Carol, impatiently. "Go on, Imp! Begin *somewhere*."

"I was just wondering where to begin," admitted the Imp. "I was trying to remember what you actually *do* know, but I guess, except for the fact as to who that picture is, you don't know a single thing."

"You once said," Sue reminded her, "that there were three things we actually knew that we hadn't connected with this affair. We've tried and tried to think what they were, but somehow we never could seem to strike them. Perhaps you'd better begin with *them*." [Pg 164]

But the Imp ignored this suggestion.

"I suppose it *has* dawned on you that that picture has some connection with Louis?" she asked.

"We've thought of it, but it seemed so impossible that we finally gave up the idea," replied Sue. "What *could* it possibly have to do with him?"

"Everything," answered the Imp briefly.

"Go on, then!" commanded Sue. "You've kept us on tenter-hooks long enough. If you're going to tell us at all, do please begin at the beginning, and don't stop till you're through."

"The trouble is just this," admitted the Imp. "I don't actually *know* anything much at all. It's just guesswork, except for one or two things. You seem to think Monsieur has told me the whole business. Well, he hasn't,—not a single thing,—except that I was right about knowing who that portrait was, and he asked me not to say anything about it, especially to Louis. Everything else I've worked out for myself, and it *may* be all wrong; but somehow I don't think it is." [Pg 165]

The two listeners looked crestfallen. For some time past they had come to believe that the Imp was wholly and entirely in Monsieur's confidence. It was a shock to learn the truth. Carol immediately intimated as much to the assembled company.

"You're a pack of sillies," exclaimed the Imp scornfully, "to imagine such a thing, anyway! Why, this thing is of—of immense importance to—well, I was almost going to say to the whole world. Do you suppose for one moment that a youngster would be let into such an important secret?"

"What are you saying? 'To the whole world?'" cried Carol. "Are you going crazy, or do you think you are taking us in again with some of your nonsense?"

"I'm *not* talking nonsense, and I'll prove it. Do you know what I discovered by reading a little more than you did at the library, and also from an old book that Miss Hastings lent me, because I told her I was interested in the subject? Well, I found out that, although most people think it's a settled fact that that poor little dauphin died in prison, still there are a lot of legends that he really escaped, that he was helped to escape by some of the Royalists, and that the little boy who died there wasn't the dauphin at all!" [Pg 166]

The Imp stopped to let this startling news sink into the minds of her hearers.

"But—but—" stammered Sue, "if he escaped, what became of him?"

"That's something that never was known," answered the Imp. "After the downfall of Napoleon and the restoration of the Bourbons in France, there were a lot of pretenders who *said* they were the escaped dauphin and claimed the throne. But they never could prove it, so no one paid much attention to them. Only you see there must have been some truth in it,—his escape, I mean,—or no one would have thought of such a thing."

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"But I don't see, anyway, what all that has to do with this affair," remarked Carol.

"Don't you?" replied the Imp coldly. "Then you're more stupid than I gave you credit for being."

Carol quite wilted under this rebuke, but Sue, who had been doing some rapid thinking, cried:

"Mercy! It can't be possible that—"

"Wait a minute," interrupted the Imp. "I'm going to answer your question about those three things, and see what you make of it. Do you remember what they used to call Louis XVI—the people, I mean? I'm sure you know, because you mentioned it to me that day you were telling me what you'd found out."

"'Louis the Locksmith,'" answered Carol promptly.

"Right," said the Imp. "Does *that* make you think of anything?"

Carol shook her head.

"Oh, you're hopeless!" groaned the Imp. "Try the next one. When Louis was sick one time Monsieur stood over him murmuring something about 'the Temple look.' Does *that* convey anything to your mind?"

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"It does to mine," interrupted Sue. "Oh, I believe I'm beginning to understand."

But Carol still looked hopelessly confused.

"Well, here's the last," went on the Imp. "Why should Monsieur and all the others treat Louis in the queer way they do? Why should Louis have found Monsieur kissing his hand that time?"

"Oh, please explain *clearly*, Bobs!" moaned Carol. "You mix me up so, firing questions at me, that I can't think at all. Just say straight out what it is."

"All right, I will. I'll say it in words of one syllable, suitable to your infant mind," laughed the Imp. "It may sound like the craziest idea that ever was imagined, but I believe Louis to be a descendant of that little dauphin, and I believe Monsieur knows it and the Meadows people, too."

The conjecture was so stupefying in its scope that the three girls sat for a moment in dumb, confused wonder.

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"I can't believe it," murmured Carol, at length. "Right here on little Paradise Green, way out of the world, to have such a thing happen? Impossible!"

"It's no stranger than lots of other things that have happened in history," asserted the Imp, "when you come to think it over. And it's so possible, too."

"But here, *here!*" cried Sue. "What in the world would Louis be doing in America? I could believe it more easily if we lived somewhere in France."

"I read in one book," replied the Imp to this objection, "that there was a rumor that after the dauphin escaped he was taken to America. There was an American Indian, named Eleazar Williams, or something like that, who claimed to be the dauphin. So you see it's not so impossible, after all."

"Now I begin to see," remarked Carol, after a long pause, "what you meant by some of those three things. If Monsieur thinks Louis is a descendant of the dauphin, I can understand why they all treat him with such respect. Why, girls," she cried enthusiastically, "just think,—Louis—*our* Louis—may have royal blood in his veins! I simply can't believe it!"

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"That remark about 'the Temple look' meant, I suppose," murmured Sue, "that Louis looked so awfully when he was sick that it reminded Monsieur how the dauphin must have appeared after his bad treatment and illness in the Temple Tower. That never occurred to me. But I can't yet see any connection with what you said about 'Louis the Locksmith.'"

"That's easy," answered the Imp. "It was one of the first things I thought of. Don't you remember how Louis XVI was always tinkering with things and fixing locks, and how fond he was of mechanical work? The whole court used to resent it. Well, the Meadows and Monsieur evidently think that Louis has inherited that trait, and it drives them wild. Don't you remember what Louis told us Miss Yvonne once said when she found him fixing the lock on the kitchen-door? 'The ancient blood! It will ruin everything!' Doesn't that indicate what they think?"

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"True enough," Sue had to admit. "But what foolishness all this is, girls, when you think of Louis's history and the history of his family! I was asking Father about Louis's folks not long ago, just out of curiosity. He said that the Durants had lived in and owned that house across the Green for

many, many years, even longer than our descendants have lived in our house. It was way back in the eighties when Louis's father left here and went out West. He was a young man then, about Father's age. In fact, they'd gone to school together. But this Charles Durant went away out West to better himself, and rented the old house on this Green. Father says he never saw him again, because Charles Durant and the wife he'd married out there were suddenly killed in an accident. The first Father heard about it was when old Mr. Meadows and his daughter, whom nobody had ever seen before, came to this place with the tiny baby who was Louis, and settled here for good. They never said much about themselves, except that they were old friends of the Durant family and that they had always lived in France. They explained that they had come over here to take care of and bring up the last Durant baby, since its parents had been killed. Now will you tell me how anything about a dauphin could come in there?"

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"Maybe they didn't bring the baby from out West," suggested Carol, "but brought him over from France with them. Maybe he isn't a Durant at all."

"That's possible, too," said the Imp, "but, after all, it doesn't make any difference where he came from, does it, if Louis is what we think he is?"

"But who is this 'Monsieur,' and what has *he* to do with the whole thing?" suddenly cried Carol.

"That," admitted the Imp, "is what I can't figure out. I'm sure he must be some relative. They say there are descendants of the Bourbons still living. It wouldn't be strange if he wanted to hunt up a long-lost relative, but why he should make such a secret of it is beyond me."

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"Bobs," cried Sue, suddenly going off at a tangent, "have you any idea about those two other pictures in Monsieur's room,—the ones all covered up? I've stayed awake nights trying to guess who on earth they could be, and why he keeps them covered."

"Why, of course I don't *know*," laughed the Imp, "but I can make a good guess. I believe they're portraits of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. I can't imagine why he keeps them covered, unless it's to keep Louis or any one else from guessing anything about this affair. Of course they're very well-known portraits, and almost any child would know who they were at first sight. But it's different with the dauphin. Very few people know that picture by sight. That's the only reason I can think of."

It seemed such a simple explanation, after they'd heard it, that both girls felt a little chagrined to think that they'd never had the wit to work out this easy problem. But so humble were they now, after the Imp's astounding revelation, that they were willing to admit their inferior wit twenty times over.

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It was Sue who presently voiced the unspoken thought that was in each mind.

"I wonder how Louis will take all this?" she sighed.

This was a matter that went beyond their conjecture. How, indeed, *would* Louis take it?

CHAPTER XIII SUSPICIONS

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May 17, 1914. It may seem a strange thing, but two whole weeks have gone by since the Imp told us what she did, and nothing has happened at all. By "nothing" I mean that no astonishing developments of any kind have occurred. We went out from Carol's barn that day perfectly certain that everything—about Louis, at least—would be changed and strange and upheaved. We lived on a tiptoe of expectation for hours and days, but all has gone on over there just the same as ever. I can't understand it.

That morning, about eleven o'clock, Louis came over to tell us that Monsieur was feeling much better, and that we need no longer worry about him. We all gazed at him curiously,—*so* curiously, I'm afraid, that he noticed it.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "You all act as if you were seeing a spook. Is there anything wrong about me anywhere?"

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"Oh, no!" I hurried to assure him. "We were wondering how Monsieur was getting on."

"Well, he's getting on famously," said Louis, "but I certainly did manage to upset him. I was afraid he wouldn't take the news well, but I didn't dream it would be as bad as that. I only supposed he would rant and tear his hair. I'm horribly sorry, for I'm actually getting a bit fond of the old gentleman, queer as he is."

"Did he say anything more to you about it?" asked the Imp.

I knew she couldn't resist asking that. I was crazy to, myself, but couldn't pluck up the courage.

"Not another word," Louis replied. "I expected he'd say a whole dictionary full. He did start off once with a word or two, but evidently changed his mind. He hasn't even hinted at it since."

This seemed a little queer, but we decided (after Louis had gone) that Monsieur was probably

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putting off the ordeal till he felt stronger. That would be entirely likely. So we told each other that by the next day Louis would probably know the whole strange truth.

But the next day came and went, and Louis was just the same and nothing was changed, even at the end of a week. He told us that Monsieur had never so much as alluded to the subject again, and, for *his* part, he was mighty glad that the affair had blown over. He said he was sure Monsieur would get used to the notion after a while.

So time has passed, and things remain just as they were. We cannot imagine what has come over Monsieur,—Carol, the Imp, and myself, I mean. Why is he waiting? Why doesn't he tell Louis, as he said would have to? What does all this delay mean?

But if everything remains outwardly the same, it is not so with the way we three *feel* about things. I don't know if I can explain the strange change that has come over our feelings toward Louis and Monsieur and all that concerns them,—especially toward Louis. All our lives he has been just 'Louis Durant,' the nice boy who lived across the Green, who played with us from the time we were babies and studied with us in the same classes in school, who was just like our brother, except that he didn't live in the same house. We have always thought of him in the same way that we do of Dave. Now, however, everything is different. He *isn't* 'Louis Durant' any more. He's some strange, unknown, long-way-off person, whose ancestors were monarchs of one of the greatest countries on earth, and who might have been a king himself, if things had gone a little differently. I simply *can't* feel near to, and well-acquainted with, a person like that. Carol says she can't, either, and the Imp admits that she's felt so a good while longer than we have.

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It seems as if *our* Louis had been taken away forever and a strange, unapproachable person had been put in his place. Not that Louis *himself* acts any differently. He's exactly the same as ever, of course, and he's said a dozen times in the course of the last week:

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"What's come over you girls, anyway? You're all the time gazing at me with eyes as big as dinner-plates, and you act so queerly and are so absent-minded that I don't know you! Has a realization of the fact that I hope some day to be a full-fledged aviator had such a doleful effect on you as all that? You haven't been the same since that day. I wish to goodness that I'd never told you, if you're going to take it in this silly way."

Of course we try to assure him that nothing at all is the matter, but it doesn't work very well.

We three have talked a number of times about whether we ought to breathe a word of what we suspect to Louis, but the Imp says positively, "No." If he is to know, she says, he must learn it from Monsieur and from no other. In fact, by rights she ought not to have let us into the secret, and she wouldn't have done so, except that she thought there would be no reason why she shouldn't after Monsieur had told Louis. Since he apparently hasn't told him anything yet, it is our duty to keep the secret. I guess she must be right. *I* wouldn't want to be the one to tell Louis, anyway.

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Our final exams for this year are coming in a week or so, and we are all "cramming" hard, so I probably won't have a chance to think of much else for some time to come.

June 3, 1914. Everything is just about the same as when I last wrote in this journal. Nothing is changed, as far as we can see, in affairs across the Green. We are all so busy working for and taking our examinations that we haven't had much time to think about it, especially Carol, who is weak in mathematics, and I, who always dread Latin. Only the Imp remains unworried by these troubles. Her studies never did cause her a moment's uneasiness, as far as I can see, though how she gets through them, when she never makes even a pretense of studying, is beyond me.

Monsieur is about again in the usual way, and two or three times Carol and I have had a few moments' conversation with him, while he was strolling on the Green. I simply can't describe the uncanny feeling I have when with him now. If he was a mysterious person before, he's a million times more so now, and every moment that I'm talking to him I find myself in a panic, for fear those eagle eyes of his will bore into my mind and discover the fact that I know his secret. Of course I don't suppose he realizes for a moment what he said that day he was taken so ill, and certainly he does not dream that the Imp was keen enough to unearth what she did. He is polite and courteous and stilted—and very French—in his manner toward us, and I suppose he no more dreams that we know what we do than he supposes that the sky will fall on him.

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One thing is beginning to disturb me very much. It's a suspicion that occurred to the Imp, and that she confided to us a day or two ago. She rather startled Carol and me by suddenly putting this question to us:

"What do you figure out that Monsieur's plans are?"

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"How on earth should *we* know?" said I.

"Well, you must admit that he probably has some, or he wouldn't be dangling around here so long," replied the Imp. "Why shouldn't he tell Louis what he has to tell, and then go away or take Louis away, as the case may be?"

"What do *you* think, Bobs?" asked Carol. "I'll warrant you have worked it all out."

"If I tell you what I think, you'll tell *me* I'm a lunatic," declared the Imp. "It does sound rather

crazy, and yet why shouldn't it be so?"

"Why shouldn't *what* be so?" I cried. "You haven't even told us yet."

"Well, here's my notion," she said. "Suppose—well, just suppose that somebody wanted to overthrow the present government of France. Wouldn't this be a lovely chance?"

We were struck dumb with amazement by this astounding proposition.

"I guess you *are* a lunatic!" I said. "But even lunatics ought to have a chance to explain themselves. Go on." [Pg 183]

"Oh, I know it sounds foolish," returned the Imp, "but, after all, is it any more foolish than the possibility that our Louis may be a descendant of a king of France? Just think what that means. Suppose there are a lot of discontented descendants of royalists in France, who are dissatisfied with the present form of government. And suppose that they hear there *is* a direct descendant of Louis XVI now living. Wouldn't it be a lovely chance to get up a secret insurrection in his favor and so restore him to the throne? It wouldn't be the first time that a republic has been overthrown in that country, if you remember. And if this Monsieur happens to be a Bourbon relation, he'd be all the more interested."

Just then Carol gave a gasp, and cried out:

"Yes, and do you remember the way that first cablegram commenced? 'Time almost ripe!' I always did think that was queer."

"Exactly what I said," continued the Imp. "And what do you suppose Monsieur is twiddling his thumbs around Paradise Green for? Just because Louis isn't falling in with his plans as nicely as he'd hoped. I'll warrant Monsieur has been horribly disappointed from the first, because Louis was so thoroughly *American* and didn't take a scrap of interest in his French affairs. He sees plainly that Louis isn't going to be easy to handle. And if *Louis* won't stand for this restoration business, then 'the fat's in the fire.' *That's* what's bothering Monsieur. And he's waiting around to see if he can't win Louis over unconsciously somehow. At least, that's how I've figured it out." [Pg 184]

We couldn't help but agree with her, and wondered that we'd never thought of it by ourselves. Besides, the more we thought of it, the more we remembered dozens of little incidents that seem to confirm it. If we all weren't so busy pegging away at our exams, and so had more time to think about this, I feel sure that we could come to some definite conclusion about it, but as matters stand, I, for one, am too bewildered to know what to think.

And Louis goes about as happy as a lark, unconscious of it all! [Pg 185]

June 29, 1914. Examinations are over at last, and I'm thankful to say that we all passed, except that Carol has a "condition" in mathematics that she'll have to make up during the summer. Anyhow, it's over, and we can breathe more freely and look forward to vacation.

Last evening after tea the Imp asked Carol and myself to go for a walk with her, as she had something important she wanted to tell us. We suspected that she'd thought out something else about Louis, so we went quite willingly. Otherwise, I'm bound to confess, we'd have been bored stiff with the prospect of spending our time with her. It was quite true. She *had* thought of something new.

"Girls," she began, "has it occurred to you that if what we suspect about Monsieur and Louis is true, it's a very serious affair?"

We said we supposed so, but that we didn't see how we could help it.

"That's just it," she answered. "We *ought* to help it, somehow. I told you once that this was a matter that might affect the world, and you can easily see now that it is. Ought we to simply sit down and let it slide gaily along?" [Pg 186]

"But what on earth can *we* do about it?" I demanded. "Just remember that we're nothing but three young girls, one not even out of public school, and that not a soul on earth would believe us if we were to make such fools of ourselves as to tell what, after all, we only suspect."

"History has sometimes been in the hands of as young people as ourselves," she remarked. I'm sure I don't know where the Imp gets all her information, and yet somehow I'm bound to believe her. I couldn't think of a single case where history had been in the hands of any one of our age, but I didn't dare say so, because she would probably have promptly pointed out half a dozen cases. So I said nothing.

"I haven't made up my mind what we ought to do," she went on, "but I'm sure *something* must be done, and pretty soon, too!" [Pg 187]

"Suppose we begin by telling Father," I suggested. "He has a pretty level head about most things."

"Pooh!" she scoffed. "He'd just laugh his head off at us, and tell us to run away and play and forget all about it. You know Father doesn't take much stock in anything that isn't agriculture." This was quite true, and we saw at once that the Imp had the right of it.

"No, don't speak to any one yet," she added. "We'll keep the secret a while longer, till I've thought out a better plan."

This morning another queer thing happened. As there was no school, we were all sitting on the veranda discussing the startling news in the paper, the assassination of the Archduke of Austria, which happened yesterday. Just then Louis came over to ask us to go out in the launch.

"What do you think of the news?" he asked.

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We said it was awful, and that we were wondering what would happen next.

"You ought to have seen Monsieur when he read it," went on Louis, laughing at the recollection. "He got up, crumpled the paper into a ball, and stormed about the place as if he were having a fit. I asked him why he was so excited about it, and he immediately began to reel off a lot about the 'balance of power' in Europe,—how it would be upset and what Austria would be likely to do, where Russia would object and how France might be affected, and a whole lot more that I couldn't begin to understand. He's a great student of international politics, he says, and this news seemed to upset him a lot. I'm sure I can't see why."

The Imp poked me so hard in the ribs that I almost shrieked aloud, but I saw at once what she must be thinking. *Are Monsieur's plans upset by this, I wonder? Or are we just imagining trouble where there is none?* I'm sure I don't know. But of one thing I'm certain. I never realized how strange it would feel to go off for a picnic up the river in a launch run by a boy in a pair of paint bespattered overalls, whose ancestors sat on the throne of France and who might, in his turn, become the future ruler of that country.

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Anyhow, I don't like it. I'm not happy, and I wish things were just as they used to be. So does Carol, but I'm afraid the Imp enjoys all the excitement.

CHAPTER XIV

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A SOLEMN CONCLAVE—AND WHAT CAME OF IT

It was a hot morning toward the middle of July. About nine o'clock three girls might have been seen issuing from the Birdseys' gate, two carrying between them a well-filled lunch-basket. The third,—none other than the Imp,—bore a couple of shawls and two or three books, also a thermos-bottle of large proportions.

"I know you're not awfully keen about this picnic," she was saying to the others, "but it's only because you're a lazy pair and desperately afraid of getting a little overheated. It'll be cool and pleasant down at the old boat-house on the river. We can put on bathing-suits and have a swim first, and then eat our lunch when we feel like it."

"But I don't see why you're so anxious for this picnic just to-day," grumbled Carol. "It's blazing hot getting there, and we could have a much more comfortable lunch at home and go for our swim this afternoon."

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"Yes, and I was planning to do a lot of work in the house this morning," added Sue, discouragingly. "I wanted to rearrange my room and make that new waist for which Mother gave me the material. I hate to have things so upset."

"Look here!" exploded the Imp. "Didn't I make all the sandwiches and pack the lunch-basket and do every blessed thing for this picnic before you were even out of bed? Do be a little grateful, just for once. I had a reason, and a precious good one, for wanting to get off by ourselves to-day. I want to talk over something with you."

The other two pricked up their ears.

"What is it?" they demanded, with an increase of interest.

"Oh, yes," scolded the Imp, "you're anxious enough, now that you think there's something worth while in it. I've a great mind not to tell you."

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"Oh, go on, Imp!" soothed Carol. "You can't blame us for being a little grumpy on this hot morning. Have you found out something new?"

"I'll tell you after we've had our swim," was all the Imp would vouchsafe, and with that they were forced to be content. At the end of a hot walk across the meadows in the blinding sun, they emerged on the river bank at the cool little boat-house under the willows. Here they donned bathing-suits and splashed about in the river for an hour. When they were dressed again they lounged on the wide platform, amply shaded by one immense willow that overhung the water. They were comfortable and lazy and cool, and even the two reluctant ones acknowledged themselves quite happy.

"Well, let's have lunch," suggested the Imp, "and while we eat I'll tell you what's been in my mind for several days."

They spread out the sandwiches and fruit, and during the meal the Imp, who had not put on her shoes and stockings, sat on the edge of the platform and dabbled her feet in the water. [Pg 193]

"I guess I don't need to give you three guesses as to what I'm going to speak of," she remarked, between two mouthfuls of a sandwich.

"Oh, no; it's Monsieur, of course, and Louis," replied Sue. "Has anything new come up? I haven't heard of anything. Louis has been away at Bridgeton a lot, and I imagine he's been with that Page Calvin, pattering around the old biplane he's always talking about. I've had a mind to ask Dave, who certainly knows, but of course *he* wouldn't give me any definite information. I think Louis is trying to pluck up courage to begin work on that model, but he knows he'll have another awful fuss with Monsieur when he does."

"That isn't what I was going to talk about, anyway," said the Imp. "It may all be true, but something more important has been on my mind for several days. It's this: How much longer are we going to let this affair go on, and do nothing about it?" [Pg 194]

"You've asked that before," remarked Sue, uncomfortably, "and I can't for the life of me see what we *can* do."

"You've made that brilliant remark before," replied the Imp, scornfully, "and it doesn't help matters one bit. The point is that things have come to such a state that something *has* to be done, and done pretty soon. I had a little talk with Monsieur yesterday, and I'm going to tell you some of the things he said. He was sitting out on that seat on the Green about five o'clock in the afternoon, reading his paper. You and Carol were off down at the village getting the mail, and I didn't have a thing to do, so I strolled over to talk to him.

"He began by saying the news was bad, very bad. I was sort of surprised, because I'd looked at the paper every morning, and there hasn't been a single exciting thing in it since that archduke what's-his-name was assassinated some time ago. I thought that fuss had all blown over, but Monsieur says it hasn't, and that Europe is on the verge of some tremendous upheaval. He said that that murder was only the match that would start the conflagration, or something like that. Anyhow, he ended up with these words: [Pg 195]

"I tell you, petite mademoiselle, I have seen it coming this long, long time. Kingdoms will fall; republics will totter; the face of Europe will be changed. France, France herself, will experience a mighty upheaval! It is inevitable!"

The Imp stopped impressively, and her hearers were evidently thrilled.

"What does he mean? What *can* he mean?" she went on, her voice unconsciously rising higher and higher, "except that he's mixed up in all this. If Austria and Russia and Germany and England and France are all going to be in a big fuss, as he suggested, can't you see what a lovely opportunity it would be for him to put through this scheme about restoring the Bourbon monarchy? What else can he mean by saying, 'Republics will totter; France herself will experience a mighty upheaval'? I tell you, girls, it's time this thing was reported to the authorities. I'm sure our government could prevent it, if it only knew, and then, too, if we really care anything about Louis, we ought to protect him, even if he *is* a royalty,—I'm sure he doesn't *want* to be one!—from being caught in all this mix-up." [Pg 196]

"But how can we report it to the authorities?" asked Carol, in a scared voice. "I wouldn't know the first thing about how to go about it."

"Then I'll tell you," announced the Imp, dramatically. "I don't believe that in so important a thing as this we ought to stop short of the very highest authority there is. I propose that we write to the President himself. And I propose that we do it this very afternoon. I've thought it all out. I've even brought along the things to do it with."

True enough, she produced a fountain-pen and some notepaper. So impressed were her hearers that Sue could only quaver, in a voice that shook with nervousness:

"Well, you go on and write it, Bobs. I'm sure you'll know what to say. And we'll all sign it, if you wish. Perhaps that will make it look more important. But somehow I feel as if we ought to tell Father first." [Pg 197]

"Then you'll spoil everything," declared the Imp. "He wouldn't believe it, to begin with, and by the time he was convinced it would probably be too late. No, this must go off to-night. How ought I to address the President of the United States,—'Dear Sir' or 'Your Honor' or what?"

"If mademoiselle will delay this proceeding for a moment," said a strange voice with startling unexpectedness, almost at her elbow, "it may not be necessary to write the note."

The Imp turned about so abruptly that she dropped her fountain-pen into the river. The two others, fairly turned to stone in their astonishment and fright, sat motionless.

It was Monsieur himself. He had emerged from the bushes close to the water's edge, and now stood beside the platform of the boat-house. As no one of the three sufficiently recovered their wits to address him, he went on: [Pg 198]

"I owe you a thousand apologies for this intrusion and for being an unwilling eavesdropper. I came to a spot among the trees a short distance away early this morning, before the sun was hot.

I have often been there before. The nook is a favorite one of mine. I bring my book and Mademoiselle Yvonne contrives me a little lunch, so that I do not have to go back in the heat of the day. I must have fallen asleep before you arrived, for I was not aware of your proximity till I awoke. Then you were eating your luncheon and conversing. I was about to make my presence known to you, when I caught the drift of your conversation and astonishment forced me to listen. Mesdemoiselles, I know not how you have arrived at this conclusion, but I take it that you think me a conspirator, a—a plotter against the government of one of the world's greatest nations. You think it is your duty to report me to the authorities of your country. Is it not so?"

It seemed as if the three found it impossible to break their abashed silence. At length the Imp plucked up sufficient courage. [Pg 199]

"Yes, I guess that's about it," she admitted, nervously.

"Would you be so good as to inform me on what grounds?" he inquired, with the courtesy that never failed him.

The Imp glanced at her companions and back again to Monsieur. They were plainly caught in a trap. Should she tell what she knew, or refuse point blank? For an appreciable moment she hesitated. It was evident that if they put Monsieur in possession of the facts, they also would put themselves quite completely in his power. That would, on the face of it, be a foolish proceeding. Yet how could they do less? There was something about the old French gentleman's perfect courtesy and frankness that disarmed even the suspicions of the Imp. While she hesitated, however, Sue, to her own and every one else's astonishment, took up the cudgels in his behalf.

"I think it is only fair to tell Monsieur what we have been thinking," she said in a trembling voice. "He may be able to show us that we are in the wrong." [Pg 200]

Monsieur turned to her with a grave bow.

"I am sure there is some misunderstanding," he declared. "I have heard only enough to cause me to suspect that my actions and motives here may have been misjudged." Then he turned once more to the Imp.

"P'tite Mademoiselle Hélène, you and I have always, so I thought, been the best of friends. May I not understand from you the cause of this serious suspicion of me?"

Then and there the Imp, her feet still unconsciously dabbling in the river, told Monsieur in halting fashion the whole history of their discoveries about the portrait and their consequent conjectures. He listened to it all, an inscrutable expression in his eyes, till she had finished. When the recital was over he stood quite still for several moments, while the others waited breathlessly.

"You are marvelous children—you Americans," he said at last, "especially petite Hélène here! Who would have dreamed that you could piece together this story so accurately, with so little ground to work on? Yes, so accurately, as far as its foundation goes, for there you are right, astonishingly right. But, my good little friends, your premises may be right, but your conclusions are most deplorably wrong." [Pg 201]

"Do you mean that we guessed right about the portrait and Louis, but were wrong about what *you* intend to do?" demanded the Imp, scrambling to her feet and approaching Monsieur excitedly.

"I will permit you to judge of that after you have heard my story," replied Monsieur. "For I will now put you in possession of the whole truth, since you have discovered so much. Allow me, if you please, to sit down, while I render this accounting of myself."

CHAPTER XV MONSIEUR'S STORY

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He stepped up to the platform and took a seat on one end of an old bench that flanked one side of it. On the other end sat Carol and Sue. The Imp, unable in her excitement to remain seated anywhere, stood near him, her great, blue eyes wide with wonder. A catbird sang at intervals in the willow above them, and the incessant *lap-lap* of the river ran like a musical accompaniment in their ears. Not one of the three girls was ever to forget this strange moment in their lives, not even its beautiful setting.

"It is hard for me to know just where to begin," Monsieur at length broke the silence by saying. "But, as I have said, *mes enfants*, you three have worked out for yourselves a difficult problem, so perhaps it is best that I commence by telling you where you were right, and end by pointing out where you erred. I hasten to begin." [Pg 203]

"It may have been a foolish whim of mine that I bring with me to this country the three portraits that are so dear to me, and especially foolish to leave the one unveiled. I had, however, my reason for that, but I did not contemplate that the public was to be admitted to my room, as it had to be during our—during Louis' serious accident. All this, however, is beside the point. I will

begin by telling you that I am not, as you have so shrewdly suspected, this 'Monsieur de Vaubert' that I call myself here. Truly, 'de Vaubert' is a part of my name, but it is not all. In France I am known as the Marquis Philippe de Vaubert de Fenouil. It is a title that is ancient and honorable. It goes back to the time of Louis XIII—yes, and even before that. When our Louis discovered the 'F' on my handkerchief, he was entirely right in his surmises, and I was not very astute to leave it lying about. *N'est-ce-pas?*"

He smiled deprecatingly at his three listeners, with a smile so genuine, so utterly friendly, that they found their dark suspicions melting away, even before his tale was well begun. [Pg 204]

"To go back to the portrait, however. Yes, it is a very beautiful copy of Madame Lebrun's original. It was executed many years ago by an exceedingly clever copyist, and I doubt if many would know it from the original. It is my dearest possession. I will tell you why.

"My little friend, petite Hélène here, by her wonderful ingenuity and perception has deduced the conjecture that the ill-used dauphin, who should have been Louis XVII, did not die in the Temple Tower, as history has recorded it. There have, indeed, been many legends to that effect. But the truest one, the truth, was never known to the world. There are remaining to-day but two families who are in possession of the facts,—my own and that of our friends the Meadows, whose real name, as you perhaps know, is Mettot. All the rest of that wonderful brotherhood which helped to rescue him are dead and gone, and the secret is dead with them.

"In order that you may fully understand, I will now give you a short account of the real story of the dauphin's rescue. As you know through your researches, after Simon the Cobbler was released from the care of the young king, the dauphin was placed in a small room and completely isolated from the world by bolts and bars. Not even his jailers saw him, only hearing him speak through an aperture in the door. It was the most inhuman treatment of a child that the world has known, and it is a thousand wonders that the boy survived. But he did. At the end of an awful six months, when Robespierre himself was sent to the guillotine and Barras came into power, the boy was removed from this horrible incarceration and brought to a large, clean room, where he was taken care of by two or three guardians chosen for their humanity and kindness. [Pg 205]

"It was at this period that a plot was formed by a league of warmhearted, loyal men,—not only royalists, but republicans, too,—to rescue the dauphin from his long imprisonment and send him somewhere, possibly out of the country, to live out the rest of his life in peace. This league was known as 'The Brotherhood of Liberation,' and the world to-day would stand amazed, did it know the members, the many *famous* members, who composed it. It has even been whispered that Barras himself and the great Napoleon Bonaparte—then young, poor, and comparatively unknown—were concerned in this plot. All that, however, is as it may be. [Pg 206]

"But the main thing is this. The brotherhood was accustomed to meet secretly at the house of my grandfather, another Marquis de Fenouil, in Paris, for he was one of the chief leaders and originators of the scheme. Among them was a young fellow scarcely more than five years older than the dauphin, one Jean Mettot, who was deeply and devotedly interested in the plan. It seems that he and his little foster-sister, Yvonne Clouet, had once become acquainted with the dauphin as he played in happier years in his garden of the Tuileries. Through his intervention, the queen, Marie Antoinette herself, had given the young fellow's foster-mother quite a large sum to defray the overdue taxes on her home and thus enable her to keep it for her children. So grateful was this poor washerwoman, Mère Clouet, and her little daughter Yvonne and her foster-son, Jean Mettot, whom she had adopted from the foundling hospital, that they had vowed to help the poor, ill-used dauphin, even to the extent of risking their lives for him. [Pg 207]

"It was Jean Mettot who played one of the most important roles in the plan to smuggle the dauphin out of the Temple Tower. He was employed in that citadel as cook's assistant, and thus was able to give aid right on the spot, as it were. One of the dauphin's three guardians, Gomin, had also become a member of the brotherhood, else the plan could never have been carried out.

"On a given day a sick child who greatly resembled the dauphin was smuggled into the Tower in a basket of clean linen brought by Mère Clouet, laundress for the Temple. This child was so ill that there was no possibility of his recovery. He was speedily substituted for the dauphin, who was carried up to the great unused attic of the Temple. There he was kept for several weeks, unknown to the world and tended only by Jean Mettot. When the sick child at length passed away, the authorities proclaimed that the dauphin was dead and that there was no further need to guard the Tower. It was then that the *real* dauphin was smuggled out of the Temple in a basket of soiled linen and taken to the home of the Clouets, where he remained for several days. He was finally removed by some of the members of the brotherhood in high authority, and was sent to a distant and obscure corner of France to be cared for and brought up, under an assumed name, by humble people. The brotherhood was then disbanded, being first sworn to secrecy by an inviolable oath never to reveal what had been done. [Pg 208]

"The boy, Jean Mettot, later became a soldier in Napoleon's army and rose to the rank of officer. He finally married little Yvonne Clouet, and, as you have doubtless surmised, this John Meadows whom you know is his descendant,—his grandson, in short. The original Jean Mettot, however, and my grandfather, the marquis, kept closely in touch with each other for a time, drawn together by their mutual love and loyalty to the little dauphin. It was Jean Mettot alone who, several years after the escape of the dauphin, was summoned by that young man to Havre, in order that the dauphin might bid farewell to his rescuer. The dauphin was sailing for America, never to return. He intended, he said, to live there incognito, in some obscure capacity, as he had [Pg 209]

no desire ever to return to France and certainly never wished to rule over that nation.

"Jean Mettot later attempted to communicate the news of the dauphin's departure to my grandfather, but found that he had suddenly passed away and that his son had assumed the title. As Mettot was not certain whether the secret had been handed down to the son, he did not reveal his news. Many years later, when he was a middle-aged man, the notion took hold of him to go to America and see if he could discover any trace of the dauphin. He had nothing whatever to assist him, except the assumed name of the dauphin, 'Louis Charles Durant,' and the fact that the ship on which he had sailed had been bound for a New England port. I think it was Boston. With only these two points to aid him, he sailed for America to engage in his almost hopeless task.

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"In all the years he had heard not so much as one syllable from the exile, but even this did not discourage him. He began his search in New England, shrewdly suspecting that 'Louis Durant' might not have traveled very far from his first landing-place. Many weeks and months of absolutely useless and fruitless effort followed. No one in any of the large cities, or even in the smaller towns, seemed to have heard of 'Louis Charles Durant' or of any one corresponding to his description. It was by sheer accident—when Jean Mettot's horse (he made it a practice to travel about on horseback) went lame one stormy night right by your Paradise Green—that he was forced to ask for a night's shelter in one of the only two houses on the Green at that time. It was on the door of the Durant house that he knocked, and none other than the dauphin himself opened it!"

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At this point in the narrative Sue and Carol breathed a long sigh of intense interest, and the Imp came closer and rested her hand on Monsieur's knee.

"Yes, it is marvelous, is it not?" he went on. "There is a proverb which says, 'Truth is stranger than fiction,' and I have always found it so. I leave you to imagine the meeting between those two, for they quickly recognized each other. After a time Mettot heard the whole story from the dauphin. It ran like this:

"He had come to America, landing in New England and wandering about for a time, almost penniless and earning his way as he went by doing odds and ends of labor for the farmers. Singularly enough, he enjoyed it. Does it seem strange to you, *mes enfants*, that a king should enjoy himself in this fashion? Ah, but he no longer wished to be a king! Not for all the riches of the earth would he have gone back to his country and assumed his rightful title. His terrible childhood years in prison had given him a longing only for freedom and independence of thought and action and a desire for the most absolute simplicity of life.

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"To Jean Mettot he confided how at length he had drifted out to this present farmstead, had apprenticed himself to the good farmer who owned it, and how for several years he had served him faithfully and well for a sum that was a mere pittance, but on which he could live happily. Two years later the farmer's daughter, who had married some time before, came home to her father's house a widow. After a time she and the dauphin became mutually attracted to each other and married. Six months after their marriage the farmer died, leaving his farm to his daughter and her husband, the unknown dauphin. At the time of Jean Mettot's visit they had a fine little son, then ten or twelve years old, and were as happy and contented as could well be imagined.

"Mettot made them quite an extended visit, but never did the dauphin reveal to his wife that he had ever known Mettot before, or give the least hint of his own identity. He said that he preferred these things to remain secrets forever, buried in the past. He told Mettot that he desired his descendants to remain in complete ignorance of his past and of their own origin. Should a crisis ever arise (now unforeseen by him), when it would be wise for any of his descendants to know their forefather's history, he had prepared for such an emergency a document which he had securely hidden away. He acquainted Jean with its hiding-place and gave him permission to transmit the secret to his own descendants. On no account, however, was it to be communicated to the dauphin's descendants, unless the aforementioned crisis should arise.

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"Jean Mettot went back to France, and never again saw the son of Louis XVI. But he continued to keep in touch with 'Louis Charles Durant' of America, and to his own son he communicated the strange secret. And his son, in turn, communicated it to a son of his own, the present Jean Meadows whom you know. The dauphin died when he was scarcely more than middle-aged, for his constitution was never robust after the cruel hardships of his childhood. The son whom he left lived to a ripe old age on the same farm, and left an heir in his place to continue the line. This child, the father of our own Louis, becoming discontented, as he reached manhood, with the life on a simple New England farm, leased the property, as you probably know, and went out West to make his fortune. He married a young western girl on the Canadian frontier, and both were mortally injured in a terrible accident on one of the Great Lakes' steamers. He had time, however, before he died, to send word to France, to this present Jean Mettot, leaving their baby son in his care. The two families had always kept in touch, though none of the present generation had seen each other.

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"I am sure you must be wondering during all this recital where *I* come into the story. It is about time for me to make my entrance. That is what I am about to disclose. Mettot and his daughter Yvonne, on hearing the sad news, forsook all and came to America to take possession of the baby, which was still being cared for at the hospital where its parents had died. The Mettot family had not prospered with the years, the present Jean's father having unfortunately lost the modest fortune that the original Jean had amassed. They were living in a humble way in a small French

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village, and had practically sacrificed everything to come over to America on what they considered an almost sacred charge.

"What, then, was to be done? Jean Mettot cast about in his mind for some time, considering the matter, but at length came to the conclusion that the crisis, spoken of by the original dauphin, had now arrived and that the time was come to disclose the secret to some one. But to whom? That was the great question. Suddenly he bethought himself of me, the present Marquis de Fenouil. He had not the slightest idea whether the secret of the dauphin's escape had been transmitted in our family, but, taking the risk, he wrote me a full account of the whole proceeding, throwing the present little orphan, so to speak, on my mercy.

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"And now at last I enter. I cannot, indeed, give you the slightest idea what this wonderful news meant to me. The secret *had* been transmitted,—aye, it had become a sacred tradition in our family! Many long and fruitless searches had we made,—I, my father, and my grandfather before us,—to trace, if possible, the fate of that lost dauphin. Not one of us but would have sacrificed his all to have made sure of the after-history of our adored little monarch. The portrait that you have seen, and those of Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI, which I have always kept veiled, have been our most cherished family possessions, especially that of the dauphin. We worshipped the memory of that heroic little uncrowned monarch.

"Can you then understand what it meant to me to find myself at last on the track of a true descendant of the dauphin? For a time I could scarcely credit it. But I knew from my grandfather the part played by the original Jean Mettot, and I could see no reason to doubt that this tale of his descendant was genuine. My first impulse was to send for them at once, and to bring the child up as my own son, till he should be of suitable age to disclose the secret to him. But there were a number of strong objections to that course. I need not mention them all. One is sufficient. For the past twenty years I have not been strong. My health is only sustained by constant treatment from physicians, and I spend three quarters of my time at sanitariums and health resorts. I am seldom, if ever, in residence at my French estate. There were a number of other legal reasons why it was not wise for me to appear to adopt a child, presumably as my heir, which you would scarcely understand, so I will not recount them. Suffice it to say that I decided on a course which may seem strange to you, but which appealed to me as wisest at the time.

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"The child was a mere baby, not yet a year old. I concluded that for the present it would be best to leave him in America, the land that his kingly ancestor had chosen to adopt. In Jean Mettot's name I leased the same Durant farmhouse that belonged to his father and that one day would be his own, sent the Mettots there with their infant charge, and instructed them to bring up the boy in ignorance of his real ancestry, until such time as I should deem it best to come over to America and take charge of his affairs. They have worthily fulfilled that charge, having kept me constantly informed of his growth and progress.

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"In truth, I never supposed the interval would be so long before I should find it possible to come here. One matter after another,—my health chiefly,—has delayed me from year to year, though I have planned the trip more times than I care to count. During this past year, however, the news sent by our friends the Mettots proved somewhat disturbing to me. In order to explain this, I must now disclose to you my plans for 'Louis Charles Durant.' They are, as you will see, far from any schemes to restore the Bourbon monarchy in France. That would be in direct opposition to the wishes of the dead dauphin. No, I wished him to learn of his wonderful ancestry secretly, and only as something to be proud of. I wished him to grow up as my own son, and, when the time was ripe, I would legally adopt him. At first there were several obstacles in the way, but these have lately been removed. In my own heart, however, he would never be my son, but the *king* who should rightfully have ruled over me. I wished him to study statecraft and become a great political light—a French statesman—and perhaps some day make a great name in the world. He should be a king of men in deed and act, if he could not be in name and right. These were my ambitions for him. I felt that he *must* fall in with them."

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The three listeners stirred uneasily, and the catbird in the tree above them uttered its odd, mournful cry. Monsieur paused a few seconds to gaze out over the blue heat-haze on the river. Then he went on:

"It was, therefore, disturbing tidings that I began to receive from Jean Mettot. At first his reports had been satisfactory in every respect. The boy was upright, manly, and entirely lovable in nature. Up to his tenth or twelfth year he had developed no traits that would seem in opposition to my plans for him. But of late my news of him had been very unwelcome to me. To begin with, he openly avowed that he cared nothing for France or French history and traditions. He was American to the core, and he actually boasted of it. This was not surprising, however, considering the fact that he had been born and brought up in this land. I promised myself that this difficulty would be easily overcome later. But there was something that troubled me more.

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"The Mettots began to report that the boy was developing a strongly *mechanical* turn of mind, that he was constantly working with tools and contriving unique devices of his own for various mechanical purposes,—in short, that he was following directly in the footsteps of the unfortunate Louis XVI. It has always been my contention that if that monarch had devoted himself more to the affairs of his kingdom and less to pattering about with tools and locks, he never would have lost his throne. It was an ominous sign to me. But even then I hoped that it might prove merely a childish whim and fade away into other interests as the years progressed. It did not, as you very well know. I now feel it to be a family inheritance, impossible to overcome. I have resigned myself to it, only praying that in time other matters more important may overgrow and stifle the

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tendency.

"But I also realized that the day could no longer be delayed when I must make the trip across the ocean and see with my own eyes the great-grandson of our long-lost dauphin. Perhaps you think it strange that I did not send for him to be brought to me. But I had my reasons for that, also. I wished to see the boy in his natural environment. I wished him to know nothing of me. I wished to study him and learn his character, watch him at his work and play, observe him with his friends, and discover for myself his ambitions and tendencies. How could I know that I would really care for him *personally*, or he for me, unless I followed this course? I loved him already for his *ancestry*, but I wished to love him, if possible, for *himself*. And as I am an old, childless, lonely man, I wished him to love me for *myself*. Only by coming here incognito, I deemed, could this be accomplished.

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"Well, *mes enfants*, I came. The history of my stay here you are fairly well acquainted with. At first, I confess, I was bitterly disappointed. The boy was a fine, upstanding, splendid specimen of American boyhood, but he was thoroughly *American*. He resembled in no way that I could see, facially at least, the portrait that I had brought with me. That, of course, was entirely natural; yet I was disappointed. At times I thought I could discern a fleeting resemblance, but it was always fleeting. Only at the time when he was so ill did I seem to see in him a resemblance to the little dauphin after he had been some time in prison."

At this point the three girls glanced at each other, and, noticing the exchanged look, Monsieur went on:

"Yes, that is what I meant by the 'Temple look,' which remark you say Louis overheard. But to proceed. The worst disappointment, however, was that terrible mechanical trait, a trait I found it impossible to overcome and to which I have now resigned myself. We had our quarrels and disputes over that subject, as you know, but at last I felt myself unable to cope with so strong a passion. I pass on to other things.

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"I need scarcely tell you that during these passing months I have come to care deeply and tenderly for this boy. He may be different, entirely different from my ideal of him, but I have come to recognize his fine, genuine manliness, the entire loveliness of his character. His attitude toward me has never deviated from the courteous and thoughtful and attentive, except in the one instance of his boat, and I myself was at fault there! I feel that he is even developing a sort of fondness for me with the passing of time. When you realize that he knows nothing whatever of my real identity or my object in coming here (I think he rather suspects both at times), this is all the more admirable. As for my feeling for him, I *adore* him, *mesdemoiselles*,—I can say no more. He is the worthy descendant of a king, even though he be not *French* in anything but ancestry.

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"You can easily see, then, what it meant to me when he made that astonishing announcement a few weeks ago. Could anything be more unutterably terrible for me to hear than that this most dangerous of all careers should be the chosen one of my adopted son-to-be? It is incredible to me, even yet. I am praying daily that the whim shall pass from him. In the first shock of it I thought that the time had come for me to disclose the truth to him, whether I was ready to do so or not. Yet on second thought I again hesitated. There is one link in the chain that is still missing. It is for that I am waiting, for I do not wish him to be made acquainted with the secret till I can lay the complete evidence before him.

"You remember, perhaps, that I spoke of a document, prepared by the dauphin and hidden by him in some spot, the secret of which he disclosed only to the original Jean Mettot. It was his wish that the document be found and delivered to his descendants, should a crisis ever arise when it would be deemed necessary to disclose the secret to them. That document, I am sorry to say, we have as yet been unable to discover. The original Mettot wrote the directions for finding the hiding-place in a sealed letter and left it with his son, who, in turn, left it in care of our John Meadows. Unfortunately, when this John Meadows and his daughter came to America they failed to bring the letter with them, because they supposed that they would return at once to France. More unfortunately still, since they have been here their little home was burned to the ground, and the letter, of course, disappeared in the conflagration. Meadows himself never read the letter, and he has only a vague remembrance that his grandfather once said in his hearing, when he was only a small child, that he believed the hiding-place to be somewhere near a chimney. That is absolutely the only clue we have had to work on.

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"I need not tell you that the search for that document has been unceasing since I first arrived, and even before that. Every nook and cranny, from attic to cellar, has been ransacked without the slightest result. Unless the house itself is torn down, I see no possible hope of finding it. However, I do not yet utterly despair; and when the document does come to light, I will make the great disclosure to Louis and formulate my future plans. Circumstances *may* be such, however, that I shall have to put him in possession of the secret before the document is found. I should be sorry for that, as I wish him to feel that our evidence concerning this strange story is complete.

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"And now, my friends, you know it all. I have hidden nothing from you. I have shown you my inmost heart. I have only one request—that you still keep this thing a secret from every one, especially from Louis."

He stopped, and there was silence. The catbird above them had flown away. The river was unruffled by the slightest breath. The water had ceased its *lap-lap*. The afternoon stillness was

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complete. Carol and Sue sat motionless in their corner, their hands clasped, their eyes wide and intent.

Suddenly the Imp flung herself to the ground and buried her face on the old French gentleman's knees, a passion of choking sobs shaking her little body. He laid his hand on her head and murmured in a startled voice:

"Little one, little one! What is it that troubles you?"

"O Monsieur, Monsieur!" she gasped. "What a little *beast* I've been! Can you ever forgive me? *How* I have misjudged you!"

CHAPTER XVI

AUGUST FOURTH, 1914

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July 27, 1914. It is ten days since that strange afternoon down at the old boat-house on the river. I have been living in a kind of dream ever since. I cannot somehow believe that I'm just plain, ordinary Susan Birdsey, living on out-of-the-way little Paradise Green, to whom nothing unusual ever has or ever will happen. Paradise Green is no longer the prosaic place it was. It is the secret spot chosen by history as the home of one of her most romantic characters. Who would ever have thought it? And I, Susan Birdsey, am one of the three humble persons Fate has chosen to be the sharer of this marvelous secret.

I cannot help thinking of what Miss Cullingford said when she suggested that we keep a journal,—that some journals had been interesting and valuable additions to history. That, at least, is what I never supposed mine could possibly be. And yet, if she could only see it *now!* But she never will, of course, nor any one else, for I have promised Monsieur that I will never, without his permission, reveal a single word of what he has told us. This is not, he says, because it would harm any one, or make the slightest change in the world's affairs, but because of the poor "lost dauphin's" wish.

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We three have talked of it incessantly,—Carol, the Imp, and I. Somehow the wonder of it never grows any less. That such a thing *could* happen here, here on little Paradise Green! And yet the Imp says it is no new thing in history for an exiled king to hide himself away in a strange country amid the humblest surroundings. Where *does* she get all these historical facts, anyway? Even Carol, who is fond of history and reads a lot of it, doesn't know half as much about things as the Imp does. I am changing my opinion of the Imp very much lately. I used to think she was such a scatter-brained, harum-scarum child, without a serious thought in her head. But I guess we really didn't *know* her then, and misjudged her a lot.

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But it's Louis, our Louis, who seems to us the strangest, the most impossible thing to believe. Before we heard Monsieur's story we imagined this about him, but half the time we told ourselves it wasn't, it *couldn't* be true. We *must* be on the wrong track, we said. Now we know that it is all true, and Louis can never be "our Louis," the friend we've always known, any more. How could he be? To begin with, he's going to be the adopted son of the Marquis de Fenouil (I *hope* that's the way to spell it!), a great nobleman of France, and go away to France and inherit a title, and probably we'll never see him again as long as we live. In addition, as if that weren't enough, he's not the plain American boy we always thought him, but the great-great-grandson of a king of France. And *we* know this, even if the rest of the world does not, and can never, never feel on the same footing with him again. Not that that will make any difference, I suppose, if he's to go away from here for good. But it's like losing your brother,—like losing Dave, for instance,—only Dave never has been, especially of late years, as friendly and near to us as Louis has been.

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We have seen almost nothing of Louis since that day with Monsieur. He has been to Bridgeton every day, spending the time, I'm perfectly certain, with that Page Calvin and his miserable aéroplane. It makes me perfectly sick to think of it, especially since Monsieur has told us everything. By the way, I can't get out of the habit of calling him "Monsieur," but it's just as well, I suppose, because we're not supposed to know he's anything else. Of course Louis doesn't realize what all this means to the old gentleman, but if he only knew that it was fairly breaking his heart, I do believe he'd be willing to give up the dangerous scheme and take to something else. I feel sure Monsieur suspects why he's away at Bridgeton, but he never says a word to us,—just suffers in silence.

The Imp sees Monsieur and talks to him very often as he sits on his favorite bench on the Green. He sits there a great deal, on that bench under the big elm, and reads his paper and watches us play tennis. Sometimes we all go over and talk to him, but he never says a word about what he told us that day on the river,—not, at least, when we're all together with him. He does speak of it sometimes to the Imp when they're alone. She says that to-day he told her that the situation in Europe is very grave. He is certain that Austria is about to declare war on Serbia, and that if she does, the whole of Europe will be involved. There will be the most awful conflict the world has ever known, if this happens.

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The Imp asked him if France was likely to go into it, too, and he said he did not see how this could be avoided; France would always do what was right. But here's the worst. He says that if France declares war, he will have to return immediately, since important political matters will

demand it, and he intends to tell Louis the whole truth and take him back with him. That piece of news seems perfectly ghastly to us, and yet I honestly don't see how Monsieur can do anything else.

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I felt to-day, after hearing this from the Imp, that I simply must understand this European situation for myself, so I got the daily paper and read up everything I could find about it. But I have to confess that I was not much wiser after I had read it than I was before. So I went to the Imp and asked her if she could explain the thing. She said:

"Why, it's this way. Monsieur has told me all about it. Austria considers that she's got to make Serbia get down on her knees and beg pardon, because an Austrian archduke was killed there. So Austria's sent Serbia a note proposing all sorts of concessions that Serbia will never stand for in the world. The Serbians answered that note yesterday, and were willing to make whatever reparation they could about the archduke, but they won't hear of some of the other things. Austria wants the 'whole hog,' or nothing, so of course she'll take this opportunity to declare war. Russia has always sort of sympathized with the Serbians, so if they get into trouble, she's going to give them a hand. And Monsieur says she's already mobilizing her troops. Germany is in a compact always to help Austria out, so that's where *she* comes in. Monsieur says Germany's been waiting forty years for this opportunity to get gay and let loose on Europe, so she isn't going to let such a lovely chance as this pass." (These are the Imp's words, not Monsieur's, I feel certain!) "And France has a compact to be an ally of Russia, and England's in that, too, so you can easily see what a beautiful parrot-and-monkey time it's going to be!"

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The situation is a little clearer to me now, I'll admit, but the whole thing makes me terribly depressed. I'm glad I don't see much of Louis now. I simply cannot be with him and act naturally, as if nothing were out of the ordinary. I cannot face him and think who he really is, and keep the wonder and pain and bewilderment of it out of my expression. So perhaps it's a good thing he's away so much.

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August 1, 1914. Austria declared war on Serbia a few days ago. The Imp, in a terrible state of excitement, rushed up to my room with the paper that morning to announce the news. But we've had worse since, and it's all turning out as Monsieur said it would. We—that is, the Imp, Carol, and I—were all going into Bridgeton to the circus to-day, but we've given it up. None of us seemed to have the heart for that kind of a lark in the face of what is going on and what it means for Louis. He still unsuspectingly goes off to see Page Calvin every day, and never gives the European situation a thought, I'm certain. Of course he can't for a moment imagine that it will have any bearing on *his* affairs.

The Imp told us to-day that Miss Yvonne is not a bit well. She's had a nervous breakdown of some kind. Monsieur thinks it's because of this awful state of affairs in Europe, and also because they can't seem to find the least trace of those papers. That has been preying on her mind for a long time. She thinks it's her fault and her father's that they didn't bring that letter with them from France. It really wasn't, because they came away in such a hurry, without knowing much about the actual circumstances. Nevertheless, she is continually worrying about it.

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We told Mother she was ill, and Mother and the Imp went over to see her yesterday. They took her some grape conserve and some raised biscuits we'd just baked, and they said she seemed awfully grateful for the attention. The Imp said she seemed more *human* than she ever had before, and more communicative, too,—not about any of their secret affairs, of course, but on general topics. She says her eyes bother her a lot, so the Imp offered to come over every day and read the paper to her, and she actually said she'd like it.

Louis's birthday comes in a few days—on August fourth—and we're planning a little surprise-party for him. We're going over there early in the morning,—Dave, Carol, the Imp, and I,—and just casually ask him to walk across the fields to the old boat-house with us. When we get there we're going to suggest to him that he take us out in the launch for a while. And when we get back we're going to produce a big spread that we'll have previously hidden in the boat-house, and have a regular feast on the platform. In the middle of it all we're going to present Louis with a gold watch-fob that we all chipped in for, and Monsieur is going to give him the most beautiful watch. Monsieur, of course, is to be a member of this party. The Imp asked him, and he seemed delighted with the idea. Under ordinary circumstances, I would consider it the greatest lark, but as things are, it seems as if I could hardly endure it—to sit there all day and look at Louis and think what he's soon going to learn from Monsieur.

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August 4, 1914. The worst has happened, the *very* worst! It makes me sick beyond words to read what I last wrote here—about having a surprise-party, a *picnic*! It was a surprise-party right enough, but the surprise was very much on our side, after all. We all started over for Louis's this morning, just as we'd planned. We'd been up at six o'clock, carrying the "feed" (as the Imp calls it) down to the boat-house, and everything was quite ready. At the last minute Dave couldn't go over with us, because Father had some urgent errand he wanted him to attend to in Bridgeton, but he promised to join us later.

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I confess that we weren't any of us as hilarious over this party as we'd ordinarily be, for we all feel a lot depressed about this thing. But we hadn't a suspicion of what was ahead of us.

We'd hoped to see Monsieur or Louis around outside, but no one was anywhere in sight. So we knocked at the front door, and Louis came and opened it.

In all my life I'll never forget how that poor fellow looked. He was *stricken*! I can't think of any other word that expresses it so well. He didn't seem surprised to see us, but instead of inviting us inside, said:

"Come out on the Green and sit on our old bench for a few minutes, will you? I've something to tell you." [Pg 239]

We followed him in dead silence, and we felt that something awful, must have happened.

"Have you seen the morning papers?" Louis asked, when we were seated.

"No," I said. "What's the matter?"

"*France has declared war!*" he answered.

Somehow he didn't need to say another word. We knew the whole thing. It had come at last. There wasn't one of us who could think of a word to say, not even the Imp, though she's usually quick enough with a reply. But this time she seemed struck dumb.

After we'd all sat there for what seemed like six months, Louis said:

"I've heard the whole story from Mon— I mean from the marquis. I know that you know it, too. He told me so. I understand that he didn't intend to tell me to-day,—that you were going to give me a surprise-party for my birthday. Thank you, girls, all the same. I—I—"

He couldn't say any more just then, but sat staring away at nothing. [Pg 240]

"It was the news in the paper that changed it all," he went on at last. "Germany has invaded French territory and violated the neutrality of Belgium, so of course the war is inevitable. The marquis is much excited and has to go back at once to offer his estates and his assistance to the government. I shall go with him."

He said all this in the strangest way, in a sort of dull, monotonous voice, as if he'd just learned it by heart and hadn't the slightest interest in it. It was the Imp who spoke first.

"Louis," she said, very quietly, "were you sorry to hear about—about that other matter?"

He didn't answer for a minute, and just sat looking off into space again. Finally he said, in the same monotonous voice:

"It's *killing* me!"

"But, Louis," I found the courage to say, "it's really a wonderful thing. You ought to be proud of it."

"Proud of *what?*" he demanded fiercely. [Pg 241]

"Of—of being the descendant of a French king," I said.

"I've been proud as Lucifer all my life to be an *American*," he answered. "What are French kings to me? And I *am* an American, too! Not a thing he's said can make me anything else. I don't care if my ancestor did come here from France. Every American's ancestors came from somewhere else, if you go back far enough. That doesn't alter things."

"Yes, that is perfectly true. You are just as much an American as ever," I admitted, thinking of that side of it for the first time. "But if that's so, I can't see what you're so down-hearted about."

"What do you think it means to me to give up all my plans and ambitions in life and go over to France and become a French nobleman by adoption; to devote myself to every interest but the one I'm wrapped up in and fitted for during all the rest of my days?"

"But, Louis," began the Imp, "if you feel so—strongly about it, why do you have to do it? Couldn't you persuade Monsieur to let you do something else? He's simply devoted to you. Surely he'd be willing to meet *your* wishes, somehow." [Pg 242]

"You don't understand," answered Louis. "Can't you see that I'm under an absolute *obligation* to meet his wishes? I'd be an ungrateful brute, if I did anything else. You must realize what his ancestor did for mine. I wouldn't be in existence to-day, if it hadn't been for what the original marquis did to help the—the dauphin to escape. Why, I'm also under a tremendous obligation to the Mettots for the same reason. And then, there's something else you don't know about that makes it even worse. I haven't a cent in this world, nor ever have had, that hasn't been supplied by Mon—by the marquis."

"You had this farm, didn't you?" I interrupted, for Louis has always told us that this farm was his, or at least would be his when he came of age. That was all the Mettots had ever told him about his affairs.

"Oh, yes; so I thought!" he answered bitterly. "But of course I didn't know that my father had died deeply in debt, leaving this place mortgaged to the hilt. I would never have owned a penny of it if the marquis hadn't stepped in and redeemed it, paying every cent of the expenses of my bringing up. Why, the very pocket-money I've had was his, and I always supposed it was the proceeds from [Pg 243]

the sales of our garden-truck. Oh, I'm tied hand and foot by the deepest of obligations! There's nothing else to do. I'm helpless."

We all were silent for a long time after that. I, for my part, couldn't think of one thing more to say. Louis was resigned and quiet and utterly hopeless. And to try and comfort him and put the best side on things was a perfect farce. None of us attempted it.

"When do you go?" I asked, presently.

"In a week or so," he said. "As soon as things can be arranged. Monsieur—I mean the marquis—has asked me to beg that we be excused from the surprise-party, in view of what has happened. I don't know what he means by that, but probably you do. He also wished me to explain to you that you are at liberty to tell any one you wish that I am to go to France to become his adopted son, but that the other secret you will always kindly keep to yourselves."

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"Louis," said the Imp, "we were going to have a surprise-party for you at the boat-house to-day because it was your birthday, but I guess the surprise is on us. Anyhow, here's a little trifle we wanted to give you, but we hadn't intended to present it in *this* way. You'll understand, though."

She handed Louis the watch-fob, and he took it in a sort of dazed, unseeing way. But he thanked us a lot, adding that Monsieur had given him the watch after they had had their interview.

"I'll never forget you," he said, "and you needn't think because I have to go to France that I'm not going to see you again, either. I'm coming back here as often as I can manage it, and I'll be the same old Louis. You'll see!" This thought seemed to give him the only comfort he had.

"But what about the Meadows?" asked Carol.

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"Oh, they're going, too, of course," Louis answered. "Their mission here is over now. The marquis is going to close the house, but he's granted, as a concession to me, that he'll keep it, and not sell it or even rent it to any one else. There I can come back to it once in a while, and live in the old way for a time. He's an awfully good sort, I will say, and is only doing this because he sees I'm all broken up over things. Well, I must go back to help him send off despatches and pack. It's a hateful job. Come over and see Aunt Yvonne. She's upset over this, and instead of feeling joyful, as I should suppose she would, is quite miserable over something. I can't understand what it is, though."

Louis went off directly across the Green. It was heartbreaking to watch him.

But the Imp says that one thing is certain. They evidently haven't told Louis about those papers that can't be found.

CHAPTER XVII

THE IMP MAKES A LAST DISCOVERY

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A burning August sun shone down pitilessly on the parched brown grass and dusty roads about Paradise Green. The great elms stood absolutely motionless in the stifling air. Into this merciless atmosphere, quite early in the morning of August 12, emerged three girls, bound for the home of Louis Durant.

"Isn't it awful!" moaned Carol, perspiration streaming down her face, as they plodded on in the blazing sun. "This terrific heat has lasted a week, and there isn't a sign of let-up yet!"

"And to think that poor Miss Yvonne has to tear up the house and pack at such a time as this!" echoed Sue. "She isn't a bit well, either. I'm awfully glad she's letting us help her. I never supposed she would, but she must be kind of desperate, with their servant gone. She's fine to have let her go, though, for the servant said her son had to join the army, and she might never see him again, if she didn't leave for France at once."

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"Yes, it is great of Miss Yvonne to struggle through this alone," put in the Imp, "but I still don't see why Monsieur didn't want her to get help from the village, except that he didn't wish strangers to pry around and ask questions at this time, I suppose."

They reached the gate and turned into the yard. Monsieur was sitting under a tree, reading a paper and striving to imagine that he was as cool as possible in its shade. Louis was in the house, helping Miss Yvonne.

"Come in, girls!" he called through an open window. "We are precious glad to see you. Can you help us pack these books?"

The tone strove to be his usual, careless, care-free one, but it was patently anything but that. Not one of the girls but realized the effort he was making.

They entered the room, donned dust-caps and aprons that they had brought with them, and entered on the work with assumed zest. They were in Miss Yvonne's room on the ground floor, and the dismantling process had begun to be complete. The bed was taken down, the bookshelves emptied and their contents piled on the floor, and the furniture was shrouded in sacking. Little remained to be packed, except the contents of a big closet built into one wall. Miss Yvonne was

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elsewhere, so the young folks had the room to themselves.

"Isn't the weather awful!" groaned Carol, for the second time in ten minutes.

"The news in the paper is worse!" commented Louis.

"Oh, what is it?" chorused the girls. "None of us have had time to read the paper to-day."

"The Germans are demolishing Belgium. They've entered France at several points and are bound straight for Calais and Paris. It seems as if nothing could stop them. They're walking away with everything. They're hideously prepared for this, and not one of the other nations is. It makes my blood boil! Oh, if I could only *do* something, instead of just going over to France and watching the show! But I suppose Monsieur wouldn't hear of it."

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"Louis, you mustn't get into this fight. You're too young!" exclaimed Sue.

"Yes, that's what he says," muttered Louis, viciously scrubbing a book with a dust-cloth. "But I'm seventeen; and I don't agree with him. I've lost all interest in life, anyhow. Why shouldn't I go in and smash a few of the enemy's heads?"

The three girls shuddered, but did not answer.

"There!" cried the Imp, glad to change the subject. "I've finished these books. Now what else is there to do here, Louis?"

"Aunt Yvonne said that closet was to be emptied and all the things piled on the floor."

The Imp straightway dived into the closet, calling back:

"I'll hand the things out, and you all put them where they are to go."

She began hurling out packages and bundles in an endless stream, for it seemed as if the closet had been used for years as a storage-place, and that the contents had seldom been moved.

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"My, but there are a lot of them!" coughed the Imp, choking with dust.

"Yes, Aunt Yvonne said she was rather ashamed of this closet," said Louis. "She's used it as a catch-all for years, and most of these bundles are things she never has any use for, yet won't under any circumstances give or throw away."

"We have the same kind of a closet at home," remarked Carol. "Mother says she doesn't know how she'd get along without it,—I mean the kind of place where you stow things away that you hardly expect to touch again."

"So have we," echoed Sue.

They worked for a time in silence. At last the Imp, dusty and cobwebby, tossed out a final bundle, with the remark:

"That's the last, I guess, except some scraps of wrapping-paper and so on. I'll just look among these to see that there's nothing more."

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They heard her grubbing about for a moment or two, and then came a stifled exclamation.

"What's the matter?" cried every one simultaneously.

"Somebody bring a candle!" commanded the Imp. "There's something queer here!"

Louis rushed away to get one, and was back in a jiffy.

"Here it is," he said, handing it in to the Imp. While she lit it the three crowded into the doorway to see whatever was to be revealed.

"It's this hole," explained the Imp, holding the candle to a space about six inches in diameter, near the base of the wall. "It was back of a pile of bundles, and I guess it must have been made by mice or rats, for the gnawed bits are lying all around. It must be rather recent, too, for it looks so. My hand slipped into it a moment ago, and the boarding came loose as I was trying to get it out. I think it must be because it was so old and rotten. Anyhow, it pulled away, and I just caught a glimpse of something behind it that seemed strange."

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Louis crowded into the closet at this, and gave the board a wrench. It fell away, disclosing a sight that made the four stare with surprise.

"Why, it's a *fireplace*!" cried the Imp, poking her head in as Louis pulled away another board. "A great, immense fireplace, even bigger than the one in your living-room."

It was nothing less. Each girl took a turn at poking her head into the open space, and all were amazed at the breadth of the great chimney-place, which still contained the andirons and curious old hooks and cranes of bygone years.

"I must tell the others!" cried Louis. "I'm sure they'll be interested in this." And he rushed away to inform them.

While he was gone, the Imp suddenly emerged from the closet in great excitement.

"I have an idea," she whispered to the others. "I may be crazy, but I believe we're on the track of

the hiding-place of those papers. Don't you remember what Monsieur said about a *chimney*?"

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The two girls looked startled. Before they could discuss the matter, however, back came Louis with Monsieur and the Meadows couple behind him.

"It's perfectly clear to me," Louis was explaining to them, "that at some time or other, pretty far back, some one had the great 'long kitchen' in this house made into two rooms, and the original walls and fireplace were entirely boarded-up and concealed. I always thought it rather strange that this house, which is exactly the same build and design as the old Caswell place, for instance, or a dozen others around here, should be entirely without that immense 'long kitchen,' as they call it, that all the rest have. You know it's the original kitchen of the former New Englanders. They used it as kitchen and dining-room and everything. The fireplace is the biggest in the house, for often they would have an ox drag into the room a great log that would entirely fill the chimney-place. Somebody has evidently had that room made into two smaller ones, with no fireplace at all. Queer thing to do. I wonder why they did it?"

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In his interest in this explanation, Louis had not appeared to notice the evident excitement of Monsieur and old John Meadows and Miss Yvonne. Now he was thunderstruck when Monsieur asked him if it was possible to pull down the boarding around the fireplace.

"Why, of course," exclaimed Louis, much astonished. "I have some tools I could use, and it wouldn't take much strength, but what's the use of demolishing it now? It will make an awful mess, and there probably isn't much beyond what we've already seen, anyhow. It would be a good thing, perhaps, to have this fine old room restored while we're away, but I don't see any use in beginning it now."

The marquis, trembling so that he was forced to support himself by leaning on a packing-case, spoke with more decision than his hearers had ever heard before:

"Tear down the woodwork, Louis. It is my wish. There may be an excellent reason." Without further protest, Louis went to work.

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The noontide sun grew hotter and hotter, but the company in that curiously littered room did not notice it. Not a word was spoken as they watched Louis, but a breathless suspense gripped them all,—all, that is, except Louis. To him it was only a useless whim of Monsieur's that he was obeying, and he was secretly rather irritated. He found, during the course of his labor, that the chimney-place ran clear behind the walls into the next room, which was that of old Mr. Meadows, but even this did not daunt the marquis.

"Tear down the wall between, if you can. Knock it down, break it down, somehow. I do not care, so long as we free the chimney!"

Before Louis was finished, the place looked as if it had suddenly been subjected to an air-raid and earthquake combined, but no one cared. By that time even Louis had begun to feel a vague suspicion that they were on the track of something. When the fireplace at last stood free amid the surrounding débris, he stepped aside, remarking:

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"There! That's about all I can do, I think. That was a clever piece of work—the way this other room has been entirely concealed. Not one of us has ever suspected that it was here, though I suppose if we'd been any sort of architects, we might have done so."

"Oh, here are the old Dutch ovens!" cried the Imp, rushing forward to examine the curious little iron doorways in the sides of the chimney-place. "I saw the same thing in the Caswell house. They used to bake bread in those, when the chimney became good and hot."

She pulled open one of them and thrust in her hand.

"Gracious! There's something in here!" she almost shouted, hauling out a small iron box covered with the rust and dust and cobwebs of what must have been a century in hiding.

"Give it to me! Give it to me!" cried old John Meadows, striding forward and fairly snatching it from her grasp. "It is the one, the very one my grandfather spoke of, and in the *chimney*, just as I have always thought he said."

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With tears of excitement in his eyes, he took the box and placed it in the hands of the marquis. Miss Yvonne, sobbing quietly in the intensity of her relief, sat down on a small packing-case and hid her face in her hands. The three girls, understanding something of this strange discovery, stood by, breathless in their excitement and interest. Only Louis, to whom the whole proceeding was a dark mystery, stared at them all, open-mouthed and questioning.

Monsieur took the box and placed it in Louis's hands.

"Can you open it for us?" he asked. "I suppose we might find the key, if we hunted long enough, but I cannot wait for that. Open it without a key, if that is possible."

"I suppose I could get it open with an ax," remarked Louis, examining the box carefully, "or even with a hammer and chisel, if you're not afraid that the contents may be hurt."

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"It will not harm it, I am sure," replied Monsieur, and Louis brought the necessary tools.

It took a long while to break the lock, for the workmanship was stout and strong. But at last this was accomplished, and Louis handed the box to Monsieur for further investigation. They all

pressed around him eagerly, as he opened the lid. It contained nothing but a paper, folded, tied, and sealed—a paper so faded, stained, and tender that they scarcely dared touch it, lest it fall apart. Monsieur took it out with extreme care, broke the seal, and handed the unread document to Louis.

"Read it," he said. "It concerns you, and you alone. It is your right to have the first reading of it. It is a sacred message, transmitted to you through the years by your great-grandfather, the lost dauphin."

"Shall I read it aloud?" inquired Louis, in a voice of hushed awe.

"If it pleases you to do so," replied the marquis.

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Louis began to read aloud, stopping often to decipher a word

Louis cleared his throat nervously, and began to read aloud in French, stopping often to decipher a word that was blurred by the stains of time. As the two girls, Carol and Sue, could understand little or nothing of what he read, they could only watch curiously the expression on the faces of the other auditors. But before Louis had read far, that expression became singularly different on each of those five eager countenances. Miss Yvonne leaned forward from her packing-box, her eyes startled and unbelieving. Old John Meadows ruffled his white hair distractedly with his hands and muttered, "What? what?" in English, and other expressions in French. The Imp's big blue eyes fairly danced with amazement, and pleased amazement, at that. Monsieur stood listening, his hands clenched, his head thrust forward, his eagle-like gaze intent, unbelieving, stricken. Only Louis read on stolidly, as if the content had not yet registered itself on his mind.

Suddenly he threw down the paper and shouted, "Hurrah! hurrah!" and then more solemnly, "Oh, thank God! I'm so glad."

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"What is it? what is it?" cried Sue and Carol, simultaneously. "Please tell us! We haven't understood a word of it."

"You poor things!" he exclaimed gaily. "Listen! I'll translate it for you. It's very short." And he went on to translate from the ancient paper as follows:

I who write this am the Dauphin of France, who should have been Louis XVII. I escaped from the Temple Tower in my tenth year by means which I shall not attempt to explain here. All that is known to others who could make it public to the world if I so wished. I do not, however, wish it. My only desire is to remain forever hidden. Should there, however, arise at any future time a cause or reason for making descendants of mine aware of the truth of their real ancestry, I wish to make this statement. *I have no descendants.* The boy whom Jean Mettot supposes to be my son is no flesh-and-blood heir of mine. The boy is the son of my wife by her former husband. He was a young child, less than two years old, when I married her, and so fond did I become of him that I felt no difference and wished to feel no more difference than if he were truly my own. But no Bourbon blood runs in his veins, praise God, and heirs of his may never inherit the throne of France. I am ill and weak, when writing this, and I feel that death is not

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far away. Only Jean Mettot knows the hiding-place I have designed for this document. I pray God there may never be need to disclose it.

LOUIS CHARLES.

"But—but," stammered Sue, when Louis had finished, "what does this mean?"

"It means," cried Louis, "that I haven't a drop of Bourbon blood in me! It means that I'm a plain, *American* boy, after all!"

He threw his cap into the air exultantly and shouted another hurrah.

Strangely enough, it was Sue who first gave a thought to the marquis. Glancing suddenly toward him, she exclaimed in a low voice:

"O Monsieur!"

He was still standing in the same tense attitude, his expression dazed and unbelieving. Not one of them but expected that this news, so happy to Louis, so tragic to him, might cause an attack, possibly a fatal one, of his physical ailment. But the marquis was made of sterner stuff than they knew. With a sudden squaring of his shoulders, he walked over to the window and stood staring out, his back toward them all, his hands clenched behind him. [Pg 262]

So long did he remain thus, that the tense silence became almost unbearable. It was Louis at last, with his head up and the kindest expression the girls had ever seen in his eyes, who walked over to Monsieur and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Will you forgive me, sir," he said very quietly, "for my beastly expressions of joy? I ought to have realized what a blow this news would be to you,—whatever it may mean to me."

The marquis turned and looked deep into his eyes.

"My boy," he spoke in a husky voice, "you are worthy to be the lineal descendant of a king, even if fate has willed that you are not."

He could say no more at that moment, and Louis went on:

"I want you to know I feel, sir, that my obligation to you remains precisely the same, even though conditions are changed. I owe you everything I have. You undoubtedly will no longer contemplate taking me for your adopted son. There isn't the slightest reason for it now. But I want to give you and the country you love the very best that is in me. I am an American of the Americans, and I'm prouder of it than ever. But I want to 'do my bit' for France and for you. Will you allow me, sir, to go with you to France and join the French Flying Corps? It is the only way that I can repay you." [Pg 263]

The marquis was still gazing straight into the boy's eyes. Now he laid both hands on his shoulders.

"You shall have your wish, my boy," he said, still huskily. "I now see that I should never have striven to restrain you. But, king or no king, an adopted son of mine you shall be, if you yourself will consent to it. I love you for yourself. What matters any other reason? But, before God, I promise you that in no way will I put the slightest obstacle in the path you have chosen for yourself. France will yet be as proud of you as I am. Louis Charles, will you be my son?" [Pg 264]

"I never knew any parents," answered Louis, in a shaky, unsteady voice, "and I've—I've missed them horribly. Will you be—my father?"

When the girls looked around, they found that old Mr. Meadows and his daughter had vanished from the room. At Sue's beckoning finger, the three girls tiptoed out after them.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE END OF THE JOURNAL

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September 25, 1914. It's so long since I've written in this journal that I'm quite discouraged about it. Not a single entry have I made since that wonderful day over at Louis's when they found the document. Well, there hasn't been much to write about, and we've all felt lonely and blue and *apprehensive* (that's the only word I can think of to express it) ever since Louis sailed for France.

They did not get away quite as soon as they had expected. Changed conditions and sailing dates delayed them a week or more longer than the original plan. I think it was at least the twentieth of August before they left for New York and their steamer.

Oh, it is such a desolate place now, across the Green, since they went away,—all shut up and dark and lonely! But Monsieur has left the key with us, and asked us to go through it once in a while to see that everything was all right. In the spring he intends to have an architect come and restore the "long kitchen" to exactly its former appearance, and to put all the rest of the house in good shape. He says that, since Louis wishes it so much, he shall come back here whenever there [Pg 266]

is an opportunity, that is, whenever his duties will permit, and that he can live here as long as he likes. That is glorious news. We are all so happy about it, and Louis was just wild with joy.

But *will* he come back? That is the awful question. Aviation is dangerous enough, even here in a peaceful country. What earthly chance of life has one over there in the midst of this horrible war? It makes me shudder every time I think of it, and I don't dare think of it much. I have awful nightmares about it every night.

The Imp has taken to reading up everything she can find on the subject, and she insists on telling us hair-raising tales about the dangers and accidents that happen to military aviators. I asked her once if it didn't simply make her sick to think of such things in connection with Louis, but she only said:

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"Oh, no! Louis's not going to have things like that happen to *him*. He's different!" I only wish I had her faith.

Louis's departure with the marquis was a nine-days' wonder here, of course. Everybody talked about it incessantly for a while, speculating at the greatest length on why in the world a French nobleman should do such an eccentric thing. But naturally, no one except we three girls ever guessed the truth, or ever will. For it was the marquis's wish that, even as things turned out, the truth about the dauphin should never be made public.

We have all gone back to school, and are plodding along in the same prosaic way. The only thing we're doing that really interests us is to knit an outfit for Louis—a sweater, a helmet, some wristlets, and socks. He said before he left that he'd probably need them, and we promised to make them as quickly as possible.

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September 28. We had a letter from Louis to-day,—the first since he left. Of course it caused the wildest excitement. He said they had a safe voyage across, and he wasn't seasick a minute, though the marquis and old Mr. Meadows were very ill. Louis said that they went straight to Paris, and there the marquis used his influence and had him enlisted in the French Air Service. In a few days Louis was notified to report for duty at the Hôtel des Invalides. Here he went through his physical examination, passed it, and then was sent to Dijon to get his outfit, which is provided by the government. After going through all that, he was sent to Pau (we've looked up these places in the Atlas, and know exactly where they are!) to become a member of the flying-school.

Louis had been there only a week when he wrote this letter, but he says that, owing to the hard study he put in on Page Calvin's machine, he's almost perfect in the mechanical parts,—the engine and steering,—and instead of having to spend several weeks at that, he can soon begin the actual flying. Of course I don't understand all his technical talk, but one thing is easy to see—he's completely and absolutely *happy*. He says he'll write again when he's actually "been up," but that he has hardly a moment to himself during the day, and at night he's so tired that he almost falls asleep on the way to bed. The French course must be very strict and exacting.

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November 22, 1914. I didn't suppose it would be so long before I'd write here again, but there's generally nothing much to write. Paradise Green has returned to its old, sleepy nonentity of a place since Louis went away. Only one thing has stirred the quiet surface of our family. Dave has been extremely morose and uneasy ever since Louis's departure, and yesterday he launched a thunderbolt in our midst by asking Father if he could go off to "the front" and enlist in the French army. Father was very quiet about it, but he refused absolutely. Then Dave broke down and blubbered like a baby. He said he wanted to do something to help in this beastly mess, and that he thought America was "rotten" not to get into it, too. But Father said:

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"If America ever does get into it, Dave, you'll go with my full permission,—but not till then!" So Dave had to be content with that.

We heard from Louis to-day,—the most *wonderful* letter! Two weeks ago he finished his course in aviation and was ordered to duty at the front. So off he went (he wasn't allowed to tell us where the "front" was) and has been there ever since, scouting over the enemy's lines in a biplane with the *chef pilote*, to familiarize himself with conditions. He will soon be actively engaged with the enemy. It makes me sick and cold to think of it. Will we ever see Louis alive again, walking about Paradise Green in the old way? I have simply made up my mind that it is not possible,—that if it ever happens, it will be nothing short of a *miracle*.

On looking back in this journal, I find that I have kept it exactly one year. I have fulfilled my promise to Miss Cullingford, and I believe, if she could only read it, she'd find it a very interesting "supplement to history." But of course she never will read it. That would be breaking my promise to the marquis. I do not think I will write in it any more. The year is over, and Louis has gone—and may never come back any more.

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April 10, 1917. To-day, in an old drawer of my desk, locked away and almost completely forgotten by me, I found this journal that I kept three long years ago. How long, how *very* long they seem now! I was sixteen then, and still in high school. I am nineteen—nearly twenty—now, and have

been a year in college. At present I am home for the Easter vacation, back in little Paradise Green, and in rummaging through my desk I found this journal. The idea has come to me to add one more entry, because it will make the story complete.

When I last wrote here, I was positively certain that Louis would die, that he would be killed in some terrible battle or have some accident to his aëroplane. Nothing of the sort has occurred, marvelous as it may seem. Yes, the miracle has happened, and Louis, our same old Louis, is back in his home on Paradise Green! What is more, the Meadows, or Mettots, as I now call them, are back here with him, just as in the old days. It's too wonderful for words!

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But the marquis is not here. He never will be here any more, for he died a year ago, leaving his title and what little remains of his estate to Louis. The greater part of it has been turned over to the French Government.

But Louis! Oh, that has been the wonderful part of the story! He has been known for two years as one of the most daring and successful members of the French Aviation Corps, with a record of captured enemy machines and successful engagements to be proud of. He has been decorated by the French Government and honored in a dozen ways, and has never been wounded or injured till just lately.

In an engagement at Eaucourt l'Abbaye last October, toward the finish of the great Somme battle, he was wounded in the side, but managed to land his machine safely. The wound was not serious in itself, but his old enemy, blood-poisoning, set in, and for a while it was nip-and-tuck whether he could recover. But Louis says his constitution is "sound American," and after a long siege he was pronounced out of danger and recovered. He has been compelled by his commanding officer, however, to take a long leave of absence, to recover complete health before he returns to the front.

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So he came back to Paradise Green, to take up life, as he says, where he left it. During this Easter vacation we four have been rollicking around, just as we used to when we were children and hadn't a care on our minds. Carol is as grown-up as I am, and is attending college with me. The Imp is a tall, lanky creature now, nearly through high school, and at times can be quite as exasperating as ever. They say she's cut out for a brilliant future, but just at present her whole mind is concentrated on becoming a Red Cross nurse, so that she can go off to "the front" and get in the thick of it. Mother and Father won't stand for it, of course, but trust the Imp to get her way—somehow.

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And that brings me to another thing. America has at last entered the war. We can scarcely believe it yet. Louis is jubilant, and Dave promptly claimed the promise that Father made him three years ago. Father has consented, as he said he would, but is feeling pretty grave about it. And the look in Mother's eyes is enough to keep Dave from effervescing too openly. I dare not think very far into the future, but for the immediate present we all are trying to be happy.

I had almost decided to destroy this journal, but something Louis told us has made me change my mind. He said that before Monsieur (I cannot get out of the habit of calling him that!) passed away, he told Louis that he had changed his mind about keeping secret any longer the story of Louis's descent. He said that he believed the dauphin would have been filled with pride at the wonderful attainments and service to France of the descendant of his own adopted son, and would glory in the world's knowledge of his connection with him. So Louis said that, although he wasn't ever going to say anything about it himself, he didn't specially care if the rest of us did. The matter seemed of little importance to him, anyhow. He said that probably no one would believe it, anyway, as there were too many stories already concerning the escape and claims of the "lost dauphin."

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Probably they won't, and I wouldn't blame them, for it does seem well-nigh incredible. However that may be, I've changed my mind about this journal. I'm going to show it to Miss Cullingford. She and I have always been great friends, even after I left high school, and I want her to read for herself the whole history of this wonderful thing that happened on little, out-of-the-way Paradise Green.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THREE SIDES OF PARADISE GREEN ***

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