

A Mystery Story for Girls

WITCHES COVE

ROY J. SNELL

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Mystery Stories for Girls

Witches Cove

By
ROY J. SNELL

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WITCHES COVE

CHAPTER I

MYSTERIES OF THE NIGHT

It was night on Casco Bay off the coast of Maine. There was no moon. Stars were hidden by a fine haze. The distant harbor lights of Portland, eight of them, gleaming faintly in pairs like yellow cat's eyes, served only to intensify the blackness of the water and the night.

Ruth Bracket's arms moved backward and forward in rhythmic motion. She was rowing, yet no sound came from her oarlocks. Oars and oarlocks were padded. She liked it best that way. Why? Mystery—that magic word “mystery.” How she loved it!

In the stern of the little punt sat slim, black-haired, dark-eyed Betty Bronson, a city girl from the heart of America who was enjoying her first summer on the coast of Maine.

Betty, too, loved mystery. And into her life and that of her stout seashore girl companion had come a little mystery that day. At this very moment, as Ruth rested on her muffled oar, there came creeping across the silent waters and through the black of night a second bit of mystery.

The first mystery had come to them on shore in the hold of a beached three-masted schooner.

Ruth knew the schooner well enough. She had been on board her a dozen times and thought she knew all about her—but she didn't.

The owner, a dark-skinned foreigner who had purchased the schooner six months before, used her for bringing wood to the islands. There is, so they say, an island in Casco Bay for every day in the year. Each island has its summer colony. These

summer folks like an open fire to sit by at night and this requires wood. The schooner had been bringing it in from somewhere—from Canada some said. No one seemed to know for sure.

Being an old schooner the wood-carrying craft must be beached from time to time to have her seams calked. They beached her at high tide. Low tide found her stranded. The return of high tide carried her off again.

In this there is no mystery. The mystery began when Ruth and Betty, along with other girls and boys of the island, swarmed up a rope ladder to the tilted deck of the beached schooner.

Being of a bolder nature than the others, having always a consuming desire to see the hold of so ancient a ship, Ruth had led Betty into the very heart of the schooner and had opened a door to pursue her investigation further when a harsh voice called down to her:

“Here now. Come out’a da sheep!”

It was a foreign skipper.

Startled, the girls had quickly closed the door and bolted up the gangway. Not, however, until they had seen a surprising thing. They had seen three bolts of bright, red cloth in that cabin back of the hold. Were there others? They could not tell. The place had been quite dark.

“Looked like silk,” Betty had said a few moments later as they walked down the beach.

“Can’t tell,” Ruth replied. “Probably only red calico, a present for the wood chopper’s wife.”

“Three bolts?”

“Three wood choppers’ wives with seven children apiece,” Ruth laughed.

She had found this hard to believe. There certainly was something strange about those bolts of cloth, and the foreign skipper’s desire to get them away from the cabin.

And now, as they listened in the night on the bay with muffled oars at rest, they caught the creak of oarlocks. The schooner had got off the beach with the tide. She was anchored back in the bay. That the dory had come from her they did not doubt.

“Where are they going?” Betty asked in a faint whisper as the sound of rowing grew louder, then began to fade away in the distance.

“House Island, perhaps.”

“There’s nothing over there.”

“Only an abandoned house and the old fort. No one living there. Strange, isn’t it?”

“Really mysterious,” Betty agreed.

“We’ll row around the *Black Gull*, then we’ll go home,” said Ruth.

Visiting the *Black Gull*, an ancient six-master that had lain at anchor in the harbor months on end, was one of Ruth’s chief delights.

Steam and gasoline, together with the high price of canvas, high wages and demand for speed, had brought this slow going craft to anchor for good.

So there she stood, black and brooding, her masts reaching like bare arms toward heaven, her keel moving with the tide yet ever chafing at the massive anchor chain that was never drawn.

Night was the time to visit her. Then, looming out of the dark, she seemed to speak of other days, of the glory of Maine’s shipping, of fresh cut lumber, of fish and of the boundless sea.

It was then that Ruth could fancy herself standing upon the deck, with wind singing in the rigging and setting the sails snapping as they boomed away over a white-capped sea.

They had rowed to the dark bulk that they knew to be the *Black Gull* and had moved silently along the larboard side, about the stern and half way down the starboard side, when of a sudden a low exclamation escaped Ruth’s lips.

Something had brushed against her in the dark.

The next instant a gurgling cry came from the bow of the boat. This was followed by a splash.

“She—she’s overboard!” thought Ruth, reversing her strokes and back paddling with all her might.

“Ruth!” came a call from the water. “I’m over here! Some-something pulled me in.”

So astonished was the stout fisher girl that for a moment she did not move. Something had taken her companion overboard. What could it have been?

By the time she had come to her senses, Betty had gripped the gunwales of the boat and was calling for help. The next moment, drenched with salt water, but otherwise unharmed, she sat shivering in her place.

“Some-something caught me under the chi-chin,” she chattered, “and ov-over I wen-went.”

“I felt it,” said Ruth. “Let’s see what it was.”

Slowly, deftly, she brought the punt about and alongside. Then, with both hands she groped in the dark.

“I have it!” she exclaimed. “It’s a rope ladder. How queer! There’s no one staying out here. There never was a ladder before. It goes up to the deck.”

“Let’s go up,” said Betty. “What a lark!”

“You are drenched. You’ll catch your death of cold.”

“B-best thing to d-do,” said Betty, beginning to chatter again, “to take off my clo-clothes and wring them out.”

“Right!” said Ruth, fumbling for the painter. “Guess it’s safe enough. Just tie the boat to the ladder.”

A moment of feeling about and struggling with ropes, then up they went, like

blue-jackets, hand over hand. Another moment on deck and Betty was doing a wild whirling dance in the dark while her companion's strong hands wrung out her clothes.

"Boo-oo, it's cold!" shivered the city girl as she struggled to get back into her sodden and wrinkled garments.

"Come on," said Ruth. "Now we're here, we might as well explore. There's a cabin forward—the Captain's. We'll be out of the wind if we get in there."

They were more than out of wind in that cabin. They found a great round stove set up there. With the aid of two matches Ruth examined its flue, and with a third she lighted the fire that was laid in it. The next moment Betty and her clothes were drying before a roaring fire.

"Think of being in such a place at ten o'clock at night!" Betty said with a delighted shudder.

"Might not be so good," said Ruth. "That ladder wasn't left there accidentally. Someone's been here."

"Tell you what!" she added suddenly. "While you are drying out I'll play I'm the ship's watch, and pace the deck."

"You don't think——"

"Don't think anything," said Ruth as she disappeared through the door. "It isn't safe to take too many chances, that's all."

Ruth had not been on deck three minutes before, lost to all sense of impending danger, she walked the deck, captain of this great sailing craft.

Few girls are more generously endowed with imagination than are the fisher-folk's daughters of the coast of Maine. None are more loyal to their state and their seaboard.

As this girl now paced the deck in the dark, she saw herself in slicker and high boots with a megaphone at her lips shouting commands to nimble seamen who swarmed aloft. Sails fluttered and snapped, chains rattled, rigging creaked as they swept adown the boundless sea.

But now the scene was changed. No longer was she aboard a great shipping boat, but an ancient man-o'-war. An enemy's sloop threatened her harbor. With bold daring she set the prow of her ancient craft to seaward ready to do battle with the approaching foe.

Once more, her craft, half fancied, half real, is a cutter, chasing smugglers and pirates.

Pirates! How her blood raced at the thought. There had been pirates in those half-forgotten days, real, dark-faced pirates with cutlasses in their teeth and pistols at their belts. Not an island on the bay but has its story of buried treasure. And as for smugglers' coves, there was one not a mile from the girl's home.

"Smugglers!" she whispered the word. Rumors had run rife in the bay these last months. Dark craft, plying the waters, were supposed to be smugglers' boats. A bomb had sunk a revenue cutter. "Smugglers!" the people had whispered among themselves.

She thought now of the three bolts of red cloth in the beached schooner's hold, and of the dory that had passed them in the night.

"Smugglers!" she thought. Then, "Probably nothing to it. Only a wood hauler."

Then her heart skipped a beat. She had thought of the rope ladder. What a hiding place for smuggled goods, this deserted six-master, lying alone in the dark waters of the bay!

"What if it were used as a smuggler's store room," she thought as her pulse gave a sudden leap. There was a fire laid in the cabin. The ladder was down. "What if some of them are on board at this very moment."

She thought of the slim city girl sitting alone there in the dark. Turning, she started toward the cabin when a sudden sound from the water arrested her.

The next instant, a few hundred yards from the ship, a light flared up. The sight that struck her eye at that moment froze the blood in her veins.

For a full half moment she stood stock still. Then with a sudden effort she shook herself into action to go tip-toeing down the deck and thrust her head in at the cabin door and whisper:

“Betty! Betty! Quick! Get into your clothes! There’s something terrible going to happen. Quick! We must get off the ship!”

CHAPTER II

SCULLING IN THE NIGHT

The thing Ruth saw on the water was startling, mysterious. Nothing quite like it had ever come into her life before. She could not believe her eyes. Yet she dared not doubt them. A moment before she had dreamed of pirates with pistols in their belts. Now out there on the sea they were, or at least seemed to be, in real life. There could be no denying the existence of a boat on those black waters of night; a long narrow boat propelled by six pairs of sweeping oars swinging in perfect rhythm. This much the flare of light had shown her.

More, too; there was no use trying to deny it. She had seen the men only too clearly. Dressed in long, black coats, with red scarfs about their necks and broad-brimmed hats on their heads, with their white teeth gleaming, they looked fierce enough.

Strangest of all, there were pistols of the ancient sort and long knives in their belts.

What made her shudder was the sign of skull and cross-bones on the black flag they carried.

“Pirates! What nonsense!” she thought. “Not been one off the Maine coast in a hundred years.” Pausing to listen, she caught again the creak of oarlocks.

“Betty! Betty!” she whispered frantically. “Hurry! We’ll be trapped!”

Poor Betty! She certainly was having her troubles. Frightened half out of her wits; expecting at any moment to be arrested for trespassing, or who knows what, she struggled madly with her half dry and much wrinkled garments.

“It’s all my fault,” she half sobbed. “I insisted on coming up here. Now we shall be caught. I—I hope they don’t hang us at the yardarm.”

This last, she knew, was nonsense; but in the excitement she was growing a trifle hysterical.

At last, with shoes and stockings in her hands, she emerged from the door.

Gripping her arm tight and whispering, “Don’t speak! Not a sound!” Ruth led her rapidly to the end of the rope ladder.

“Follow me. Drop in the boat. Sit perfectly still.”

Tremblingly, Betty obeyed. Presently they were in the punt. The sound of rowing came much more clearly now. They could even hear the labored breathing of the oarsmen.

Thankful for the darkness, Ruth thrust an oar into a socket at the back of the boat and began wabbling it about in the water. She was sculling, the most silent way to move a boat through the water.

“We-we’ll go round the bow,” she thought, as a sudden sound set her heart racing.

“If only they don’t light another flare!”

With a prayer on her lips which was half supplication for forgiveness and half petition for safety, she threw all her superb strength into the task before her.

Many times she had rowed around the *Black Gull*. Never before had it seemed half so far.

Now they had covered half the distance, now three-quarters. And now there came a panic-inspiring gleam of light on the sea. It lasted a second, then blinked out.

“Only a match.” Her heart gave a bound of joy. “But if they strike another, if they are attempting to light a flare!” She redoubled her energy at the oar. Great beads of perspiration stood out on her brow as they rounded the stern of the ship.

Even then catastrophe threatened, for the ship's anchor chain, touched by the punt, sent out a rattling sound.

"What was that?" came a bass voice from the sea.

An instant later the sea was all aglow with a second flare. But luck was with them. They had rounded the ship's hull and were out of sight.

"If they row around her, we are caught," whispered Betty.

Ten seconds passed, twenty, thirty, forty, a minute. Then came the sounds of a boat bumping the ship and of men ascending the rope ladder.

"Not coming!" Ruth breathed a sigh of relief.

"We'll just move back under the stern by the rudder," she whispered a moment later. "Even if they look over the side they won't be able to see us there."

"Who-who are they?" Betty's question carried a thrill.

"I don't know."

"What do they look like?"

Ruth told her.

"Oh, oh!" Betty barely suppressed a gasp.

"But they can't be!" she said the next moment.

"They are," said Ruth. "And they are going to man the *Black Gull* and sail her away. The wind is rising. There's plenty of sail. A sail boat makes no noise. What's to hinder?"

"What could they want with her?"

"Don't know; for exhibition, sea pageant, moving pictures, or something. Captain Munson, the owner, has been offered ten thousand dollars for her. Moving picture company wants her. She's the last six-master in the world."

"Betty," she whispered, impressively, after there had been time for thought,

“we’ve got to do something. We can’t let the *Black Gull* go like this. The *Black Gull* doesn’t belong just to Captain Munson. She belongs to all us Maine folks. That’s why he won’t sell her. She stands for something, for a grand and glorious past, the past of our coast and of the most wonderful state in the Union.

“I’ll tell you what we’ll do,” she whispered. “They’re all on board now. We’ll scull around and get their boat. We’ll tow it ashore so they can’t escape, then spread the alarm. Even if they get out to sea, the fast cutter will catch them and bring them back.”

“I h-hope,” chattered Betty, half beside herself with fear, “that they don’t catch us. I wouldn’t like to walk the plank.”

“They won’t,” said Ruth. There was an air of conviction in her tone. Alas for conviction.

Once more their punt, creeping forward in the dark, rounded the ship’s hull and came at last to a point but a boat’s length from a long, dark bulk just ahead.

“Their boat,” thought Ruth. “We’ll be away in a moment.” But they were not.

That they were taking grave chances, Ruth knew right well. Her heart was in her throat as she sent her punt gliding through the dark. Only thoughts of her beloved Maine and the ancient six-master that stood for so much that was grand and glorious in the past could have induced her to run the risk. Run the risk she did. Trouble came sooner than she dreamed.

She breathed a sigh of relief when the dim light told her that there was no one in the long boat that had brought the black-robed crew to the ship.

Her relief was short lived. She had succeeded in untying the painter of that other boat and swinging it half about, when there came a harsh jangling of chains. A rusty chain dangling from the side of the ship had caught in the stern of the long boat and, slipping free, had gone thudding against the hull. Ten seconds of suspense ended with a gruff:

“Who’s there?” and the sudden flash of a brilliant electric torch which brought the two girls out in bold relief.

At once there followed exclamations of astonishment as dark figures crowded

the deck above them.

“Trying to steal our boat,” said one.

“Ought to walk the plank,” came from another.

“Up with ’em!” said another, placing a foot on the top rung of the ladder.

Ruth sat there, red-faced, defiant. Betty was beginning to cry softly, when a fourth person spoke up suddenly:

“Lay off it, boys! Can’t you see they’re just girls? I don’t know what they are about, but I’m bound to say it can’t be anything wrong. One of ’em is Tom Bracket’s girl. I know her well.”

Ruth’s heart gave a great leap of joy. She had recognized her champion’s voice. He was Patrick O’Connor, the skipper of a sea-going tug, one of her father’s good friends.

At once her head was in a whirl. What could it all mean? Captain O’Connor dressed as a pirate and aiding in a night raid of the harbor? The thing seemed impossible.

Her thoughts were broken short off by the voice of the man on the ladder.

“I’m still in favor of havin’ ’em tell their story. An’ mebbly girls don’t care for pie and hot coffee an’ the like.”

“We’ll leave it to them,” said Captain O’Connor. “If they want to come up we’ll be glad to have them. If they don’t, then they have their punt. Let them go. What do you say, girls?”

“Come on,” said Ruth. There was a large lump in her throat. “We’ve got to go up. ’Twon’t do to let them misunderstand.”

Truth was, there were things she did not understand and that she wanted dreadfully to know about.

So, once more, hand over hand, they went up the rope ladder and tumbled in upon the deck.

Ten minutes later the two girls found themselves seated one on either side of Captain O'Connor before the massive mahogany table in the cabin of the *Black Gull*.

The table was piled high with good things to eat. A great copper kettle filled with doughnuts, a basket of sandwiches, two hams roasted whole, a steaming tank of coffee, and pies without end, graced the board. A merry band of pirates, surely. Most surprising of all was the fact that the pirate at the head of the table, blackest and fiercest of them all, was none other than Captain Munson, owner of the *Black Gull*.

“Now,” said Captain Munson, and there was a friendly smile on his formidable face, “I am sure you will enjoy the meal more fully if you tell us first why you were about to take our boat.”

“Rest assured,” he said, as he saw the crimson flush on Ruth’s cheek, “you stand absolved. You shall not walk the plank.”

CHAPTER III IN THE DUNGEON

“Please,” said Ruth, “I—I—” She choked as she looked into the many pairs of eyes around the table in the *Black Gull*’s cabin, and stammered, “We thought you were,—no, we didn’t think. We knew you were not real pirates, but we thought you—were—were going to steal the *Black Gull*. And we—we thought we could stop you.”

No laugh followed these stammered remarks. Each man sat at attention as Captain Munson asked in a kindly tone:

“And why did you wish to save the *Black Gull*?”

“Because she stands for something wonderful!” The girl’s tones were ringing now. “Because she tells the story of Maine, our grand and glorious state we all love so well.”

“Boys,”—the pirate chieftain’s dark eyes glistened—“I propose three cheers for Ruth and her dauntless companion.”

Never did the walls of that cabin ring with lustier shouts than when those men ended with, “Ra, Ra, Ra! Ruth, Ruth, Ruth! Betty! Betty! Betty!”

“And now for the feast!” exclaimed the Chief. “Fourteen men on a dead man’s chest. Buckets of blood! There never was a pirate crew but liked their victuals. Ho! You scullions, hove to with the viands!”

All this talk made Betty shudder, but Ruth only sat and stared.

They were hungry enough after the long row across the bay and without asking

further questions they accepted the cold chicken, coffee, doughnuts and huge wedges of pie and did full justice to all.

A half hour later, as the pirate crew joined ringing notes of a pirate chanty ending with a rousing, "Heave ho, Ladies, Heave ho!" the girls pushed their punt away from the towering hull of the *Black Gull* and went rowing away into the night.

Ruth's arms had swung in rhythmic motion for a full ten minutes before she spoke. Then dropping her oars, she said in a deep, low tone,

"Of all the things I ever heard of, that beats 'em."

"I thought," said Betty, solemnly, "that I had seen strange things, but that beats them all."

"And somehow," Ruth said, still more soberly, "I have a feeling that this is the beginning of something very big and mysterious, and perhaps awfully dangerous."

"That is just the way I feel about it," said Betty, with a shudder.

After that they lapsed into silence, and Ruth renewed her silent rowing.

The hour was late. Betty's head began to nod. Ruth, alone with her thoughts, was swinging her oars in strong, sweeping strokes when a curious thing struck her eye. They were passing the ancient abandoned fort on House Island, a massive pile of solid granite, when through a narrow space where cannon had frowned in the long ago, a light appeared. One instant it shone there clear and bright, the next it was gone.

"How strange!" she thought. "No one is ever there." At once she registered a resolve to visit the fort to have a look into this new mystery.

Once more she thought of the ancient wood-carrying schooner, of the bolts of silk cloth in her hold, and of the dory that had passed them in the night.

"It's astonishing," she told herself, "the way events connect themselves up, woven together in a pattern like a rug. But you have to trace them out one by one before the pattern comes out clear and strong."

The moon was out. The stars were shining when their punt touched the sandy beach of the island that had always been Ruth's home.

A half hour later that same moon, looking down upon a brown and weather-beaten fisherman's cottage, beamed through narrow panes of glass upon two girls sleeping side by side. One was large and strong and ruddy. Her arms, thrown clear of the covers, showed the muscular lines of an athlete. Endless miles of rowing, clam digging in the early morning, hauling away at the float line of lobster traps, had done this. There was about the girl's whole make-up a suggestion of perfect physical well-being which is found oftener than anywhere else in a seacoast village.

The other girl, as you will know, was slim, active and with nerves tight as fiddle strings. Her life had been lived in the city. A few months before she had gone with her father to live at a school by the side of Lake Michigan. Now, for the summer, she was staying with a wealthy young married woman in her summer cottage on the island. She was with Ruth for but this one night.

As one looked at Betty lying there in repose, he read in her face and figure signs of strength. The slender arms and limbs were not without their suggestion of power. Her strength was the quick, nervous strength of a squirrel; useful enough for all that. One might be sure that she would leap into action while others searched their troubled minds for a way out.

Strangely matched as they might be, these girls were destined to spend much of their summer together and to come to know in a few brief weeks how much of mystery, adventure and romance the rugged coast of Maine has to offer those who come there to seek.

"Betty," said Ruth as she sprang out of bed next morning, "do you know what day this is?"

"Wouldn't need two guesses if I didn't know," said Betty. "Listen to the boom of cannons. It's the Glorious Fourth of July."

"To-day," said Ruth, "we must do something exciting."

"What shall it be?" Betty's tone was eager.

"Listen!" said Ruth, seized with a sudden inspiration, "I've got a dollar."

“So have I.”

“We’ll spend them all for Roman candles.”

“Roman can—”

Ruth held up a hand. “We’ll get Pearl Bracket to go along. We’ll row over to House Island in the evening and eat a picnic lunch on the grass before the fort that overlooks the bay. The sunset is wonderful from there.

“Then when it’s getting dark, we’ll go into the old fort and have a sham battle with Roman candles.”

“Sham battle?”

“Sure! The boys did that last year, Don and Dewey, Chet and Dill and some others. They said it was no end of fun. They’re all going up the bay for fireworks this year, so we’ll have the fort all to ourselves. We’ll get Pearl Bracket to go along.

“It’s something of an adventure, just going into that old fort at night. Secret passages and dungeons with rusty old handcuffs chained to the wall, and all that. Quite a place.”

“I should think so. Is it very old?”

“The fort? Almost a hundred years, I guess. Used to be cannons there. They’re gone now. No one’s been there for years and years. Just big and empty and sort of lonesome.”

“But how do you play sham battle in there?”

“All scatter out with tallow candles in tin cans, just a little light. Each one has an armful of Roman candles. When you hear something move you know it is an enemy who has broken into the fort, and you shoot a candle at him, shoot low at his feet. Be dangerous if you didn’t.

“But think what fun!” she enthused. “You’re creeping along between stone walls, all damp and old. Just a little light. Dark all around. All of a sudden down the long passage a little stir, and like a flash your fuse sputters. Bang-pop-pop-

pop-bang! Red, blue, green, yellow, orange, five balls of fire leap away at the enemy and he is shot, defeated, routed into wild retreat.”

“I should think he might be,” said Betty. “But it should be great sport. I’m for it. Any jolly thing on the Fourth of July.”

CHAPTER IV

THE FACE IN THE FIRE

Ruth let out a little half-suppressed scream. A pasteboard tube slipped from her grasp and fell to the floor. A purple ball of fire bursting forth from the tube shot across the floor, climbed a stone wall, then suddenly blinked out. The yellow gleam of a tallow candle shot downward. A tin can struck the floor with a dull thud. The candle blinked out. Then all about the girl's trembling figure was darkness, darkness so complete that it seemed you might cut it with a knife.

It was terrifying, that darkness, in an underground place at night. Yet it was not the darkness that affected her most. Nor was it the ball of fire that had danced about her feet.

There had been another ball of fire, and through that red ball of fire she had seen a face.

"The face!" she whispered. "The eyes! I must have blinded him. How perfectly terrible! Whatever am I to do?"

What, indeed? She could not turn and run. Which way should she run? The candle was out. She had counted on the candle to show her the way. The way she had taken was winding, many turns, many corners, and always stone walls.

"And now," she thought with a sinking feeling at the pit of her stomach. "Oh! Why did I come?"

"We started out to stage a sham battle. And I have blinded a man."

A man! Her thoughts were sobering now. Questions arose. What was the man doing here in the heart of the old abandoned fort on House Island? That was a

question.

“His face was low down, close to the stone floor, as if he were crawling.”

Her heart skipped a beat. “Perhaps he was crawling. Perhaps I did not injure him after all. He may be at my very feet now. Crawling!” The thought drove her overwrought nerves into tremors.

“Matches!” she thought suddenly. There was a penny box of them in her pocket. Until now, in her excitement, she had forgotten them.

The box out, she broke three matches trying to light one. When the fourth flared up, it so startled her that she dropped it.

In time, however, the candle was lit. Then, with bulging eyes she stared before her.

“Nothing,” she told herself in surprise.

She took three steps forward. Still nothing. She advanced ten yards. Nothing.

“Must have been here,” she told herself. “But there is nothing and no one.” She began to shudder again. Had the Roman candle she had fired into the dark revealed a lurking ghost? Surely this ancient fort was spooky enough. But no! Ghosts were nonsense.

“I saw him,” she told herself stoutly.

“A man was here,” she assured herself. “I saw him. I could not have been mistaken. He is here for no good purpose—couldn’t be. I couldn’t have blinded him, else he could not have found his way to—to wherever he has gone. He’s using this fort without permission—perhaps for illegal purposes.”

No longer able to control herself, she went racing on tip-toe down the narrow winding corridor.

There came a sudden burst of moonlight, and she found herself standing in a stone archway, looking out upon a sort of open court grown wild with tall grass, brambles and rose bushes.

Old Fort Skammel, built before the Civil War, has been abandoned for years to the rats and bats that have found a home there. Yet there is something suggestive of grandeur and protecting power hovering over it still.

Ruth had felt this as she sat with Betty and Pearl at the foot of its massive masonry and ate her Fourth of July evening lunch.

Following out her plan of the morning, they had rowed over here, she and Betty Bronson and Pearl Bracket, for a little picnic. Having been brought up on the island across the bay, the abandoned fort did not inspire in Ruth the awesome fear that it did in some others.

“Rats in there,” Ruth had said, munching at a bun.

“Big as cats,” said Pearl.

“Fraid of fire, though,” said Ruth. “Won’t hurt you if you have a light.”

“Betty,” said Ruth, changing the subject as she watched the red glow of the sunset, “I never see a sunset but I feel like I’d like to get on a ship and go and go until I come to where that red begins.”

“Yes,” said Betty, “I sometimes feel that way myself.”

“But you’ve traveled a lot.”

“Not so much.”

“But you’ve lived on the banks of the Chicago River and traveled on the Great Lakes. And now you’re here. That’s a great deal. I—why I’ve only been on the sea.”

“The sea is wonderful,” said Betty. “It’s a little world all its own. When you come to it you feel that you have found something that no one you know has ever seen before.”

“I suppose so,” said Ruth, “but of course I’ve always known the sea.”

“And been everywhere on it.”

“No, only a little way. Why,” Ruth said, sitting up, “right over yonder, not a hundred miles from here, is one of the most interesting islands in the world. Monhegan they call it. I’ve never seen it. But I shall some day, I am sure.

“It’s sixteen miles from shore, a great rock protruding out of the sea. If there wasn’t a smaller rock standing right in front of it and making sort of a harbor, no one could ever land there, for most of its headline is bold, a hundred, two hundred feet high. These rocks have strange names. Burnt Head, White Head, Black Head and Skull Rock, that’s the names they’ve given them. They say you can catch beefsteak cod right off the rocks. It’s got a history, too. Captain John Smith was there once and Governor Bradford. I want to go there and watch the breakers come tumbling in. It’s wild, fascinating, you’ve no idea.”

“Must be lonesome,” said Betty.

“Lonesome? Well, perhaps,” Ruth said musingly. “Yes, I guess so. The sea always makes me feel small and lonesome. Out there almost everything is ocean.”

That was all they said of Monhegan. Little they dreamed of the part that bewitching island would play in their lives during the weeks that were to follow.

Pearl had been timid about taking part in the sham battle. At last the others talked her over. So, armed each with a bundle of Roman candles and a tallow candle stuck in a tin can, they had made their way silently down the long corridor that led to the gun room, from which massive cannons had once looked down upon the bay.

“Spooky in here at night,” Pearl had said with a shudder. The sound of her voice awakened dead echoes and live bats.

Betty felt like turning back, but Ruth plodded on. Down a long, steep stairway, across a circular court, then into a narrow passage they went, until Ruth with a sudden pause whispered:

“There! There! I hear ’em.”

“Here,” she said, holding out her burning candle. “Get a light from this and shoot straight ahead.”

With trembling fingers Ruth lighted a Roman candle, watched the fuse sputter for a second, then jumped as pop-pop-pop, three balls of fire went shooting down between stone walls to send an astonishing number of rats scurrying for shelter.

It would be difficult indeed to find a more exciting game than the one that followed. And such a setting! An ancient and abandoned fort. Down these narrow passageways and resounding corridors had sounded the tramp-tramp-tramp of marching soldiers. Through long night watches in time of peace, in stress of war, weary night guards had patrolled their solemn beats. From these narrow windows eyes had scanned the bay, while like giant watch dogs, grim cannons loomed at the gunner's side.

In this small room, where chains, lifted and dropped, give out a lugubrious sound, some prisoner has sat in solitary confinement to meditate upon his act of desertion or of treachery against the land that offered him food and shelter.

The three girls thought little of these things as they parted to go each her own way down separate corridors to meet sooner or later with screams of terror and laughter as one stealing a march upon another set balls of fire dancing about her feet.

A move in the dark or the slightest sound called forth a volley of red, blue, green and yellow fire. More often than not it was a rat or a bat that drew the fire, but there is quite as much sport in sending a huge rat scurrying for cover as in surprising a friendly enemy.

So the battle had gone merrily on until Ruth, finding herself alone in a remote corner of the fort and, hearing a sound, had fired a volley with the result we have already seen.

“And now, here I am all alone,” she told herself. “Wonder where the others are?”

“They are in there alone with that strange man,” she told herself. “How—how terrible!”

That she could do nothing about it she knew well enough, and was troubled about their safety.

“If anything serious should happen to them I never could forgive myself!” she

thought with a little tightening at the throat. "They are such good pals. And it was I who proposed that we go on that wild chase, I who really insisted."

She was beginning to feel very uncomfortable indeed about the whole affair.

She and Pearl had been pals for a long time. In the same Sunday School class and the same grade at school, they were always together. At the beach, swimming, boating and fishing in summer, tramping and skating in winter, they shared their joys and sorrows.

"And now," she asked herself, "where is she? And where is Betty?"

Relighting her candle, she turned about to go inside and search for them.

"No use," she told herself. "Place is a perfect labyrinth, passages running up and down, this way and that. Never would find them. Have to wait. Have—"

She broke short off. Had she caught some sound? Were they coming? Or, was it some other person, the man of the face in the fire? She shrank back against the wall, then called softly:

"Girls! Betty! Pearl! Are you there?" There came no answer. "Have to wait," she told herself.

She fell to wondering about that mysterious face, and what in time she should do about it.

She and Pearl were fortunate in having as a day teacher a splendid patriotic woman. That very day they had come upon her sitting on the grassy bank of their island that overlooks Portland harbor. They had dropped to places beside her, and together for a time they had listened to the *bang-bang* of fireworks and the *boom-boom* of cannons, had watched flags on ships and forts and towers flapping in the breeze. Then Pearl, who was at times very thoughtful, had said:

"It makes me feel all thrilly inside and somehow I think we should be able to do something for our country, something as brave and useful as Betsy Ross, Martha Washington and Barbara Fletcher did."

"You can," the teacher had said quietly. "You can honor these by helping to make this the finest land in the world in which to live."

“One thing more you can do, wherever there is an old fort, a soldiers’ home, or a monument dedicated to our hallowed dead, you can help prevent their being defaced or defiled or used for any purpose that would bring a reproach upon the memory of those who lived and died that we might be free.”

“I wonder,” Ruth said to herself, “what sort of den I came upon just now in this grand old fort?”

Then, very quietly, very solemnly, she made the resolve that, come what might, the whole affair should be gone into, the mystery solved.

“If only they would come!” she whispered impatiently.

“Ruth! Ruth! Is that you?” sounded out in a shrill whisper from the right.

“Yes! Yes! Here I am.”

“Shsh! Don’t talk,” she warned as Pearl began to babble excitedly. “We must get out of here at once.”

“Why? Wha—”

“Don’t talk. Come on!”

A moment later a punt with three dark forms in it crept away from the shadowy shore.

They rowed across the bay in awed silence. Having reached the shore of their own island, they breathed with greater freedom; but even here, as they climbed the steep board stairway that led from the beach to the street above, they found themselves casting apprehensive backward glances.

Once in the main street of their straggling village, with house lights blinking at them from here and there, they paused for a moment to whisper together, then to talk in low tones of the probable outcome of their recent mysterious adventure.

“I fully expected to see the *Black Gull* gone when I looked out of the window this morning,” said Ruth. “But she wasn’t.”

“Still chafing at her chains. Poor old *Black Gull!*” Pearl always felt this way

about the discarded ship of other days.

“What did you think?” said Ruth. “You wouldn’t expect the owner of the boat to steal it himself. And he was a member of that terrifying band.”

“But the old wood-hauling boat and the silks in her hold, (they were all sure the bolts of cloth were silk by this time) and the dory from her that passed us in the night,” said Betty. “They’re different.”

“And the face I saw in the fire,” said Ruth with a shudder. “Such a strange face it was, dark and hairy and eyes that gleamed sort of red and black. Oh! I tell you it was terrible! I am glad we’re all here!”

“You—you wouldn’t go back,” said Pearl. “Not for worlds.”

“Yes,” Ruth said slowly, “I think I would, but in the daytime. Daytime would be different. And someone should go. If that grand old fort is being used by rascals they should be found out.”

“And there’s been so many whispers about smugglers this summer,” said Pearl. “Smuggling in goods and men, they say. All sorts of men that shouldn’t be allowed to come to America at all.”

“That’s it!” said Pearl excitedly. “That’s what he was! One of them, one of the men America don’t want.”

“Who?”

“That man, the face in the fire!”

“You can’t be sure,” said Betty.

“No,” said Ruth, “not until we go back there. Then perhaps we won’t.”

They parted a moment later, Ruth to go to her cottage on the slope, Pearl to her home on the water front, and Betty to the big summer cottage that tops the hill.

As Ruth lay in her bed by the window, looking out over the bay that night, she felt that the cozy and comfortable little world she knew, the bay, the cluster of little islands, the all enclosing sea, had suddenly become greatly agitated.

“It’s as if a great storm had come sweeping down upon us,” she told herself.

“Mystery, thrills, adventure,” she said a moment later. “I have always longed for these, but now they have begun to come I—I somehow feel that I should like to put out my two hands and push them away.”

With that she fell asleep.

CHAPTER V

THREE GRAY WITCHES

The next afternoon Pearl Bracket went fishing. She felt the need of an opportunity for quiet thought. The events of the past few days had stirred her to the very depths. A quiet, dreamy girl, she was given to sitting across the prow of her brother's fishing boat or the stern of her ancient dory as it drifted on a placid bay. But this day only Witches Cove would do.

To this imaginative girl Witches Cove had ever been a haunting place of many mysteries. A deep dark pool on three sides by the darkest of firs and hemlocks, on the north of the island where no sunbeams ever fell, it had always cast a spell of enchantment about her.

There, when the tide was coming in, water rushed over half submerged rocks to go booming against the granite wall, then to return murmuring and whispering of many things.

Pearl sat in the stern of her dory on this particular afternoon and recalled all the strange tales that had been woven about the cove.

At one time, so the story ran, it had been a smugglers' cove. Here in the days of long ago, dark gray, low lying crafts came to anchor at dead of night to bring ashore cargoes of rich silks, tea, coffee and spices.

Still farther back it had been a pirates' retreat. Even the renowned Captain Kidd had been associated with the place.

"On a very still day," Uncle Jermy Trott had told her once in deepest secrecy, "you can still see a spar lyin' amongst the rocks. That spar came from a Spanish Gallion. I've seen it. I know. An' I've always held that a treasure chest were

lashed to it an' that it were left there as a markin' thing, like skulls and cross-bones were on land."

Pearl had never seen the spar. But more than once her fish-hook had snagged on something down there that was soft like wood and she had lost the hook and part of her line.

To-day, however, she thought little of the spar at the bottom of the cove. She thought instead of the strange doings aboard the *Black Gull* and of Ruth's face in the fire.

"I'm going back to the old fort," she told herself stoutly. "There's more to that than we think."

"And still," she thought, as she dragged a larger cunner from the water, "that's Ruth's discovery. It's only fair to let her go to the bottom of it. Nothing important ever happens to me. I—"

She paused to look at the cunner she had caught. Its coloring was curious, all red, blue, green and purple.

"Like he'd been dipped in burning sulphur," she told herself. "Nothing in Witches Cove is the same as anywhere else. They say it's the three gray witches. Tom McTag saw 'em once, three gray witches coming up out of the water behind the fog. Boo! It's spooky here even in daytime. Seems like eyes were peering at you. Seems—"

Her glance strayed to the bank. Then she did receive a shock. Eyes were staring at her, two pairs of glaring red eyes.

For a full moment she sat there petrified. Then, as her senses returned to her, she made out the figures of two huge black cats half hidden in the green shrubs that capped the rocky wall of Witches Cove.

"They're not real," she told herself. "They're witches' cats."

To prove this, she caught up the blue, green, purple cunner and sent it flying toward the cats.

That settled it. Growling, snarling, sending fur flying, they were upon the fish

and at one another, tooth and nail in an instant.

“Here, you greedy things!” she exclaimed. “Stop that! Here’s another and yet another!” Two cunners followed the first.

It was just as the cats settled down to their feast that her ear caught a movement farther up the bank and a quick look showed her a very small man, wearing great horn rimmed glasses. Squatting there on the steep bank, he was staring at her, then at the cats. For a moment he remained there. The next he turned and disappeared.

“Someone living in the old Hornaby Place,” she told herself with a quick intake of breath. “Must be. Cats wouldn’t be here. Nobody’s been there for more than six years, and it’s the only place on the island. I wonder—”

She wondered many things before she was through. And in the meantime she caught some fish; not the sort she had hoped to catch, however. Pearl, as has been said, was a dreamer. One often dreams of bigger and better things. It was so with her fishing.

Then, of a sudden, she caught her breath and set her teeth hard as she tugged at the stout codfish line.

“It’s a big one,” she told herself as the look of determination on her round freckled face deepened. “A big cod, or maybe a chicken halibut. If only I can land him!”

Two fathoms of line shot through her fingers, cutting them till they bled.

“Can’t hold him—but I’ve got to!” she told herself as, wrapping the line about her hands, she braced herself against the gunwale, tipping her dory to a rakish angle.

“I’ll land him,” she avowed through tight set teeth. “Don won’t laugh at me tonight.”

Like many another girl born and bred on the rugged coast of Maine, Pearl was fond of hand-line fishing. Time and again she had begged her big brother, Don, to take her deep-sea fishing in his sloop.

“Why, little girl,” he would laugh, “look at you! You’re no bigger than a fair-sized beefsteak cod yourself. If you got one on a line he’d pull you overboard. Then we’d have an awful time telling which was you and which the fish, one or t’other. You just stay and wash your dishes, sister. We’ll catch the fish.”

Pearl did wash her dishes. She did a great many other things besides. But when the work was done and the tide was right, she would dig a pail of clams for bait and go rowing away to the Witches Cove.

Usually she returned with a string of cunners and shiny pollocks.

That there were some wary old rock cod hiding away in the secret watery recesses at the bottom of Witches Cove she had always known. That a halibut weighing fifty pounds had once been caught there she knew also.

So to-night, with hopes high and nerves all a-tingle, she tugged at the line.

“Tire him out,” she told herself grimly. She threw her shoulders back and gave a tremendous tug. Without warning the line went dead slack.

“Lost him,” she all but sobbed.

“But no.” As she reeled rapidly in, there came another tug. Not so strong now. She had no difficulty pulling the catch toward her.

“Tangled round some kelp before,” she told herself disappointedly. “Only a small one after all.”

That she was partly wrong, she knew in a moment. A broad spot of white appeared in the dark waters beneath her, and a moment later she was landing a halibut weighing perhaps twenty-five pounds.

“Oh, you beauty!” she exclaimed. “Now they can’t say I’m not a fisherman!”

The two kinds of fish most relished by the coast of Maine people are sword fish and young halibut. Pearl’s mother would be delighted. Don and some of the other boys were off on a long fishing cruise. There had been no really fine fish in the house for more than a week.

For some little time, while she regained her poise, Pearl sat admiring her catch.

“I got you,” she said at last.

Then of a sudden her face clouded. “After all,” she told herself, “it’s nothing, catching a fish. The grand old times are gone. Nothing ever really happens. If only I’d lived in the days of great, great, great grandfather Josia Bracket. Those were the brave days!”

As she closed her eyes she seemed to see Casco Bay as it had been in the pioneer times when the first Bracket landed there.

“No houses, no stores, no steamships,” she told herself. “No city of Portland, no summer tourists, no ferry boats. Only a cabin here, another there, woods and water and skulking Indians, and the whole wide world to live and fight in. What wonderful days!”

As she opened her eyes she started. As if willing to conform to her wishes, nature had blotted out the present as far as that might be done. A heavy fog drifting silently in from the sea had hidden the wharves and storage houses in Portland Harbor, and the homes that line the shore of Peak’s Island. Even the cliffs that formed Witches Cove were growing shadowy and unreal.

A fog, however, be it ever so dense, cannot shut out all signs of progress. A moment had passed when the ding-dong of a bell reached her ears.

“There!” she exclaimed, shaking her fist at the bell buoy which, however invisible through the fog, kept up its steady ding-dong. “There now! You’ve gone and spoiled it all. I’d like to tie my sweater about your noisy tongue!”

“But of course that won’t do. The boat from Booth Bay Harbor will be passing in an hour or two. If this fog keeps up, the pilot will need your noisy voice to guide him through.”

“Oh, well,” she sighed, “what’s the use of fussing? Fish a little longer, then go home.”

She settled back in the bow of her light dory, with the prow tilting at a rakish angle, baited her hook and cast the line overboard.

Fishing wasn’t likely to be over exciting now. She had made her record catch. Never before had she landed one so large and fine. What she wanted most of all

was to sit and dream a while, to dream of the brave deeds of long ago.

And such a time to dream! Even the cliffs twenty yards away were lost to her sight now. A ring of white fog, her boat and her own little self, that was all there was to her present world.

“Indians over there on Peak’s Island,” she told herself, still dreaming. “Indians and some French. Settlers on Portland Head all crowded into the stockade. Going to be a battle. Some soldiers in a big ship anchored far out. They don’t know. A message is needed. I’ll go in my little dory.

“Will you please be still!” she exclaimed as the bell buoy clanged louder than ever as a great swell came sweeping in from the sea.

The bell did not keep still. *Ding-dong, Ding-dong, Ding-dong*, it spoke of cliffs and shallows and of a channel between that was safe, wide and deep.

The girl gave her attention to fishing. Cunnners took her bait. She caught a small one, but threw him back. A great old cod, red with iodine from the kelp, gave her a thrill. He snapped at her bait, snagged on the hook, then shook himself free.

“Go it!” she exclaimed. “What’s cod beside chicken halibut? Wouldn’t—”

She broke short off. The ding-dong of that buoy bell never had sounded so near before.

Ding-dong, Ding-dong. It seemed to be at her very side. She gave a pull at her anchor line.

“Fast enough,” she told herself. “Not drifting toward the buoy. Besides, wouldn’t drift that way. Tide’s setting out.”

The big red cod or another of his sort claimed her attention. She teased him by bobbing bait up and down. She loaded the hook with juicy clams and tried again. This time it seemed that success must crown her efforts. The fish was hooked. She began reeling in.

“A beauty!” she whispered as a great red head appeared close to the surface. And then, with a last mighty effort, the fish tore himself free.

“Oh!” she cried, “You—”

Ding-dong, Ding-dong.

She started, looked about, then stood straight up to stare open mouthed at what she saw.

And at that moment, faint and from far away there came the hoarse hoot of the fog horn on the steamer from Booth Bay Harbor.

“A hundred passengers on that boat,” she thought as her heart stood still, “perhaps two hundred, three hundred people, men, women and children, many little children coming home from a joyous vacation.”

She looked again at the thing she had seen and could scarcely believe her eyes.

Dim, indistinct but unmistakable, had appeared the outline of a steel frame, and at its center a large bell.

“Like a ghost,” she told herself.

“But it’s no ghost!” Instantly she sprang into action. Cutting her fish line, she allowed it to drift. Dragging up her dripping anchor, she dropped it into the boat. Then, gripping the oars, she put all her strength into a dozen strokes that brought her with a bump against the side of the steel frame from which the bell hung suspended.

The next thing she did was strange, indeed. Having removed her heavy wool sweater, she wrapped it tightly about the clapper of the bell, then tied it securely there with a stout cod line.

“There now,” she said, breathing heavily as she sank to a sitting position on one of the hollow steel floats that prevented the bell and its frame from sinking. “Now, perhaps you will keep still and let me dream.”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, suddenly attempting to stand up. “The dory’s gone!”

It was true. In her haste to muffle the bell, she had failed to tie her painter securely. Now it had drifted away into the fog.

“Time to dream now,” she told herself ruefully. “May never do anything else.”

To one who knows little of the ways of boats and buoys and other things belonging to the sea, the girl’s acts might seem madness.

They were not. By some mischance, the chain fastened to a huge rock at the bottom of the channel, which held the bell buoy to its place, had given way. The bell buoy still clanging its message, now a false message indeed, was drifting out to sea. If the S. S. Standish, the Booth Bay Harbor steamer, were guided by this false message catastrophe would befall her. With all on board she would go crashing into a cliff or be piled upon some rocky shoal.

Pearl could see it all, just as it would happen. A terrible crash, then unutterable confusion. Men shouting, children crying, women praying, seamen struggling and the black sea closing down upon a sinking ship.

“But now, thank God,” she said fervently, “it shall not be. Not hearing the bell, having no sure guide, they will stand away till the fog lifts.”

Then of a sudden her heart went cold and beads of perspiration started out on her forehead. What was to come of her? With her dory gone, she was going straight out to sea on the frame of a drifting buoy. What chance could there be?

A moment of calm thought, a whispered prayer, and she shut the thought from her mind. She was doing her plain duty. She was in God’s care. That was enough.

The hoot of the steamer’s fog horn sounded louder. Nearer and nearer they came. They had passed the Witch Rock bell in safety. There was need of Pearl’s bell buoy now.

Of a sudden she caught the clang of the bell, the pilot’s signal for half speed.

“He’s missed the bell. They are safe. They’ll lay outside until the fog lifts. Thank-thank God!”

Still she drifted out to sea. But her own peril was lost in great joy because of the safety of others.

Another jangling of bells. Quarter speed.

A thought struck her all of a heap. Hastily unwrapping the bell clapper of the buoy, she struck the bell a sharp tap. Again, again and yet again this strange signal sounded. It was the pilot's signal for half speed.

Three times she repeated it. Then came the ship's bell with the same signal.

"They heard," she whispered tensely.

Then, with a throbbing heart, she sent out in Morse signals the call for help, S. O. S.

There sounded the rattle of chains. They were lowering a boat.

Moments of silence followed, then from out the fog there came,

"Ahoy there!"

Sweeter words were never heard by any girl.

"Ahoy there!" she called back.

A moment more, and four astonished seamen stared at a girl riding a drifting buoy.

* * * * *

"What you doing on the buoy?" said the kind-hearted and grateful captain as Pearl climbed aboard the steamer and was surrounded by curious passengers.

"Why I—I was fishing. I caught a chicken halibut and——"

Of a sudden her eyes went wide; her dory and chicken halibut were gone.

"Yes, yes, go on," said the eager members of the group. She succeeded in finishing her story, but all through the telling there flashed into her mind the picture of her dory and the only chicken halibut she had ever caught, drifting out to sea.

All up and down the deck, as they waited for the fog to lift, grateful passengers

and crew repeated the girl's story. And always at the end they added, "Lost her fish. Lost her dory. Too bad!"

"Well, young lady," a gruff Irish voice said as Pearl spun round to listen, "you seem born to adventure."

The girl found herself looking into the eyes of Captain Patrick O'Connor, he of the pirate crew of the *Black Gull*.

"Yes, I do," she replied in uncertain tones.

"Lay by this, young lady," the Captain went on, "that buoy chain was cut."

"Cut?"

"Certain was. Them buoys are inspected regular. Look! They've brought the buoy alongside. They're hoistin' her on board. Mark my word, the chain's not worn much, not enough to cause her to break."

It was not. As they examined the end of the chain, they found no marks of hammer, file or hack-saw, but the last link was nearly as perfect as when first forged.

"Of course, they wouldn't leave the cut link to tell on 'em," O'Connor leaned over to whisper in the girl's ear. "They're told on sure enough, all the same."

"But-but—" the girl stammered, trying in vain to understand, "if I hadn't found it, if I hadn't silenced its lying tongue, you'd have gone on the rocks."

"So we would, young lady. And there's them hidin' away along these here waters as would have been glad to see it. There's twenty-four men aboard this ship, that's hated worse than death by some.

"Come over here in the corner," he bent low to whisper in her ear, "an' I'll tell you a few things. You're old enough to know 'em, old enough and wise enough to help some, I'll be bound."

The story he told her was one of smugglers uncaught, of goods brought in without duty, and of men refused right of entry into the United States who, nevertheless, were here.

“They land from somewhere, somehow, in Portland Harbor, or in Casco Bay,” he added. “It’s our duty, the duty of every good American, to find out how and where they come from.

“I suppose your cousin Ruth told you about seeing us pirates the other night?” he said, leaning close.

“Yes.” The girl’s heart leaped. Was a secret to be told? Yes, here it came.

“We wasn’t real pirates; you guessed that. It was only a blind, a masquerade party, but a party with as firm a purpose as ever American patriot ever held. We’re bound together, us twenty-four, in a solemn vow to rid Casco Bay of this menace to our land. And you can help, for a girl sees things sometimes that men never get near.”

“Yes,” said Pearl.

She wanted to tell of the bolts of cloth on the wood schooner, of the dory in the night and the face in the fire. “But those,” she told herself, “are more Ruth’s secrets than mine. I’ll wait and ask her first.”

Meanwhile the fog was clearing. The rocks of Cushing’s Island and the shore line of Peak’s Island were showing through. Very soon they were moving slowly forward. Before Pearl knew it, they were at the dock in Portland Harbor.

“Young lady,” said the Captain of the *Standish*, “we’d like a few facts to enter in our log. Will you please come to my cabin?”

Very much confused at being the guest of so great a man, Pearl found it hard to answer questions intelligently.

When at last the ordeal was over, the Captain led her to the steamer’s side.

“Look down there,” he said, smiling.

“A new dory, all green and red!” said Pearl.

“And a halibut,” said the Captain. “You lost a halibut, didn’t you say?”

“Why yes, I——”

“The dory and fish are yours,” he said gruffly. “Present from passengers and crew. Little token of—of—Oh, hang it, girl! Climb down and show us you can row her.”

Pearl went down a rope ladder like a monkey. A moment later, waving a joyous, tearful farewell to her new friends, she turned the shining dory’s prow toward home and rowed away.

CHAPTER VI

OFF FOR FURTHER ADVENTURE

Pearl returned home that evening to find a door to new and strange adventure standing wide open before her.

Donald, her brother, was seated before a small fire in the low old-fashioned fireplace at the back of their living room.

“Don!” she cried joyously. “You home?”

“Yep.” Big, broad shouldered, sea tanned, Don turned to smile at her.

“Don, I caught a halibut, a twenty-five pounder!”

“No?”

“I did.”

“Let’s see it.”

“I—I can’t. It went out to sea in my dory. But Don! I’ve got a new dory and a bigger halibut.”

“No?” Don rose.

“Come on. I’ll show you.”

“That,” said Don after inspecting the dory fore and aft, and listening to her story, “is a right fine dory, staunch and seaworthy. I’d like to take it to Monhegan.”

“Monhegan?” Pearl’s heart gave a great leap. Monhegan! The dream island of

every coast child's heart. Don was going there.

"Yes," said Don. "Swordfishing is played out, and the canners have all the horse mackerel they can use this season. I've decided to pack my lobster traps on the sloop and go up about there somewhere, mebbly only Booth Bay Harbor. All depends. They say lobster catches are fine on the shoals up there."

"But Don," Pearl's eyes shone with a new hope, "if you take my dory, you'll take me. You won't spend all your time tending lobster pots. There's fine fishing up there. I caught a halibut. You'll take me, won't you?"

"Well," said Don, thoughtfully, "I might. You'd get lonesome, though. Nobody but me and you and the sea; that is, nobody that we know."

"Take Ruth, too," Pearl said quickly. "You should have heard her talk about Monhegan over there by the old fort. She'll be wild to go. And she is considerable of a fisherman, good as most men."

Don considered the proposition. Ruth was his cousin. They had been much together on the sea. Unlike his dreamy little sister, she had always been able and practical.

"Why, yes," he said at last, "I don't see why she shouldn't go, if she wants to."

Ruth was overjoyed at the prospect. She had no trouble in obtaining permission to go, for, though Don had barely turned twenty, he was known as one of the ablest seamen on all Casco Bay, and no one feared to sail with him.

So, one day when the sky was clear and the water a sheet of blue, they rounded the island and went scudding away toward the island of many dreams.

As old Fort Skammel faded from their sight, Ruth thought of the unsolved mystery hidden there and resolved to delve more deeply into it as soon as she returned from this trip.

Someone has said that all of life is closely interwoven, that warp and woof, it is all one. Certainly this at times appears to be true. There was that lurking in the immediate future which was to connect experiences at Monhegan with the old fort's hidden secret. But this for a time was hidden by the veil of the future which ever hangs like a fog just before us.

CHAPTER VII

SOME LOBSTERS

It was strange. As Donald Bracket shaded his eyes to peer into the driving fog he seemed to see a face. The muscles of that face were twisted into a smile. Not a pleasant smile, it came near being a leer.

Of course, there was no face; only an after image that had somehow crept up from the shadowy recesses of his brain. A very vivid image, it remained there against the fog for many seconds before it slowly faded.

“Peter Tomingo,” he said to himself. “It’s fairly spooky, as if he had sent us out to get into this mess, knowing we’d fall into it.

“But then,” he thought a moment later as he steered his sloop square into the heart of a great wave, “he didn’t know. No one could foretell such a storm four days in advance. Besides, he couldn’t count on my coming out this very day.”

“Whew!” He caught his breath. Cutting its way through the crest of the wave, his twenty-foot fishing boat went plunging down the other side. For a matter of seconds the air about him was all white spray. This passed, but the driving fog remained.

“Good thing the canvas is there.” He tightened a rope that held a protecting canvas across the prow of his boat. “Be dangerous to get one’s motor wet in such a blow. Might be fatal.”

Once more, wrinkling his brow, he stared into the fog. “Wish I could sight Monhegan. Wish——”

An exclamation escaped his lips. He drew his hands hastily across his eyes. The

face, the crafty smile, were there again. The lips appeared to move. They seemed to be saying:

“The shoal is just there. Plenty da lobsters. Plenty big. Wanta go. Boat too small, mine. Too far froma da shore. Plenty da lobster. Get reech queek.”

“Well, anyway, he told the truth,” Don said to himself. “There are lobsters aplenty.” He glanced down at a crate where a mass of legs, eyes and great green pinchers squirmed and twisted while the boat, worried by the ever increasing storm, rolled and pitched like a bit of drift in a mountain cataract.

He threw a look at the two water drenched girls, Pearl and Ruth, who sat huddled in the prow, and his brow wrinkled.

“Have to get out of this,” he told himself, taking a fresh grip on his steering stick. “Only question is, where?”

That indeed was the question. Fifteen miles to the westward was the mainland and rocky shores little known to him. He was far from his usual fishing ground. Somewhere out there in the fog, perhaps very near, scarcely a mile long, a mere granite boulder jutting out of the sea, was the island called Monhegan. Smaller rocks jutting up from the sea formed a safe harbor for this island. Once there he could weather the storm in safety. Again he shaded his eyes to peer into the fog.

For a full moment, with straining eyes, he stood there motionless. Then of a sudden a sigh of satisfaction escaped his lips. Towering a hundred or more feet above the sea, a bold headline loomed before him.

“Black Head,” he whispered. “That’s better.”

Touching his lever, he set his boat at a slight angle to the rushing waves, then took a deep breath. The battle was begun, not finished. The channel that led to Monhegan’s cozy harbor was narrow. It was guarded by nature’s sentinels—black and frowning rocks on one side, reefs booming and white on the other. Many a stauncher boat than his had turned back before these perils. The rocky shore of Monhegan has taken its toll of lives all down the years.

“It is to be a battle,” he exulted, “and I shall win!”

In the meantime, while his immediate attention was devoted to the present

struggle, the questions regarding Tomingo and the lobster industry were revolving themselves in the back of his mind.

They, the three of them, Don, Ruth and Pearl, had reached the mainland nearest to the island of Monhegan, Booth Bay Harbor, in safety. There they had taken up their abode in an abandoned fisherman's shack. Shortly after that Don had met Tomingo.

To Tomingo he had confided his plans for lobster trapping. Tomingo had told him of the reef far out from the mainland, but near Monhegan, where the lobster fishing was unusually good. Without thinking much about it, he had followed the tip. The weather had been fine. Having piled his motor boat high with lobster pots, he had gone pop-popping away toward Monhegan.

He had experienced no difficulty in finding the long sunken reef Tomingo had pointed out on the chart. He had baited his pots with codfish heads, then dropped them one by one along the reef. After adjusting the bright red floats, each marked with his initials, he had cast an appraising eye along the tossing string of them, then turned his boat's prow toward his shack.

"Fifteen miles is a long way to come for lobsters," he had thought to himself. "But the reefs close in are fished out. If the catch is good I'll do well enough."

A two days' storm had kept him from his traps. The morning of this, the third day, had promised fair weather; so with his sister and cousin on board, he had ventured out. Nature had kept but half her promise. Fair weather had continued while he was visiting the shoal. The work of lifting the traps had been particularly difficult. Ruth had given him a ready hand at this. Six traps were fairly loaded with lobsters. A seventh had been torn in pieces by a fifteen pound codfish that had blundered into it. Another trap had been demolished by a dogfish. All the other traps had yielded a fair harvest.

"It sure was a good catch," the boy told himself as he thought of it now. "Never had a better."

"But that Tomingo," he thought again. "Why did he tell me about it, me, a stranger and an American?"

That, indeed, was a question worthy of consideration. The conflict between native born and foreign born fishermen all along the Maine coast has for many

long years been a hard-fought and bitter one. At times floats have been cut and traps set adrift and sharp battles fought with fists and clubbed oars. It seemed inconceivable, now that he thought of it, that any foreigner should have told him of this rich fishing ground.

“It is true,” he told himself, “that Tomingo’s boat is smaller and less seaworthy than mine. I wouldn’t want to come this far in it myself. But some of his friends and fellow countrymen have far better boats than mine. Why should they not fish that shoal?”

He could not answer this question. “There’s a trick in it somewhere, I’ll be bound, and I’ll find it soon enough without doubt. Meanwhile there is business at hand.”

And, indeed, there was. The frowning rocks of Black Head, Burnt Head and Skull Rock loomed squarely before him. He had been told enough to know that this was the back of the island, that he must round the point to the left, circle half about the island and enter from the other side.

“Going to be a hard pull,” he said, setting his teeth hard, “but if the old engine stays with me I’ll make it.”

The memory of that next hour will remain with the boy as long as the stars shine down upon him and the sun brightens his mornings.

The wind, the fog, the storm, the falling night. Above the roar of the sea a long-drawn voice, hoarse and insistent, never ending, the voice of Manana, the great fog horn that, driven by great engines, watched over night and day, warned of rocky shoals and disaster.

With that voice sounding in his ears, with damp spray cutting sharply across his face, with his light craft like a frightened rabbit leaping from wave to wave, he steered clear of Black Head, White Head and Skull Rock, to round the point and come swinging round toward the narrow entrance where he would find safe haven or a grave.

He was heading for what he believed to be the channel when a light creeping slowly across the sky caught and held his attention. It was growing dark now, difficult to see ten yards before him. He needed to get in at once. For all this, the mysterious light intrigued him. Beginning at the right, it moved slowly over a

narrow arc against the black sky. Pausing for the merest fraction of a second, it appeared to retrace its way over an invisible celestial way.

“What can it be?” For a moment he was bewildered. Then, like a flash it came to him. He was looking at the crest of the great rock that lay before Monhegan. On Monhegan a powerful light was set. As it played backward and forward it tinged the crest of Manana, as the rock was called, with a faint halo of glory.

“What a boon to the sailor!” he thought. “What real heroes are those who live on this bleak island winter and summer! What—”

His thoughts broke straight off. Before him he had caught an appalling sound, the rush of surf beating upon a rocky shoal.

Reflected from Manana, a single gleam of light gave him further warning. The shoals were just before him. The waves there were breaking mountain high. Turning his boat squarely about, he set his engine to doing its best and trusted himself to the trough of a wave. Instantly there came a drenching crash of cold black water.

He clung desperately to his course. Any moment the engine, deluged by a greater sea, might go dead. Then would come the end.

“But there’s no other way.” He set his teeth hard.

Once more he caught the moving gleam across the sky. That gleam saved him. He held to a course perpendicular to its line of motion as long as he dared. Then, swinging through a quarter circle he shot straight ahead. Five minutes later, drenched to the skin, panting from excitement and well nigh exhausted, but now quite safe, he ran his boat alongside a punt where a yellow light gleamed.

“Hello!” said a voice. A lantern held high revealed a boyish face. “Pretty lucky you got in. Nasty night. Some blow!” said the boy.

“Wouldn’t have made it,” said Don, “only I caught the gleam on the crest of Manana. It guided me in.”

“Tie up,” invited the boy. “I’ll take you ashore in my punt.”

“What you got there?” he asked in a surprised tone as the light of his lantern fell

upon the crate.

“Lobsters,” said Don.

“Lobsters?” The boy let out a whistle of surprise. “Where’d you get ’em?”

“On a shoal, little way out.” Don hadn’t meant to tell that. He hadn’t liked the sound of that whistle. He spoke before he thought.

“You’d better watch out,” said the other boy. Then without allowing time for further remarks, “All set? Hop in then. I got to go ashore. The gang will be looking for me.”

As the young stranger rowed the two girls and Don ashore, Don wondered over his strange warning.

“You better look out!” What could he have meant? He wanted to ask. Natural reserve held him back.

Only once during the short journey was the silence broken. They were passing a boat covered with canvas and sunk to the gunwale.

“What’s that for?” Don asked.

“Lobster pond. Keep lobsters there.”

“Why do they keep them?”

“There are a hundred or more of us summer folks out here,” the other boy explained. “We like a lobster salad now and then. They keep them for us. Mighty decent of them to bother. A fine lot, these fishermen. Real sports.”

Don thought it strange that lobsters should be kept when there was a steady market for them and they were to be caught out here with comparative ease. However, he asked no further questions.

“Thanks for the lift.” He stood looking up at the few lights that gleamed through the fog. “Suppose I’ll have to stay here all night.”

“Suppose so. I’d take you to our cottage, but it’s small. We’re full up. Couldn’t

crowd one more in an end. There's a summer hotel up yonder."

"Summer hotel. Four dollars up. Society folks." Don looked down at his sodden garments. "No, thanks. Where do the fisherfolk live? I'm one of them."

"Why——" The boy appeared surprised. "Captain Field lives just down there beyond the wharf. But you wouldn't go there?"

"Wouldn't? Why not?" Something in the other boy's tone angered Donald.

"You ought to know." The boy's tone was sharp. He turned to go.

"But I don't."

"Then you're dumb. That's all I have to say for you. You're breaking into the closed season on lobsters. You couldn't do anything worse."

"The closed season!" Don's eyes opened wide. "You're crazy. There's no closed season on lobsters, not in the State of Maine."

"On Monhegan there is, and believe me it's tight closed. Try it out and see."

"But that would have to be a law. No one owns the shoals."

"Guess if you lived on this rocky island winter and summer, heat, cold, supplies, no supplies, if you took it all as it came, you'd feel that you owned the shoals. That's the way the folks here feel. They want time to fish for cod and take summer parties about, so they haul up their traps and call June to November a closed season.

"Listen!" The other boy's tone was kindly now. "You seem a decent sort. I don't know what got you out here. But you go back. Take your traps with you. When people live in a place like this they've got a right to make a few laws. Know those Italian fishermen over at the Bay?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes, one of them. Tomingo."

"Tomingo. That's his name. He's their leader. They tried trapping on the Monhegan shoals. Know what happened? Someone cut their floats. Never found their traps, nor the lobsters in 'em. Goodnight. Wish you luck." The boy

disappeared into the fog.

So that was it! And that was why Tomingo was so willing to direct him to rich lobster fields! Don sat limply down upon a rock. The two girls stood staring at him in silence.

“He wanted to keep us off any ground he might wish to trap on, and wanted to repay a debt to these Monheganites,” he said to his companions.

For five minutes he sat there enshrouded in fog, buried in thought.

“Closed season!” he exploded at last. “What nonsense! Who ever heard of such a thing? Of course, we won’t pay any attention to it. And if they cut my floats I’ll have them in jail for it. There are laws enough against that.”

With this resolve firmly fixed in his mind, but with an uneasy feeling lurking there as well, he thought once more of supper and a bed for the night.

“We’ll go to this Captain Field’s place,” he said to the girls. “I’ll tell him I am a fisherman from Peak’s Island. That’s true. I’ll get an early start in the morning. He need never know about my catch of lobsters.”

With this settled in his mind he led the way round the bank, across the wharf and up the grass grown path that led to the dimly gleaming light that shone from Captain Field’s window.

A half hour later, with thoughts of the forbidden lobsters crowded far back in the hidden recesses of their minds, the trio found themselves doing full justice to great steaming bowls of clam chowder topped by a wedge of native blueberry pie.

All this time and for a long while after, Don talked of sails and fishing, nets, harpoons, and long sea journeys with his smiling, lean-faced and fit appearing host. Captain Field, though still a young man, had earned his papers well, for he had sailed the Atlantic in every type of craft and had once shipped as a harpooner on a swordfishing boat outfitted in Portland harbor.

As they talked Don’s eyes roved from corner to corner of the cabin. Everything within was scrupulously clean, but painfully plain, much of it hand hewn with rough and ready tools.

As if reading his thoughts, the young Captain smiled as he said:

“There’s not a lot of money to be had on Monhegan. The ground’s too rough for farming or cattle. We fish in summer and trap lobsters in winter. But we must have an eye on the purse strings every day of the year.”

As he said this a curly-haired girl of eight and a brown-faced boy of six came to kneel by their mother’s knee to say their goodnight prayers.

As he bowed his head with them, something very like a stab ran through Don’s heart and a voice seemed to whisper:

“You are a thief. You are robbing these little ones and their honest parents of their bread. They endure all the hardships of the year. You come to reap a golden harvest from their lobster fields while their backs are turned.”

He retired soon after. The bed they gave him was a good one. He was tired, yet he did not sleep. For a full hour he thrashed about. Then a sudden resolve put him to rest.

As is the way with persons endowed with particularly splendid physique, Ruth, in the broad rope bed beside her cousin, fell asleep at once. She had wrestled long that day with trap lines. The struggle to reach shore had been fatiguing. Her sleep was sweet and dreamless.

Not so with Pearl. Her mind ever filled with fancy, was now overflowing. She was now on Monhegan, the island of her dreams. She recalled as if they were told yesterday the tales she had heard told of this island by her seafaring uncle before she was old enough to go to school.

“Oh, Uncle,” she had cried. “Take me there! Take me to Monhegan!”

“Some day, child,” he had promised.

Alas, poor man, he had not lived to fulfill his promise. Like many another brave fisherman, he had lost his life on the dreary banks of Newfoundland.

“Dear Uncle,” she whispered as her throat tightened, “now I am here. Here! And I know you must be glad.”

The storm was still on. She could hear the distant beat of waves on Black Head, Burnt Head and Skull Rock. The great fog horn still sent out its message from Manana.

“Hoo-who-ee-Whoo-oo!” Sometimes rising, sometimes falling, it seemed a measureless human voice shouting in the night. The sound of it was haunting.

Rising and wrapping a blanket about her, the girl went to the low window sill, to drop upon the floor and sit there staring into the night.

There was little enough to see. The night was black. But across the crest of that great rock, the spot of light played incessantly.

“Fifteen miles out to sea,” she thought. “Seems strange. One does not feel that this house rested on land. It is more as if this were a ship’s cabin, the lighthouse our search light, the fog horn our signal, and we sail on and on into the night. We _____”

She was awakened from this dream by an unfamiliar sound, thundering that was not waves beating a shore, that might have been the roar of the distant battle front.

A moment passed, and then she knew.

“A seaplane,” she thought suddenly. “And on such a night! Why, that can mean only one thing, a trans-Atlantic flyer!”

How her heart leaped at the thought! She recalled with a tremor the day she got news of “Lindy’s marvelous achievement.”

Such flyers had become fairly common now. Yet she had never seen one in his flight.

“If he comes near enough,” she said to herself, straining her eyes in a vain attempt to pierce the inky blackness of the night.

Then a new thought striking her all of a heap set her shuddering. “What if he does not realize he is near Monhegan? If he is flying low, he will crash.”

Involuntarily a little prayer went up for the lone navigator of the night air.

Nor was the prayer unheeded. As she looked a dark spot appeared over Manana. Then the plane came into full view. As if set to the task, the light from the island beacon followed the aviator in his flight. Ten seconds he was in full view. Then he was gone, passed on into the night.

“Why!” the girl exclaimed, catching her breath, “How—how strange!”

The thing she had seen *was* strange. A broad-winged seaplane with a wide fusilage that might have been a cabin for carrying three or four passengers, had passed. The strange part of it all was that it was painted the dull gray-green of a cloudy sea, and carried not one single insignia of any nation.

“The Flying Dutchman of the air,” she thought as a thrill ran up her spine.

For a long time she sat there staring at the darkness of night that had swallowed up the mysterious ship of the air.

At last, with a shudder, for the night air of Monhegan is chill even in summer, she rose to creep beneath the blankets beside her sleeping companion.

She was about to drift away to the land of dreams, when she thought of Captain O’Connor and what he had told her of smugglers along the Maine coast.

“Can it be?” she thought. “But no! One would not risk his life crossing the ocean in a seaplane just to smuggle in a few hundred dollars’ worth of lace or silk or whatever it might be. ’Twouldn’t be worth the cost.

“But men,” she thought quite suddenly. “He said something about smuggling men into the country. It might be——”

Her eyes were drooping. The day had been long. The salt sea air lay heavy upon her. She fell asleep.

It was a little dark when Don arose. The girls were still asleep. Somewhat to his surprise, as he reached the beach he found the boy of the previous night there before him.

“Sleep here?” he asked good-naturedly.

“Nope.” There was something in Don’s look that made this boy like him. “Going

so soon? Want me to take you out?”

“Thanks. Yes.”

“Where is Captain Field’s lobster pond?” Don asked as the punt bumped the side of his boat.

“That green one.” The boy opened his eyes wide. “Why?”

“Nothing. Give me a lift, will you?” Don was tugging at the crate of lobsters in the bottom of his motor boat.

“There!” he sighed as the crate dropped into the punt. “Just row me over to the Field lobster pond, will you?”

Once there, to the boy’s astonishment, Don loosed the lacings of the canvas on Field’s lobster pond, then one at a time he took the lobsters from his crate and dropped them into the pond.

“He buy them from you?” The younger boy was incredulous.

“No.”

“You quitting?”

Don nodded.

“I like you for that.” The other boy put out a hand. For a second Don gripped it. Then, together they rowed back to the motor boat.

The sea was calm now. Twirling the wheel to his motor, Don went pop-popping away to his lobster traps. Having lifted these, he piled them high on the deck, then turned his prow once more toward Monhegan. His lobster fishing days on Monhegan shoals were at an end. But he was not going to leave Monhegan, not just yet. The wild charm of the place had got him. Strange and startling things were yet to greet him there.

CHAPTER VIII

FROM OUT THE FOG

Despite the fog that lay low over the water, the sea was choppy. The fisherman who rode in the improvised crow's nest in the forward rigging of the fishing sloop rose ten feet in air to fall, then to rise and fall again. There was a tossing, whirling motion that would have made most girls deathly sick. Not so this one; for the fisherman who stood there ever gripping the harpoon, with alert eyes watching, ever watching the narrow circle of fogbound ocean, was Ruth.

Swordfish had been reported off Monhegan; in fact Captain Field had brought in a modest-sized one only the day before.

Although Don and the two girls had decided that lobster trapping on the Monhegan shoals was unfair to those daring souls who made their home on these wave-beaten shores, they were spending a few days on the island.

"May never be here again," Don had said. "From all I can see, it's not quite like anything on earth.

"I'm going to Booth Bay on the mail tug. The sea has calmed down quite a bit. If you girls want to have a try at something, deep sea cod, horse mackerel, or even swordfish, why there's the sloop. Safe enough as long's you keep in sound of the fog horn or sight of the island. Go ahead."

Because swordfishing is quite the most thrilling type of fishing on all the coast, and because these huge battlers of the deep bring a marvelous price when caught, Ruth had elected to go swordfishing. And here they were.

There was some fog, but as long as the hoarse *Whoo-whooo-oo* of the fog horn on Manana sounded in their ears, they were safe. That sound would guide them

back.

Dressed as she was in faded knickers and a ragged lumberjack, with a boy's cap pulled down tight over her unruly locks, one might easily have taken this stalwart girl of the Maine coast for a boy, or, at the distance, even for a man.

"Guess we won't see any to-day," she shouted back to Pearl at the wheel.

"Thickening up," Pearl replied.

"May burn off later."

"May."

"We might drop anchor and try for cod," said Ruth. "There are lines and bait in the forward cabin. We——"

She broke short off to stare away to the right. The next second she gripped her harpoon more securely as she uttered a command almost in a whisper.

The capable hands of her sixteen-year-old cousin gave the wheel a turn. The boat bore away to the right. The look on Pearl's face became animated. She knew what the command meant. A great fish of one sort or another had broken water.

"Probably a horse mackerel," she told herself. "Might be a swordfish, though. If it is—if she gets him! Oh, boy!"

The two girls had not been harpooning often, so this little adventure was a real treat. Even a horse mackerel would be worth something.

"But a swordfish," Pearl told herself with a real thrill, "one of them may be worth a hundred dollars. And oh, boy! think of the thrill of the chase!"

The big girl in the crow's nest was not dreaming. With blue eyes intent, with the color in her cheek heightened with excitement, she was studying an object that, now lifting on the crest of a wave, showed black against the skyline and now, with scarcely a perceptible motion, disappeared beneath the sea.

"Never saw a fish behave like that," she told herself. "Acts like a log—almost—not quite. A log does not go under unless a wave hits it. This thing does. Shaped

like a swordfish. But whoever heard of a swordfish acting that way?"

Once more she turned her head to broadcast an order in a tone that was all but a whisper.

"It is a swordfish," she whispered back, ten seconds later. "I saw his sword. He's a monster!"

A swordfish! Her mind was in a whirl. Suppose they got him! A hundred dollars. What did it not mean to those fisherfolk! A new suit for her father, a dress for herself, a new stove for the kitchen and perhaps a new punt. They needed a new one badly.

"A swordfish! It is! It is!" Her heart pounded furiously against her ribs as the boat came closer, ever closer to that languid black monster that now rising, now sinking, seemed half asleep.

A moment passed. Pearl caught the black gleam before her, and her eyes shone as her tense muscles gripped the wheel. Pearl was standing up now. Breathlessly she waited.

As for the girl in the crow's nest, for the first time in her life she was experiencing "buck fever." Little wonder. Never before had she cast for a swordfish, yet here before her a monster cut the waves. His five-foot sword dripped with foam as he rolled lazily over and sank.

"Gone!" The tense muscles that had frozen her hands to the harpoon relaxed.

A minute passed. And then——

"There! There he is!" came in a tense whisper from the stern.

Towering above the sea, her bronze face alight, the girl in the crow's nest lifted an arm. With skill and precision she poised her harpoon, then let fly.

"Got him!" came from the stern.

Something splashed into the water. An empty keg sealed up tight and fastened securely to the harpoon rope, had been thrown overboard. It would mark the progress of the struggling fish.

But, strangely enough, the great fish did not struggle overmuch. After a few wallowing flounders in an unavailing attempt to break away from the harpoon line, he went down in a swirl of foam. A moment later he rose to the top and swam heavily away.

Pearl knew what to do. She followed the fish.

“Acts awful queer,” was the big girl’s comment. A cold dread was gripping her heart. What if this fish was sick?

“People don’t eat sick fish,” she told herself. “He’d be a dead loss.”

No food from the sea is more highly prized than is the steak of a swordfish. None brings a higher price in the market. But if the fish was not sound, then all their work went for nothing.

What was this? Some strange object was moving across the surface of the water. Now on the crest of a wave, it plunged into the trough, then, like some living thing, climbed the next wave.

“But it can’t be alive,” she told herself. “It’s only a mass of cloth and twisted stick. Something tailing behind.”

For a moment she stared at this extraordinary phenomenon, an inanimate object moving like a living thing across the water. Then of a sudden she realized that this curious object was following the swordfish.

Like a flash it came over her, and her heart sank. This was a marker, just as her floating barrel was. Someone had caught the fish before her.

“It’s some of those city folks who make their summer home on Monhegan,” she told herself. “Been fishing with a kite. That’s the remains of their kite gliding along down there. They got a fish and have been playing him, tiring him out. That’s why he’s so sort of dead. Oh! Gee!” She rested her head on her arm and wanted to cry.

Angling for swordfish with a kite is a sport indulged in by expert fishermen all along the Atlantic coast. A live herring or other fish of its size is attached to a hook on a line hanging from a kite. The kite is then sailed from a boat over the water in such a manner that the live bait, now beneath the water, now above it,

moves along over the surface like a small flying fish. The quarry, seeing this tempting prize, strikes it, then the fight begins. The task of the sportsman is to tire the great fish out. Of course, if the slender line is broken the prize is lost. The battle sometimes lasts for hours.

It was no sad face that Ruth presented to the yellow oilskin-clad city boy and girl whose motor boat, the *Speed King*, soon hove into view. She wasn't sorry she had spoiled their game. She was glad. She felt that they had no right to make play out of what was work to her and had been to her ancestors for generations.

"What did you do that for?" The city boy in the prow of the boat lifted a clouded and angry face to Ruth. To do him full justice, he had taken her for a boy.

"Do what?" Ruth asked belligerently.

"Harpoon our fish."

"How'd I know it was your fish?"

"Had a line on him."

"Couldn't see your line."

"He was about done for. We'd have had him in another half hour. We've been after him for five hours." The boy held up hands that were cut and bleeding from handling the line. "It's our first one, too."

"Well," said Ruth, and her tone was cold, "since you claim the fish, take him. He won't give you much trouble now. All I want is my line and keg. That ought to satisfy you."

Ruth knew that it wouldn't satisfy. She knew all about this sportsman's ideas of catches. She had murdered their prize. That's the way they would look at it. If they didn't take the fish with such and such tackle, so heavy a line and pole, just such a reel, they had nothing to boast of. She had spoiled their game. But she didn't care. They had spoiled hers, too, and it was more than just a silly game, it was bread and butter, a new stove, some new clothes, a——

The boy began to speak again. His words burned with anger. "That don't satisfy us, you know it don't, you meat hunter you——"

The young girl with very bright eyes that rode beside him, tugging at his arm, stopped the angry flood. She whispered in his ear. Ruth heard, and her face flushed.

What she had said was, "Don't. It's a girl."

This made her more angry than ever, but she controlled her emotions and said no more.

A moment later the *Speed King* turned about and left the circle of fog-ridden sea to Ruth and Pearl and to the great fish that had ceased to struggle.

"Well," said Ruth, rising wearily from her place fifteen minutes later, "since they don't seem to want the fish, guess we'd better take him home. He's worth a lot of money, and we need it."

There was no spirit in her voice. There was no spring in her usually buoyant self as she did the work of dispatching the fish, taking the keg and lashing the prize for a tow to port. She had won what she wanted, but now she had it she was sure she was not going to enjoy it, not even the new dress.

Late that evening she delivered the prize to Captain Field, who promised to carry it to market for her. She wasn't going to get a great deal of joy out of the money, but one could not quite throw it away.

"It's tough luck," Don said as she told him the story that evening. "I suppose those city people must have their sport, but it's a little hard to understand why one person's sport should interfere with another's business."

CHAPTER IX

OFF BLACK HEAD

In the meantime, notwithstanding the fact that Ruth and Pearl were on far away Monhegan, the old Fort Skammel mystery was not entirely neglected, nor was the sleepy old fortress allowed to bask unmolested in the sun.

With her two newly made pals away, Betty Bronson, who had lived for a long time on the banks of the romantic Chicago River, and who had but recently been taken up by a wealthy benefactress, found life hanging heavy on her hands. The ladies in the big summer cottage on the hill, which was her present home, drank quantities of tea, played numberless games of bridge, and gossiped as ladies will. All of which interested Betty not at all.

Fishing off the dock was not exciting. She tried for cunners off the rocks at the back of the island and was promptly and efficiently drenched from head to toe by an insolent wave.

After three days of this sort of thing she was prepared for any wild and desperate adventure. Hiring a punt from Joe Trott, she rowed across the bay to the old fort.

The day was bright and the bay calm. The grass by the old fort was as motionless and silent as were the massive stones which made up the walls of the fort.

“Peaceful,” she thought. “What could be more so? Like the schoolhouse by the road, the old fort is a ragged beggar sunning.”

No sooner had she gripped a flashlight and crept through a narrow square where once a massive cannon had protruded, than all this was changed. As if to make reality doubly real, the sun for a moment passed under a cloud, and the great

silent circular chamber, which had once known the cannons' roar, became dark at midday.

“Boo!” she shuddered and was tempted to turn back. Just in time she thought of tea and bridge. She went on.

“Ruth said it was down these stairs at the right,” she told herself, stepping resolutely down the ancient stone stairway. “Down a long passage, around a curve, through a small square dungeon-like place, then along a narrow passageway. Ooo-oo! That seems a long way.”

She was thinking of the face Ruth had seen in the fire. Just why she expected that face to remain there, like an oil painting on the floor, she probably could not have told. Perhaps she did not expect it. That she did expect to meet with some adventure, make some discovery, or experience a thrill was quite certain.

“I wish Ruth were here,” she told herself. “It’s really her mystery; but I’ll save it for her.”

At that she disappeared down the narrow passageway that led to the dim unknown.

Had she known just what was happening to Ruth at that moment she would have been surprised and startled. Ruth was experiencing adventure all her own.

On that day, still wondering and brooding over her curious experience with the swordfish and trying without much success to get the consent of her mind to enjoy the swordfish money gotten in such a strange manner, Ruth had gone for a walk to the back of the island.

Once there, fish and money were driven from her mind, for the view from the crest of Black Head, a bold headland towering two hundred feet above the sea, was glorious beyond compare. The day was clear. There was no storm, yet great breakers, racing in from the sea, sent out long, low rushes of sound as they broke against the impregnable black barrier.

As her keenly appreciative eyes took in the long line of fast racing gray-green surf, they suddenly fell upon a sight that made her blood run cold.

“What a terrible chance! How—how foolish!” she exclaimed as, springing from

her rocky seat, she went racing back over the island.

Having arrived at the head of a rugged trail that led downward, she came to a sudden pause.

This, in view of the fact that she honestly believed that the boy and girl on the rocks by the rushing surf were in grave danger, might seem strange. Strange or not, she walked deliberately now. Dropping here, clinging there to drop again, she had made her way half the distance to them when she paused again to at last take a seat there in the sun.

The path from there on was steep but straight. She could reach the ones below in less than a moment's time. But she would not, at least not yet.

"What's the use?" she told herself a little bitterly. "Wouldn't be so bad if one didn't really like them. But I do."

It was a rather strange situation. The boy and girl who were endangering their lives by playing in the high rolling surf were the very ones who had followed the swordfish the day before.

With her eyes on the shining surf and the two dancing figures before her, she gave herself over to reflection.

The boy and girl below were tempting death. There was no question about it. They were playing in the surf at an exceedingly dangerous moment. True, there was no wind, no storm upon the sea. But there had been a storm somewhere. That was evident. It might have happened on the faraway coast of Florida. No matter, the seas that had risen then had journeyed northward. Now they were reaching higher and higher on the sloping rock where the boy and girl played.

"They think the ocean is a plaything!" Ruth said almost bitterly. Having lived her life in a fisherman's cabin by the sea, she knew the ocean was no plaything. Twice in her short life she had looked into eyes that saw nothing, on arms that would never move again, lifeless forms given up by the sea.

As she watched, in spite of her dislike for sports that tempted providence, she found herself fascinated by the wild, nymph-like daring of the twelve-year-old girl who in a single cotton garment drenched with salt spray, hatless and bare of feet, sprang far out after the receding waves to turn and rush back as the surf

came thundering in.

Now as she watched, the spray hid her. She sprang to her feet.

“There! There! She’s gone!”

But, no, the spray cleared and the girl, drenched, chilled but triumphant, threw up her arms and laughed.

“Who can help but like them, these rich men’s children!” she exclaimed. “They are frank and fearless. They never quarrel. They are generous to a fault. And yet —” she paused for a moment to reflect, “they don’t seem to have any notion of the value of life. They have never been taught to be afraid.”

Not taught to be afraid. That was it. Too much fear was destructive; too little fear quite as bad.

Receding, the sea appeared to give up its attempt to snatch the daring ones to its breast. Ruth’s eyes and thoughts drifted away from the boy and girl on the rocks. She joyed in the beauty and power of nature revealed in that long line of thundering surf. Nowhere in all her life had she seen such surf as came beating in at the back of Monhegan.

Great men have felt the charm of it in all ages. Captain John Smith once tarried to raise a garden there. Governor Bradford of Plymouth Plantation was once there. And, at this very moment, Ruth caught a glimpse of a shock of white hair which belonged to one of the greatest inventors of modern times.

“Suppose he is sitting there watching the surf and trying to estimate the amount of power that is being wasted,” she thought with a smile.

But there was the surf again. Booming in louder than before it sent spray forty feet high on Black Head’s impregnable stronghold. There, too, were the daring ones, the boy and the wildly dancing girl.

“There! There!” she whispered tensely once more. “She is gone. The waves have her.”

Once more she was mistaken. With a scream of triumph the child emerged from the spray.

“Wish I had never seen them,” she mumbled angrily.

The death of a human being, particularly a child with all the bright glories of life before her, is something to give pause to every other human being in the world.

It did seem an unkind act of Providence that had thrust these two young people who knew so little of fear and of the sea into the presence of one who had experienced so much of the ocean’s wild terrors.

She had seen this boy and girl twice before. There had been the painful swordfishing episode. Then once, as she had guided her motor boat into the tiny harbor at Monhegan, a cry had struck her ear. She had taken it for a cry of distress. Surf had been rushing in masses of gray foam over the shoals before Monhegan. There had been something of a fog. Having caught the outlines of a green punt there in the foam, she had exclaimed:

“They have lost their oars. Their boat will be smashed on the rocks!”

With infinite pains, in danger every moment of losing her motor boat, she had worked her way close, then had shouted to them.

To her great disgust, she had seen the boy turn and laugh. Once again they were using the ocean as a plaything. Having thrown an anchor attached to a long painter among the rocks, they were riding the surf in their shallow punt.

A strange providence had saved them.

“But now they are at it again,” she told herself. “I’ll leave this island. I won’t be their keeper. I—”

She broke off, to stand for ten seconds, staring. A piercing scream had struck her ear. No cry of joy, this. As she looked she saw the boy alone on the slanting rock. On the crest of a wave she caught a fleck of white that was not foam.

“The girl! She’s out there! She’s swimming. She—”

Like a flash she shot down the rocky path. At the same instant an old man, his gray hairs flying, sprang down the other bank of the rocky run.

The old man reached the spot before her.

“No! No! Not you!” she panted. She knew that no white-haired patriarch could brave that angry swirl of foam and live.

The aged inventor knew this quite well. He knew something more. He had measured the boy’s strength and prowess and found it wanting.

“Not you either,” he panted as the suddenly panic-stricken and heart-broken city boy prepared to leap to the rescue.

“Not you!” The old man seized him and pinned him to the rock. “If someone is to undo the harm done by your recklessness it must be another.” The aged inventor paused, out of breath.

That other was Ruth. No one knew that better than she. The time had come when she must battle with death for the life of another.

“Go! Go for a boat!” she shouted to the boy and the man. Her voice carried above the roar of the surf. With that she leaped square into the arms of a gigantic wave to be carried away by it toward the spot where the white speck, which had a moment before been a joyous twelve-year-old girl, struggled more feebly and ever more feebly against the forces that strove to drag her down.

The battle that followed will always remain a part of Monhegan’s colorful history.

Two thoughts stuck in Ruth’s mind as, throwing the foam from her face, she struck for the place where the white spot had last been. She must get a firm grip on the girl; then she must go out, out, OUT. Nothing else could save them. By a great good fortune this was a moment of comparative calm. But such calms are deceiving. Ruth was not to be deceived. The ocean was a cat playing with a mouse. At any moment it might be raging again. To attempt a landing on the rocks, to allow one’s self to be cast high against Black Head’s pitiless wall was to meet death at a single blow.

“I must go out, out, OUT. There is life,” she told herself over and over.

But first the girl. A low wave lifted her. Riding its crest, she caught a glimpse of that slight figure. But now she was gone, perhaps forever.

But no; there she was closer now, still battling feebly against the blind forces

dragging her down.

With almost superhuman strength the fisher girl leaped against the waves. Now she had covered half the distance, now two-thirds, and now she reached the child. As if to torment her, a wave snatched her away. She disappeared.

“Gone!” she murmured.

But no, there she was, closer now. Her hand shot out. She grasped a shred of white. It gave way. A second stroke, and she had her.

Gripping her firmly with one hand, she swam with the other. Swimming now with all her might, she made her way out until the sea grew wild again.

Nothing could be done now but keep heads above the foam and spray. One, two, three waves, each one higher than the last, carried them toward the terrible wall of stone. Now they were five yards back, now eight, now ten. With an agonizing cry, the girl saw the rocks loom above them.

But now, just in the nick of time, as if a hand had been laid upon the water and a mighty voice had whispered, “Peace! Be still!” the waves receded.

Ruth, looking into the younger girl’s eyes, read understanding there.

“Can you cling to my blouse? I can swim better.”

The girl’s answer was a grip at the collar that could not be broken.

The next moment a fearful onrush found them farther out, safer. But Ruth’s strength was waning. There was no haven here. A boat was their only hope.

Hardly had she thought this than a dark prow cut a wave a hundred yards beyond them. Above the prow was a sea-tanned face.

“Captain Field!” She shouted aloud with joy. Captain Field is the youngest, bravest of all the Atlantic seaboard.

“Now we will be saved,” she said, huskily. The girl’s grip on her jacket tightened.

The rescue of two girls by a small fishing schooner tossed by such a sea was no easy task. More than once it seemed the boat would be swamped and all lost. Three times the waves snatched them away as they were upon the point of being drawn aboard. But in the end, steady nerves, strong muscles and brave hearts won. Dripping, exhausted, but triumphant, Ruth and the one she had saved were lifted over the gunwale. At once the staunch little motor boat began its journey to a safe harbor, and all the comforts of home.

CHAPTER X

THE TILTING FLOOR

That evening Ruth sat before a tiny open grate in her room at Field's cabin. She was alone; wanted to be. The summer folks were giving a concert up at the big hotel. Pearl and Don had gone. She had wanted to sit and think.

She had been angry for hours. "I'll leave Monhegan in the morning," she told herself, rising to stamp back and forth across the narrow room. "If Don isn't ready to go, I'll take the tug to Booth Harbor and go down by steamer. I won't stay here, not another day!"

She slumped down in her chair again to stare moodily at the fire. What had angered her? This she herself could not very clearly have told. Perhaps it was because they had tried to make a heroine of her. She hadn't meant to be a heroine, wouldn't be made one. The whole population of the island, a hundred and fifty or more, had flocked down to the dock when Captain Field brought her and the rescued girl in.

There had been shouts of "What a wonder! A miracle girl!"

An artist had wanted her to pose for a portrait. "So romantically rugged," he had said as he gripped her arm with fingers that were soft.

"Romantically rugged." She didn't want her portrait painted; had only wanted dry clothes.

"They had no right to do it," she told herself savagely. "If that boy and girl hadn't been tempting God and Providence by playing in the surf, I wouldn't have been obliged to risk my life to save the girl. And on top of that they have the nerve to want me to pose as a heroine!"

She slumped lower in her chair. Yes, she'd go home to-morrow. She had begun by loving Monhegan. The bold, stark beauty of it had fascinated her. Nowhere else did the surf run so high. Nowhere else were the headlands so bold. No surf was so green, blue and purple as that which rose and fell off Black Head, Burnt Head and Skull Rock.

But now the cold brutality of nature as demonstrated here left her terrified and cold.

Perhaps, after all, she was only in a physical slump after a heroic effort. For all that, she had formed a resolve to leave Monhegan in the morning. Like a spike in a mahogany log, the resolve had struck home. It would not be withdrawn.

As for Pearl, she was at that moment listening to such music as it was seldom her privilege to hear—Tittle's Serenade done on harp, flute, violin and cello. Her eyes were half closed, but for all that she was seeing things. She was, as in a vision, looking into the night where a single ray of light fell upon a mysterious dark-winged seaplane speeding away through the fog above the sea.

* * * * *

It was at noon of that day that Betty found herself moving slowly, cautiously down the narrow passageway at the heart of old Fort Skammel, that was supposed to lead to the spot where Ruth had seen the face in the light of her Roman candle on the Fourth of July.

The place was spooky enough in daytime. In truth, day and night were alike in those subterranean passageways which had once led from dungeon to dungeon and from a battery room to one at a farther corner of the massive pile of masonry. No ray of light ever entered there. The walls were damp and clammy as a tomb.

Still, urged on by mystery and who knows what need of change and excitement, the slender, dark-eyed girl pushed forward down this corridor, round a curve, across a small room which echoed in a hollow way at her every footstep, then round a curve again until with a wildly beating heart she paused on the very spot where Ruth had fired the eventful Roman candle.

Nor was she to wait long for a thrill. Of a sudden, of all places in that dark, damp and chill passage, a hot breath of air struck her cheek.

Her face blanched as she sprang backward. It was as if a fiery dragon, inhabiting this forsaken place, had breathed his hot breath upon her.

Be it said to her credit that, after that one step backward, she held her ground. Lifting a trembling hand, she shot the light of her electric torch before her.

That which met her gaze brought an exclamation to her lips. Not ten feet before her a square in the floor, some three feet across, tilted upward. Moved by an invisible, silent force, it tilted more and more. A crack had appeared between the floor and the tilting slab. From this crack came the blast of heat that fanned her cheek.

“The fort is on fire,” she told herself in a moment of wild terror.

Then, in spite of her fright, she laughed. How could a structure built entirely of stone burn? The thing was absurd; yet there was the heat from that subterranean cavity.

“There!” She caught her breath again. The heat waves had been cut short off. She looked. The slab of stone was dropping silently down.

“It—why it’s as if someone lifted it to have a look at me!” she told herself as a fresh tremor shot up her spine.

She did not doubt for a moment that this conclusion was correct. In spite of this, and in defiance of her trembling limbs that threatened to collapse, she moved forward until she stood upon the very slab that had been lifted.

“Don’t seem different from the others,” she told herself. “Nothing to mark it.”

“Well,” she told herself as her eager feet carried her farther and farther from that haunting spot, “I’ve done a little exploring. I’ve made a discovery and had a thrill. That’s quite enough for one day.”

“Ought to tell someone,” she mused as she sat before the wood fire in the great fireplace of the big summer cottage on the hill that evening. “But then, I wonder if I should? It’s really Ruth’s mystery. She should have a share in its uncovering. I’ll go back to-morrow and see what more I can discover,” she told herself at last.

Had she but known it, reinforcements were shortly to be on the way. In Don's room on Monhegan, Ruth, Pearl and Don had just held a consultation. In the end they agreed that they should start for home in the morning.

A short while after this, Ruth, as she was about to fall asleep, reached a comforting conclusion:

“Since I saved that girl's life,” she told herself, “it should square that swordfish affair. I can now spend the swordfish money with a good conscience. I shall have a new punt as soon as I reach Portland Harbor.”

Don's boat was a sailing sloop with a “kicker” (a small gasoline motor) to give him a lift when the wind was against him. The day they started for home was unusually calm. Sails bagged and flapped in the gentle breeze. The little motor pop-popped away, doing its best, but they made little progress until toward night, when a brisk breeze came up from the east. Then, setting all sail, and shutting off the motor, they bent to the wind and went gliding along before it.

There is nothing quite like a seaworthy sail boat, a fair wind and a gently rippling sea. At night, with the sea all black about you and the stars glimmering above, you appear to drift through a faultless sky toward worlds unknown.

Ruth and Pearl, after their exciting experiences on Monhegan, enjoyed this to the full. Not for long, however, for there was something in the salt sea air and the gently rocking boat which suggested long hours of sleep. So, after wrapping themselves in blankets, with a spare sail for a mattress, they stretched out upon the deck and were soon lost to the world of reality and at home in the land of dreams.

It was on this same calm day that Betty returned to old Fort Skammel and the scene of the tilting stone floor.

Just what she expected to see or do, she could not perhaps have told. Driven on by the spirit of adventure, and beckoned forward by the lure of mystery, she just went, that was all.

As it turned out, she saw that which gave her food for thought during many a long hour.

Having made her way, with hesitating steps and backward glances, to the spot

where Ruth had seen the face-in-the-fire, she threw her light ahead; then, with a quick little “Oh-oo” took an involuntary step backward.

The square section of stone floor was now tilted to a rakish angle. It appeared stationary. Beneath it was revealed an open space some three feet across.

As the girl switched off her light and stood there trembling, she realized that a faint unearthly yellow light shone from the half dark space beneath the stone.

For a full moment, with no sound save the wild beating of her heart to disturb the silence of the place, she stood there motionless.

Then, seeing that nothing happened, she plucked up courage, and, without turning on her torch, dropped on hands and knees, to creep toward the oblong of yellow light.

Three times her heart leaped into her mouth. A small stone rolling from beneath her hand wakened low echoes in the place. A stone that gave way beneath her suggested that she might at any moment be plunged into an unknown abyss below. Some sound in the distance, probably made by a rat, all but made her flee. In time she found herself gazing down into the space beneath the tilted floor.

The sight that met her gaze was worthy of her effort. A small square room lay beneath her and in that room, revealed by the witch-like yellow light, piled on every side and in great squares at the center, were bolts and bolts of richly colored silks and boxes beyond number, all filled, if one were to be guided by the three that had been broken open, with silk dresses, red, blue, orange, green, silver and gold, fit for any princess of old.

“Oh! Ah!” she said under her breath.

Then, just as she was beginning to wonder and to plan, there sounded far down some dark corridor heavy footsteps.

In wild consternation, without again switching on her torch, she sprang away down the narrow passageway. Nor did she draw an easy breath until she was in her punt and half way across the bay.

Then as she dropped the oars for a second she drank in three long breaths of air to at last release a long drawn “Whew!”

She had not been in the big summer cottage on the hill five minutes, her brain pulsating from a desire to tell someone of her marvelous discovery, when the rich lady of the house told her of a yachting party to start early next morning.

“We will be gone three or four days,” she was told. “Pack your bag well, and don’t forget your bathing suit.”

“Three days! Oh—er—” She came very near letting the cat out of the bag right there, but caught herself just in time.

“Why! Don’t you want to go?” Her benefactress stared at her in astonishment. “It will be a most marvelous trip, all the way to Booth Bay and perhaps Monhegan, and on Sir Thomas Wright’s eighty-foot yacht. You never saw such a boat, Betty. Never!”

“Yes, yes, I’d love to go.” Betty’s tone was quite cheerful and sincere now. She had caught that magic name Monhegan.

“Ruth and Pearl are up there,” she told herself. “It’s a small island. I am sure to see them. I’ll tell Ruth. It’s her secret. Then, when we come back—” She closed her eyes and saw again those piles and piles of shimmering silken dresses.

“I’d like to try them on, every one,” she told herself with a little gurgle of delight that set the others in the room staring at her.

But Ruth and Pearl, as you already know, were on their way home.

CHAPTER XI

THE WAVERING RED LIGHT

“Look, Don. What a strange red light.” Pearl, who had been curled like a kitten on the prow of the boat, rose on her elbows to point away to sea.

“Where?” Don asked.

“Over by Witches Cove.”

“Plenty of lights on the sea,” he grumbled. He was tightening the last bolts in the pride of his life, his sloop with a kicker, which he had whimsically named *Foolemagin*. They had been home from Monhegan a full day now. His motor had gone wrong, and he was repairing it. In a few moments she would be cutting the waters down the bay. He did not wish to be disturbed.

“But this one acts so strangely,” Pearl persisted. “It sort of wavers up and down, like—like a ship in distress.”

“Distress! What nonsense!” the boy exclaimed impatiently as he tossed down a hammer and seized a wrench. “There is no sea tonight. A little swell, that’s all. How could a ship go aground on a night like this?”

“There now!” he sighed at last. “She ought to do for a trial trip.”

Releasing his boat from the float to which she was anchored, he threw the motor into gear. Purring as sweetly as a cat on the hearth, the motor set the boat gliding through the water.

“What could be finer?” He dropped back on the circular seat in the stern.

Indeed, what could? The sea, the night and a boat. Such a boat, too! True, the hull of the *Foolemagin* had seen much service. But it was strongly built, and Don Bracket knew his business. He had calked her well. And her motor was nearly new. Little wonder that the boy's heart swelled with joy and pride as the boat, responding to the lightest touch, headed for the open sea.

The boy had worked hard and long for this prize. In a twelve-foot punt he had rowed hundreds of miles. Setting lobster pots, trapping crabs, digging clams for the summer folks, he had added a dime here, a quarter there, a dollar now and then until there was enough.

"Now," he thought, "since Monhegan disappointed me, I'll get busy here at home. I'll make a lot more lobster pots. I'll set them out by Green Island, Witches Cove and the Hue and Cry. I'll get big ones, five pounders, beauties."

In his dreaming he quite forgot the girl who still lay half curled up back of the prow. To one who did not know her, Pearl might have seemed a kitten sort of girl, soft, dreamy and purring. Not so Don. He knew she could swim as strong and far as he, that she could row a punt or drag a lobster pot from the shoals with the best of them.

She could relax it is true. Everyone should be able to do that. She was relaxed now, staring dreamy eyed into the gathering darkness. But of a sudden she sat bolt upright.

"Look, Don!" she cried. "Look at the wavering red light. Over by Witches Cove." They were much nearer now. "It is someone in distress. Must be."

Without reply, Don turned the prow of his boat toward the shoals back of Witches Cove, set his motors doing their best, then leaned back to watch with half closed eyes that wavering light.

"Lights," said the girl, as if half talking to herself.

"There are plenty of lights about the bay these days—too many," said the boy. "Mysterious doings, I'd say. That fellow in the cabin by Witches Cove knows something about it all, I'll be bound. He may have something to do with this light, decoy or something. But I'll see."

He kept his boat headed squarely for the light.

The girl did not answer his remarks. They had set her thinking all the same. There had been strange doings about the bay. And not the least mysterious person who might be connected with them was the man who had taken up his abode in the abandoned cabin among the black clump of firs that cast their dark shadows over Witches Cove.

Many and strange were the thoughts that passed through her mind as they came closer and closer to that dark sea cove about which weird and fantastic tales had been woven.

There were persons who could not be induced to fish there; no, not even at midday, and now it was night.

For this girl whose home had always been on Peak's Island, this cove had always held a charmed fascination. As a small child, listening to the tales of gray witches that rose from its depths in the dark of the moon, she had time and again begged to be taken there.

As soon as she was old enough to row a punt this far, she had fairly haunted the spot on Saturdays and holidays. The banks of this pool were steep and rocky. There were spots where its depths even at low tide exceeded twenty feet. There were times when the waters were as dark and green as old jade. At such times the movement of the incoming tide seemed caused by some monster disturbed in his slumbers at the pool's bottom, and the rush of water among the rocks seemed a whispering voice. The very fish she caught there were different. As if touched by the brush of a great artist, they took on fantastic colors—red, deep blue, purple and green. The girl loved the spot. She thrilled now as she neared it.

It had been on one of her Saturday afternoon fishing trips, not two weeks back, as you may remember, that she had first discovered that someone had taken up his abode on this small rocky and hitherto uninhabited island.

She fell to thinking now of the two great cats and the little man with the wide-rimmed glasses.

"There! Right back there!" she said suddenly as the light, swinging clear of the sea, continued to waver backward and forward in a jerky and uncertain manner.

"I know," the boy answered. "Be there in a minute. It may be some false alarm. Be ready for a sudden start if I need to make it. If it's smugglers or booze

runners we may have to run for it. They don't love company too well."

The thing they saw as they rounded the reef and stood close in, astonished them much. Lying on her side, with a gash in her side, was a one time smartly rigged sailboat. Holding to the mast, and waving a lantern around which was wound a red cloth, was a boy a year or two younger than Don. Clinging to him for support as the heavy swell lifted and lowered the wreck was a mere slip of a girl.

"Not a day past twelve," was Pearl's mental comment.

In an instant she recognized them. Yet she could not believe her eyes.

"It can't be," she said in a low tone, more to herself than to Don. "But it is! It's the girl Ruth saved from the surf at Monhegan, and her brother."

The strangest part of all was that the girl at this moment showed no sign of terror. Her black eyes danced, as much as to say, "Well, here is a real lark!"

"Where'd you come from?" Don asked.

"Monhegan."

"Monhegan!" Don gasped. A girl and a boy in a sailboat coming fifty miles over an open sea. The thing seemed incredible.

"We didn't mean to come so far," said the boy. "Went out for a little lark. Didn't know much about this boat. Uncle gave her to me a week ago. She got going and I couldn't head her in, so we just came on down. Some joke, eh?"

Don didn't see any joke in it. A fine boat wrecked and all that, but he had to admit that affairs do not look the same to all people.

"What you going to do?" he asked.

"Can't you take us ashore?"

"Yes. But this boat of yours?"

"Let her bust up. Don't care much for sailing. Dad's getting me a motor launch."

"You mean—" Don stared incredulous. True, the sailboat was an old model. For

all that, she had been a fast one in her day, and could easily be made seaworthy.

“Cost thousands,” he thought.

“Don! Don!” Pearl was tugging at his arm, whispering excitedly in his ear. “Ask them to let us have it. We can fix it up. I want it for my very own.”

So excited was she that her whisper came near to being a low scream. The strange boy heard, and smiled.

“If you can save her, she’s yours,” he promised. “Only get us out of this. We’re wet and getting cold.”

To Don the thing that the other boy proposed—that the boat, any boat for that matter, should be left to pound its heart out like a robin beating its breast against a cage, seemed a crime little short of murder. To a boy whose ancestors for generations have belonged on the sea, a ship is a living thing.

“We’ll take you over,” he said shortly. “Get in. Quick.”

Without further word, the boy and girl climbed aboard.

By great good fortune Ruth was at the dock when they came in. To her was entrusted the task of conducting the boy and girl to warm quarters where they might find a change of clothing.

In Ruth’s cottage the boy and girl sat beside the fisher girl in silence, dreamily watching the fire.

“Do you mean to say,” said Ruth, breaking the silence, “that your sister’s very narrow escape from drowning made no impression upon you, that you are as willing as ever to gamble with your life?”

“She didn’t drown, did she?” the boy looked at her and laughed. “She had luck. Her time hadn’t come, that’s all. No use making a fuss about that.”

“Life,” Ruth said quietly, “is a precious possession. No one has a right to think of it lightly.”

“Life,” said the boy with a toss of the head, “is a joke. We’re here because we’re

here and because we are to have a good time. What's the use of making a fuss?"

Ruth looked at him but said no more.

In her own room an hour later she sat looking off at the bay. Her thoughts were sadly mixed. She felt that the plan of life that had always been hers was slipping.

"Much work, friends, a home and a little pleasure now and then, holidays, and— and—

"Life," she quoted thoughtfully, "is a joke. Life is a joke. What's the use of making a fuss?"

She took down a box from a what-not in the corner. There was money in the box, the last of the swordfish money. She had bought a punt because it was truly needed. She had meant to spend the remainder for useful things about the house and for fishing tackle which was also very practical.

But now, "Life is a joke." She allowed the coins to slip through her fingers like grains of sand.

"A figured taffeta dress," she thought. "I've always wanted one, and a new hat, and new pumps. I'll have them, too. Life is a joke."

Had she truly convinced herself that it was not worth while to look upon the business of living as a serious matter? Who can say? Perhaps she did not know herself.

As for Don and Pearl, they hurried back and were soon busily engaged in the business of preparing to salvage the wreck.

To Pearl, who kept repeating to herself, "If we can only do it. If only we can!" the moments consumed by Don in rolling barrels and carrying chains to the sloop seemed endless. But at last with the meager deck of the *Foolemagin* piled high, they headed once more for Witches Cove.

The cove, as they neared it this time, seemed more fearsome and ghostly than ever before. The moon was under a cloud. The clump of firs hung like a menacing thing over the cliff. The light from the mysterious stranger's cabin was gone. Pearl shuddered as she caught the long drawn wail of a prowling cat.

She shook herself free from these fancies. There was work to be done. Would they succeed? She prayed that they might. The tide was still rising. That would help. The empty barrels, once they were sunk beneath the surface and chained to the broken hull, would help to buoy the sailboat up.

With practiced hand Don began the task that lay before him. Pearl helped when she could.

The first gray streaks of dawn were showing across the water when, with a little sigh of satisfaction, Don beached the disabled boat on their own sandy shore.

“With a line from shore,” said Don, “she’ll be safe here until noonday tide. Then I’ll get her drawn up high and dry.”

Pearl did not reply. Curled up in the prow of his motor boat, she had fallen fast asleep.

“Brave girl,” he whispered. “If we can make that boat tight and seaworthy she shall be all your own.”

* * * * *

At eleven o’clock of a moonless, starlit night Pearl lay on the deck of the boat, her own first sailing boat. The work of repair was done. The *Flyaway*, as they had rechristened her, had gone on her maiden trip ’round the island and down the bay. She had proven herself a thing of unspeakable joy. Speed, quick to pick up, with a keel of lead that held her steady in a heavy blow, responsive to the lightest touch on rudder or sail, she was all that mind might ask or heart desire.

Already Pearl loved her as she might a flesh and blood companion. To lie on her deck here beneath the stars was like resting in the arms of her mother.

Three hours before, Ruth had rowed Pearl out in her new punt. Then, because there was work to do ashore, she had rowed back again.

One “Whoo-o! Whoo-o!” through cupped lips and she would come for her.

The night was still. Scarcely a vessel was stirring on the bay. Only once, a half hour or so before, she had caught the creak of oars. She had not so much as risen on elbow to see what boat it might be. Had she done so, she would have

experienced a shock.

“Getting late,” she told herself. “Have to go in.”

Rising on her knees, she cupped her hands to utter the old familiar call, “Whoo-oo-ee.”

A call came echoing back. She listened for the sound of Ruth’s shoving off. Instead she caught low exclamations of surprise.

“Oh, Pearl,” came in troubled tones, “the punt’s gone! Did you see anybody?”

“No.” The girl was on her feet, fumbling the sail. “But I heard them. They were headed for Portland Harbor. They must have stolen it. Quick! Get some boat and come out. There’s a stiff breeze. We’ll catch them yet.”

“Right!” Ruth went racing down the beach.

For a girl Pearl displayed an astonishing amount of skill with sail and rigging. Before Ruth in a borrowed dory bumped alongside she had the sail up and was winding away at the anchor rope. A minute more and they were gliding silently through the night.

“Nothing like a sailboat for following a thief,” Ruth whispered. “Silent.”

“Not a sound. Slip right onto them.”

“Hope we can!” The older girl’s work-hardened fingers gripped a long oar. If they overhauled the thief there’d be no tardy justice. He’d get it good and plenty right on the side of the head. It was the way of the bay. They were heartless wretches, these Portland wharf rats. On the sea boat stealing is bad as horse stealing on land. Yet if one of these men missed the last ferry he took the first rowboat he came upon, rowed across the bay, then cut her adrift. The owner was not likely to see his boat again.

As the water glided beneath them and the semi-darkness advanced to swallow them up, Ruth kept an eye out for a light or a movement upon the water. Twice she thought they were upon them. Each time, with an intake of breath, she gave Pearl whispered instructions and the boat swerved in its course. Each time they were disappointed. A floating barrel, a clump of eel grass had deceived them.

And now they were nearing a vast bulk that loomed dark and menacing before them. Old Fort Georges, built of stone before the Civil War, now abandoned save as a storeroom and warehouse, lay directly in their path.

This fort, that was said by some to be a storing place for enough army explosives to blow the whole group of islands out to sea, had always cast a spell of gloom and half terror over the girl at the helm. She was glad enough when Ruth told her to swing over to the right and give it a wide berth.

The fort is built on a reef. To pass it one must allow for the reef. Pearl, who knew these waters as well as any man, was swinging far out when her cousin whispered:

“Wait! Swing her in a bit. I heard a sound over there. Like something heavy being dropped into a boat.”

As Pearl obeyed her heart was in her mouth. Eerie business, this skulking about an abandoned fort at midnight.

What followed will always remain a mass of confused memories in Pearl’s mind. As the boat glided along, something appeared before them. With a suddenness that was startling, Ruth cut down the sail, then seized the rudder. Even so they missed the other boat, Ruth’s punt, by a very narrow margin.

They shot by, but not before Ruth, jumping clear of the sailboat, landed in the punt.

As she gripped at her breast to still her heart’s mad beating, Pearl caught sounds of blows, then cries for mercy, followed by muttered words of warning. There came a splash, then another. Then save for the labored pant of someone swimming, all was still.

At once wild questions took possession of Pearl. What if her cousin had been thrown overboard? Here she was with sail down, a girl, defenseless.

Gripping the rope, she hauled madly at the sail. It went up with a sudden start, then stuck. She threw her whole weight upon it. It gave way suddenly, to drop her sprawling upon the deck. She lost her hold. The sail came down with a bang.

She was in the midst of her third frantic attempt to get under way, to go for help,

when a voice quite near her said:

“It’s all right. Let the sail go. I’ll hoist it. Catch this painter.”

“Ruth!” Pearl’s tone voiced her joy.

A rope struck across the deck. She caught it. The next moment her cousin was climbing on board.

“It *was* my punt,” said Ruth quietly.

“But the men? What did they do?”

“Went overboard, and swam for the fort. Let ’em shiver there till morning. Do ’em good. Teach ’em a lesson.”

“Something queer, though,” she said as she made the painter fast. “They seemed terribly afraid I’d beat up their cargo. Must be fresh eggs. Let’s have a flashlight. We’ll take a look.”

A circle of light fell across the punt. A long drawn breath of excitement escaped the girl’s lips.

“No wonder they were in a hurry to get away!” There was genuine alarm in her tone.

“Why? What is it?” Pearl gripped her arm.

“Dynamite,” Ruth answered soberly. “Enough to blow us all to Glory sixteen times. And if I had struck a stick of it squarely with my oar—” Again she let out a long low sigh.

“Well, we’ve got it,” she concluded. “Next thing is something else.”

There really was only one thing to be done; that was to take the dynamite to the office of the Coast Guard in Portland and to tell the officer all there was to tell about it. This they did on the next morning. When this was done they considered the matter closed. It was not, however, not by a long mile.

CHAPTER XII

THE LITTLE MAN OF WITCHES COVE

That day, after Ruth had delivered her fear-inspiring cargo, which had doubtless been stolen from Fort Georges, to the proper authorities, she went uptown to shop. There she selected with care a figured taffeta dress, a bright new hat and new shoes.

“I won’t show them to anyone until Sunday,” she told herself. When an uneasy feeling took possession of her she stilled it by whispering, “Life is a joke.” Had she been asked quite suddenly what that had to do with a figured taffeta dress, she might not, perhaps, have been able to tell.

That same day, Pearl took her new dory and rowed away to her favorite fishing ground, Witches Cove.

She had not been fishing long when she caught sight of the mysterious little man who, with his two great black cats, had come to live in the abandoned cottage above the cove.

At first he was seated on a tall rock, studying the sea with a great brass telescope. Presently, however, she saw that he had left the rock and was making his way down the fern grown rocks near her. As he came, she studied him out of one corner of her eye. She lost two perfectly good cunners doing this, but it was worth the price. This man was peculiar, a “new type,” one of Pearl’s learned friends would have called him. He was short almost to deformity. He was bow-legged and very broad shouldered. He wore dark glasses which completely hid his eyes. Pearl thought nothing of this last. Many persons living by the ocean wear such glasses to protect their eyes from the dazzling reflection that comes from the mirror-like surface of the sea.

“Hello, little girl,” he said quietly as he settled himself on a rock overhanging the sea. “How’s the fishing?”

Pearl resented being called little, though indeed she was small for sixteen. She was a little frightened too. Witches Cove is a lonely spot, and as we have said before, quite spooky with all its black and green reflections and its constant murmuring that seems to come from nowhere.

But she had come to fish. Between the man and her boat were twenty feet of deep water. Besides, the man intrigued her. So she stayed.

“The fishing is fine,” she said.

“Often think I’ll try it.”

“Why don’t you?”

“Too busy.”

For a moment there was silence. Pearl had caught sight of a great cunner down there among the waving kelp. She was tempting him with a delicious bit of soft clam.

Up went her line, down again, away to one side.

“O-o! He got it!” she murmured, drawing in her line. With a deft hand she replaced her bait with a bit of tougher clam meat. Thirty seconds later a three-pounder was beating a tattoo in the bottom of her boat.

“That is a good one,” said the stranger. “Can you now afford a moment for talk?”

“Why?”

“It may be worth your while.”

“Well.” The girl settled back.

The man began to speak. In the twenty minutes that followed, this mystery man of the rocky isle told the girl things she had never dreamed of. He had opened up for her a new and quite terrible world. He ended by startling her with his

knowledge of recent events.

“Someone stole your cousin’s punt,” he said quite suddenly, tilting on his tiptoes above the black waters.

Pearl looked at him in surprise. “Last night.”

“It was loaded with explosives when you got it back.”

Again the girl stared.

“Look out for those men. They’re dangerous. We’ve nearly got them three times. They escaped us. Can’t find out where they stay.”

Pearl thought of the face-in-the-fire, and old Fort Skammel. Her heart gave a great bounce, but she said nothing.

“How do you know such things?” she asked after a moment.

He leaned far forward. “I’ll tell you something, but you must not repeat it.”

“I won’t.”

“Well, then, I’m a Secret Service man.” Her heart bounced again. She had read books about such men, and they were thrilling and scary.

“Thanks,” she said. “I won’t tell. And I—I’ll help if I can. It’s my country.”

“That’s the spirit. Come to me anytime you have a thing to tell.”

A fish took her bait. She pulled him in. When she looked up, the man was gone.

Late that evening Betty returned from her yachting party. She had had a glorious time, had traveled aboard the most marvelous yacht, all shining brass and mahogany, satin cushions and lace curtains. She had had as her traveling companions such notable people as she had never hoped to know. A senator, a great yachtsman, a wonderful actress and a real poet had been in the party. For all this she found herself over and over longing to be back at the island where she might confide her marvelous secret to those who had a right to know.

They ran over to Monhegan. When she found that Ruth and Pearl were gone, her

desire to be back increased tenfold.

Hardly had she raced up to the big cottage on the hill to change from middy and short blue skirt to blouse and knickers than she went tearing at a perilous rate down the hill toward Ruth's house.

By great good fortune both Ruth and Pearl were there.

"Oh, girls!" she exclaimed in an excited whisper. "I have a most beautiful secret! There's a hole in the floor and it's all full of the most marvelous silk things!"

"A hole in the floor!" said Ruth, quite mystified by the girl's wild rambling.

"Come down to the beach." Betty dragged at their arms. "No one will hear us there. I—I'll tell you all about it. Oh, girls! We must do something about it! We truly must!"

Away to the beach they went. There on the golden sand with the dark waters murmuring at their feet, with the lights of Portland Harbor winking and blinking at them, and the moon looking down upon them like some benevolent old grandfather, the two girls listened while Betty unfolded the story of her two visits to old Fort Skammel.

"A warm room," she said at the end in a voice that was husky with excitement, "a warm room, all glowing with a weird yellow light, and full of silk things, dresses and dresses, all pink and gold, and blue and green. You never saw any like them."

"We'll go over there," said Ruth, "but not at night."

"No, not at night." Betty shuddered.

"When we have all seen it, we'll tell someone, perhaps Captain O'Connor. Can't go to-morrow morning," Ruth said thoughtfully. "I promised to go over and lift Don's lobster traps. Might get back in time to go over in the afternoon."

So they left the beach with the Portland lights still winking and blinking at them, to return home and to their beds.

As Ruth lay once more in her own bed looking out on the harbor, she caught the

slow movement of some great dark bulk, and knew it was the ancient sailing ship, *Black Gull*. Never before had this ship spoken so clearly of the glorious past of dear old Maine, of ships and the sea, of settlement and glorious conquest, and of her brave sons who in every generation had given their lives for freedom.

Never before had she so longed to see the old ship, with every patched and time-browned sail set, go gliding out into the free and open sea. Perhaps this longing was prophetic of that which was shortly to come.

CHAPTER XIII

UNDER FIRE

It was another day, another golden link in the wondrous chain that is life. Both Ruth and Betty were some distance away from their island home, from cottage and big summer house. Fort Skammel, with its haunting mysteries, and Witches Cove were far away in the dreamy distance and well nigh forgotten in the charm of rocks, sky, sea and summer fragrance that was all about them. They had come on a little journey all their own, these two, and for a purpose. At the present moment Ruth was seated upon a rocky ledge completely surrounded by wild sweet peas in full bloom and Betty was somewhere out to sea in a punt.

Green Island, the rugged bit of broken waste on which Ruth sat, is the home of the seagulls. No one has ever lived on that island, but, as evening falls on Casco Bay, many a seagull, weary with his day's search for food, may be seen winging his way across the dark waters to this, his haven of rest.

Of all the spots near Portland Harbor, the rugged shoals off Green Island are best for lobster fishing. Don had set a number of traps here. Having been called to Portland, he had asked Ruth to sail the *Foolemagin* out to the island to lift the traps and bring in the catch.

She had asked Betty to go with her. Betty had brought clams and a cod line. There is no better cod fishing to be had than on the shoals by Green Island.

Betty had asked permission to fish over the shoals from Ruth's punt. Since the day was calm, Ruth had given consent. Such a thing is always risky, for a sudden fog or a squall may come up at any moment. But perhaps Ruth still held in the back of her head the city boy's declaration, "Life is a joke." At any rate, Betty had gone. The weather had continued calm and clear.

Looking out to sea, Ruth's eye caught the gleam of Betty's slender white figure standing up in her punt, fishing. For a time she thought of Betty and almost envied her. She had seen so much of the world and of life.

"Well, some people are lucky," she told herself. "No use disliking them for their luck."

At that, forgetting Betty, she sank back upon a bed of fragrant wild sweet peas, to stare dreamily at the drifting white clouds. Then, without really intending to, she fell fast asleep.

She was startled from her sleep a half hour later by a resounding boom that shook the rugged island to its base and set a thousand seagulls soaring and screaming as only seagulls can.

"Target practice," she told herself, in no great alarm. "Ten-mile guns. Oh, listen!"

Came a loud scream as a shell passed at terrific speed through the air, and again a deafening boom.

"Closer to the island than usual," she told herself. "Glad I've lifted the lobster traps. Guess I'll get out."

She was standing now, looking down at her staunch little motor boat that gently bumped the rocky shore of a sheltering cove.

A sudden thought struck her all of a heap. She came to earth with a jolt.

"Betty!" she thought. "Betty Bronson! She doesn't know about the guns. She can't. She'll be killed, blown to bits!"

Fort McKinley is ten miles from Green Island. At certain times of the year a target is set on a raft and a schooner detailed to drag it about. When the target is in position near Green Island, a plane circling low over the water warns fishing crafts away. Then the great guns of the fort, firing projectiles weighing a thousand pounds and more, break their long silence. Ten miles from the fort, close to the drifting target, the huge projectile falls. It strikes the water with a loud report. It bounces, rises once more in air and, singing its song of hate and defiance, flies through the air to at last sink to the bottom a hundred fathoms

below. Into this target practice Betty had blundered.

“I wish I could warn her,” Ruth told herself now. “The man in the seaplane should do it. But he probably does not see her at all. Little dark boat against a broad expanse of dark sea. How could he? And besides, perhaps there is no danger after all. The firing for to-day may stop any minute. The target ship may move off in some other direction.”

The firing did not cease. The target ship did not move away.

“Ought to be getting back home.” Ruth’s gaze swept a hazy sky, then fell to her staunch little sloop. “Going to storm. Can’t tell how bad. Hate to spend a night out here.” But without Betty she could not go.

Turning, she made her way down the rocky slope to the spot where her boat was moored.

Her hand was on the painter when again, closer, more terrifying, there came a Zss-Spt-Boom.

Dropping the painter, she turned and walked hurriedly back up the hill.

With strained attention her eyes sought that small white figure. It was nowhere to be seen.

“Gone!” Vast relief was expressed in her tone. “Thought she’d see how unsafe it was.”

Just to make assurance doubly sure, she took up her field glasses and swept the black waters.

One moment of silent attention and she dropped the glasses as if they were hot.

The sight that met her gaze as her eager eyes behind strong field glasses sought out the lone fisherman, set her heart beating madly. A shell, striking some distance back of the little boat, then bouncing in air again, appeared to pass over the city girl’s head.

It was then, for the first time that Betty awoke to her peril. This awakening was like the sudden ending of a dream. The very abruptness of it was her undoing.

She had just succeeded in hooking a great fish. Perhaps it was a thirty-pound cod, a ray or a sunfish. She will never know, for, having brought it half way up from the depths, she was shaken to the very core of her being by this terrific boom and nerve wracking scream.

She threw herself backward, tangled with the cod line, set the boat tilting, tried in vain to recover her balance and without knowing how it had all happened, suddenly found herself free of the cod line but submerged in cold salt water and clinging frantically to the bottom of her overturned punt.

Ruth, standing on the hill, saw all this. She saw more; that the girl was still within the danger zone and that the target schooner was moving in a direction that momentarily increased her peril.

“I must go to her,” she told herself with a little gasp of fear. “There is no other way.”

With one short word of prayer for strength, the fishergirl of the Maine coast dashed down the slope, jumped into her sloop, threw over the wheel, then went pop-popping straight away toward the imperiled girl and her overturned punt. Straight on into the path of the raging terror that was intended for enemies in time of war she went, without one thought of turning back.

“One thing,” she thought more calmly, “is in my favor. My boat is white. The seaplane scout may see me. He can signal them to stop firing.”

Boom! Zing! Boom! the terror sounded again.

Her heart skipped a beat. Perspiration stood out on her nose. She felt deathly cold all over. Yet a firm and steady hand steered the motor boat straight on its course.

Of a sudden from over her head there came the thunder of motors. For ten seconds it was deafening. Then, quite as suddenly as it had started, it ceased.

Ruth’s heart stood still. “What now?” she thought. The pop-popping of her own tiny motor seemed but the discharge of a toy pistol.

She was soon enough to know what was next. Glancing up, she dodged and barely escaped leaping into the sea. The great seaplane seemed about to fall upon

her.

The plane, of course, was not as close as it had seemed. It was so close that, as the motor suddenly ceased its throbbing, she caught the singing of struts as the plane went zooming on through the air. She did not hear distinctly the words that were shouted down to her, but she did catch the import of their meaning. It was a warning that she was in great danger and must get out of those waters at once. As an answer she could only shout back that a girl in an overturned punt was in far greater danger than she. She pointed in the direction of Betty and the punt. This pointing must have accomplished more than all her screams, for certainly her last words were lost in the sudden thunder of motors.

The plane was up and off again. Had he understood? Would he flash a signal that meant, "Cease firing?" She dared hope so.

Ten seconds later she realized how brave the sea scout had been. A glancing shell passed through the air at the very spot where, a few seconds before, his plane had been.

"If there is another shot?" she thought. She dared not think further.

But now, once again her eyes were upon the punt and Betty. Already she was alongside.

"Here! Give me your hand!" she said in words that came short and quick. Betty obeyed. She dropped with a thump in the bottom of the boat. Then, with all speed, they were away.

Not until they were safe on Green Island did they realize that the sea scout had flashed a message and firing had ceased.

"Well," Ruth sighed as they dropped in the sun among the wild sweet peas, "we—we're safe."

"Are we?" Betty's face still showed signs of terror.

"Yes. They never shoot at the island. But you've got to get out of those clothes," Ruth added quickly.

In silence she helped Betty out of her sodden garments. After rubbing and

chafing her limbs until the pink of health came to them, she wrapped her in her own storm coat and told her to lie there in the sun while she wrung her clothes out and spread them on the rocks to dry.

“You—your punt!” Betty said at last with a choke in her voice that came near to a sob.

“They’re firing again now,” said Ruth. “We may be able to get it and tow it in later. Can’t now. But didn’t you hear the guns?” she asked.

“The guns? Why, yes, I guess I did. Must have—as in a dream. They’re always booming away over at the fort. And I was having such wonderful luck! Lots of cod, one ten-pounder. And a polluk long as I am. Just hooked one so big I couldn’t land him when that terrible thing happened! But Ruth—do you truly think we can save your punt?”

“Might. I hope so. Current is strong. That will carry it away. Hope they stop soon.”

“I hope so,” said Betty dreamily. The shock, the bright sunshine, the drug-like scent of wild sweet peas were getting the better of her. Soon, with head pillowed on her arm, she was fast asleep.

As she slept Ruth thought of many things, of the seagulls soaring overhead, of her lost punt, of the booming, bursting shells, of the old ship *Black Gull* and of the strange secret room in the depths of old Fort Skammel.

The firing ceased without her knowing it. Betty awoke and struggled into her wind-blown, sundried garments. Still she sat staring dreamily at the sea.

Then a sudden burst of sound broke in upon her day dreams.

“The plane,” she said, springing to her feet. “It’s coming close.”

“See!” said Betty. “He’s not flying. He’s scooting along on the surface of the water. He’s towing something. Oh, good!” She leaped into the air to do a wild dance.

“It’s your punt! It’s not lost! He found it! He’s bringing it in!”

This was all quite gloriously true. Very soon the seaplane came to a halt before the island. The aviator unbuckled himself; then walked back along the fusilage to drop into the punt and begin rowing shoreward.

As he came close Ruth saw that he was a young army officer with a clean, frank face.

“You’re lucky,” he said to Betty. “Lucky to have such a brave friend. You might have been killed.”

Betty’s arm stole round Ruth’s waist. Ruth’s face took on an unusual rosy tint.

“I’ve brought back your punt,” he said in apparent embarrassment. “It’s rather a long swim back to my plane.”

“I—I’ll row you out,” said Ruth, springing forward.

“I hoped you might.”

As the young officer sat in the stern and Ruth rowed him out to sea he noted with apparent pleasure the play of the splendid muscles in her brown arms.

“Some seaman,” he complimented her.

Again Ruth flushed.

As they swung in beside the seaplane the girl’s eyes took in every detail of the plane.

“Never saw one so close before,” she said.

“Want to take a ride?”

“Not now.”

“Sometime?”

“Perhaps.”

“Do you know,” she said as he stood up in the punt, “a friend of mine, my cousin, saw a plane pass Monhegan in the dead of night. Trans-Atlantic plane,

wouldn't you say?"

"Yes. Only none have crossed for a long time. Say!" he said, sitting down again. "What sort of a plane was it?"

"Large, sea-colored plane. No name. No insignia. No mark of any kind."

"That's queer. Listen!" He put a hand on her arm. "Keep that dark. You may have made an important discovery. Men are coming to this country that we don't want here. Things have happened. There's more than one way to get into America these days."

"Strange," he mused, "you can't make a great discovery, invent some new thing, do a daring deed, but those who are selfish, heartless, who wish to kill, destroy, tear down, take possession of it! But I must go. Hope I see you again soon."

"Thanks for bringing back the punt," Ruth said.

"Don't mention it."

He sprang upon the fuselage. Ruth rowed away. Motors thundered. The plane glided away, rose, then speedily became a speck in the sky.

Ruth bumped the rocky shore with a crash that nearly overturned the punt. She was thinking of many things.

They did not go to old Fort Skammel that evening. It was late when they got back to their island and Betty's nerves were pretty well shaken up by the happenings of the day.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PASSING OF BLACK GULL

That night as the hours of slumber approached Ruth lay on her bed looking out toward the bay. The night was hot and sultry. A lazy warm breeze from the land waved the thin curtains in a ghostlike fashion. There was no need for covers, so she lay there allowing the breeze to fan her toes. Half awake, half asleep, she mused and dreamed of many things.

The night was dark, the sky overcast. Neither moon nor stars shone through. The scene before her, save for a wavering light here and there, was black. "Like a beautiful picture suddenly wiped out by the swing of a broad, black brush," she told herself.

Still there were the lights. One might imagine them to be anything. In her fancy she told herself that the red light, very high above the water, was hung on the mast of the old wood hauling schooner.

"And her hold is packed full of valuable silks," she told herself. It was easy to dream on such a night. One might imagine anything and believe it.

She stared away toward old Fort Skammel. A light flared over there. "They're carrying the silks from that hot little underground room," she told herself, and at once became quite excited about it.

"Should have gone over there this very day," she mused.

But no, the light vanished. It showed no more. "Couldn't load all that in the dark. To-morrow," she said. There was an air of finality in her tone.

She tried to see the ancient schooner, *Black Gull*. Too dark for that. She could

imagine it all the same. She could see her swinging there at anchor, a dark, brooding giant, whispering of the past, telling of glorious old State of Maine days, that were gone forever.

“I love you, love you, love you,” the girl whispered as if the dark old ship were a person, a gallant knight of her dreams.

At that, leaning back on her pillow, one brown hand beneath her head, she fell asleep.

Just how long she slept she may never know. Enough that she suddenly found herself sitting up wide awake and staring out at the bay that was all aglow with a strange, lurid, unearthly light.

“It’s the end of the world,” she told herself and wondered at her own calmness.

“It’s Portland Harbor. It’s on fire, burning up!” came a little more excitedly as she found herself more truly awake.

It was only as she sprang to her feet and stood there in the window with her dream robes blowing about her that she realized the full and terrible truth.

Then she covered her eyes with her hands as she sank to the bed with a sharp cry.

“*Black Gull*, you are on fire. You are burning up!”

And there she had at last the solemn truth. At once her mind was in a whirl. How had it happened? She recalled the curious visit she and Betty had made there in the night and of the remarkable pirate band that had come to join them. Had these men returned? Had a match carelessly dropped, a stove overheated, brought the great catastrophe?

What could be done? Nothing. There was no fireboat. No pipe line could reach her. *Black Gull* was doomed.

In a state of suppressed excitement that held her nerves at the bursting point, she sat there watching a spectacle such as is the lot of few to see.

At first the blaze, flaming fiercely, fanned by the off shore breeze, went raging

out to sea. But at last, all at once, as if awed by this sublime spectacle, the death of a great ship, the wind dropped and the blaze, like flames of some gigantic candle, rose up—up—up until it seemed to the watching girl that they must reach the sky and set the planets, the stars, the very universe aflame.

As she sat there, lips apart, pupils dilated, motionless, watching, the spectacle became a thing of many dreams. Now the flames were but the burning of a stupendous campfire, the dark bulk that stood half concealed, half revealed, docks, lighthouses, islands, were figures of reposing and crouching giants.

Then the flames became a ladder of fire. Down this ladder, a thousand angels, whose wings could not be touched by fire, swarmed.

The ship burned with a clear, red flame now. The water about her became a pool of red and old rose. At the edge of this pool small bulks moved, motor boats, row boats, launches.

“What can they do?” she murmured. “Nothing. Let them go to bed. They are like hunting hounds, in at the death.”

She wondered vaguely if the person responsible for this catastrophe were circling there, too. Strangely enough, she fancied she could pick the man, a dark-faced foreigner with a shock of black hair.

“The face-in-the-fire,” she thought.

For a moment she thought of dressing, of launching her punt and going on a still hunt for the man. In the end, she sat there watching to the end the death of much that was dear to her.

The end came with a suddenness that was startling. The masts had fallen, one at a time. Slowly, regularly, like seamen dropping from a ladder into a dory, they fell to send sparks shooting skyward. Then, with a thunder that was deafening, there came the shock of a terrific explosion.

For a space of seconds all the fire at the center of the earth seemed to be shooting skyward. Then darkness and silence, such as the girl had never known, settled over all.

Only the sea spoke. With a wild rushing breath it whispered of wind and storms,

of treachery and death. Three times its whisper came loudly from the sandy beach. Then softly, it repeated its message until it died to nothing, and a breeze springing up from nowhere caught it up and carried it out to sea.

Springing to her feet, her arms flung wide, the girl stood there for a full moment. Rigid, silent, she was swearing vengeance on the destroyers of *Black Gull*.

Dropping to her place, again she scanned the sea. One by one, like death candles, lights were appearing. Here one, there one, they formed at last the flaming outline of a ship's deck. All had been burned or blown away but the stout hull that for so many years had done battle with the waves. For an hour these burned brightly. Then, one by one they blinked out. The tide was rising. The sea had come to the rescue. It was extinguishing the fire. On the morrow the black skeleton of a gallant ship would show there above the restless waves.

"Gone!" she all but sobbed as she buried her face in the pillow. "*Black Gull* is gone forever."

CHAPTER XV

THE SEARCHING PENCIL OF LIGHT

Early next morning Ruth and Pearl sailed the *Flyaway* to the scene of the night's conflagration. No more mournful sight can be found than the wreck of a great ship, lifting its shattered form above the sea. They did not linger long. One thing Ruth observed, and that to her advantage in the future. The explosion had blown a hole in the right side of the ship. This left an open space above the water some ten feet wide. Other than this, save at extreme high tide, the ship's hull rose above the water.

"Makes sort of a harbor," said Pearl. "Believe you could sail the *Flyaway* right inside. Make a grand place to weather a squall."

The three girls, Betty, Ruth and Pearl, fully intended going to old Fort Skammel that day. But life on the islands in Casco Bay is a busy one. Fish must be caught, clams dug, crabs and lobsters trapped and boiled. Summer visitors must be served for it is their money that fills the flour box, and the coal bin, too.

There was to be a great party up at the big hotel. Crabmeat salad was on the menu. The Brackets and Byrans were to supply the meal. So, all day long Ruth and Pearl picked away at boiled crabs, heaping up a little mountain of white meat.

"It's too late to go to the fort now," said Ruth as she straightened up to ease her aching back. "Let's go for a sail instead."

So a sail it was. They dropped down around the island and, skimming along over a faultless sea, came at last just as the shadows were deepening to Witches Cove.

"Let's drop anchor and have our supper here," suggested Pearl.

“Three gray witches may rise from the water and ask to join us,” said Ruth with a low laugh.

“Let them,” said Pearl, sending the anchor with a plunk into the sea. “There are worse creatures about than gray witches. Here’s hoping they don’t come too close to us.”

The tide was setting in. The *Flyaway* which, like some active child, seemed always aching to be away, swung and turned, turned and dragged at anchor until she lay within a few feet of the rocky shore. Lying on the deck, munching crabmeat sandwiches and whispering of many things, the girls did not notice this until, with a suddenness that was startling, some dark object came flying through the air to land lightly on the deck.

“Boo!” exclaimed Pearl, springing up.

“Only a black cat,” laughed Ruth. “Smelled our crabmeat. There are some cunners in the box by the mast. Give him one.”

The girls had settled down once more to quiet murmuring, when from the rocks on the shore came a call.

“Ahoy, there! Something tells me you have one of my cats.”

“Or he has us,” said Pearl.

“Oh! It is you?” It was the little Secret Service man who spoke. “How are you? Anything new?”

“You should know!” said Ruth. “*Black Gull* is gone!”

“Yes, that’s right. But I don’t see——”

“Then you don’t see very well. She was blown up. Wasn’t supposed to be any explosives in her hold, was there? Who put them there?”

Ruth went on to remind him of her stolen punt and of the explosives she had found in it. She told him too of the secret meeting of the mock pirates on the *Black Gull*.

“Does look like the work of the man smugglers,” he admitted. “Question is, were they using the old ship as a storehouse for stolen explosives, or did they wish to destroy the meeting place of those who have been attempting to bring them to justice?”

“Well, at any rate,” he said after a moment’s silence, “the *Black Gull* is gone, and that’s one more loss to charge against them. Something tells me that their days in this, the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave, are numbered.”

“I hope so,” said Ruth fervently.

“Ruth,” whispered Pearl, leaning close, “shall we tell him about Fort Skammel?”

“No. Not yet,” the other girl whispered back.

His lunch finished, the black cat was returned to his master, then in the darkness the *Flyaway* edged out to the channel and away toward home.

In order to avoid the deeper channel where larger boats might be encountered, they sailed close to old Fort Skammel. There in the shadows of those ancient walls they met with further adventure.

As they came very close to the fort that at this point towers straight above the sea, the night suddenly went dark. It was as if some ghost of other days, a prisoner perhaps who had died in the fort’s dungeon, had turned off the light of the Universe.

Ruth shuddered and suddenly felt herself grow cold all over.

“Only a very dark cloud before the moon,” she told herself. “No danger. Know the way in the dark.”

So she did, but there was danger all the same. That she knew well enough in a moment, for of a sudden there came the pop-pop of a gasoline motor and a boat swinging round the point of the island began following them.

“No one lives on the island,” she said to Pearl in a low tone tense with emotion. “They must be following us. They burned *Black Gull* last night. Now they are after us. Well, if the wind holds they won’t get us.”

She put her boat exactly before the wind. Her deck tipped till it dipped water. Yet the staunch-hearted girl did not alter the course by so much as an inch.

“Show ’em, *Flyaway*. Show ’em!” She spoke in tender tones as if the schooner were a child.

They were gliding silently up the bay when a pencil of light like a hot finger reached forward to touch them, then blinked out.

“Powerful electric torch,” the girl told herself.

A moment, two, three passed. The pop-popping grew louder.

“Gaining,” she said with a sigh that was a sob. “Should have told all. Had the customs officials, Civil Service, Captain O’Connor and all after them,” she said to Pearl. “But that room in the old fort. I wanted to see it. Silks, dresses, such things as she’d never seen, that’s what Betty said.”

The pencil of light felt for them again out of the dark, found them, then swung away.

“Nearer,” said Ruth. “Much nearer. Get us. And then?”

She leaned far forward, trying to see into the night. Fort Georges was ahead there somewhere, and——

The sudden reach of the white finger of light showed her something—a dark bulk straight ahead.

Quick as a flash she shot a line free, gripped a yardarm, reefed the sail, reached out into the dark, felt something, braced herself against it, held the schooner away, but allowed her to move forward until with a sigh she lost the touch of that hard bulk and all but fell into the sea.

The schooner swerved to the right, then glided forward once more.

“Hist!” Ruth whispered. “We are inside the sunken hull of *Black Gull*. For—for the moment, even in death she has saved us.

“Quick!” she said ten seconds later. “We will leave the *Flyaway* here and take to

our dory.”

As they crept away into the night with muffled oars making no sound, they saw the pencil of light searching the bay for them. It searched in vain.

A half hour later they were on their own beach. At once Don in the *Foolemagin* was away with three armed men to scour the bay. They found the *Flyaway* where the girls had left her, inside the scarred hull of *Black Gull*, but the motor boat with its creeping pencil of white light had vanished off the sea.

“To-morrow,” Ruth said to Pearl as she bade her good night, “shall be the last day. Either we visit the mystery room of old Fort Skammel or we turn the whole affair over to the authorities.”

Before retiring Ruth sat for a long time before her window, looking out into the night, thinking things through.

The night was too dark to see far. In a way, she was thankful for that. *Black Gull* was gone. She felt a tightening at the throat. When she recalled how the broken and charred skeleton of this once noble boat had saved her from something very terrible, she wanted to cry. Two unruly tears did splash down on her cheek.

“I must be brave,” she told herself. “There is much work to do.”

Work. They would go to old Fort Skammel in the morning. She was sure of that. And then?

The whole affair, or group of affairs, as she looked back upon them, now appeared to be coming together. The old wood ship with the bolts of cloth in her hold, the dory’s creaking oars in the night, their visit to *Black Gull*, the strange pirate band, the face-in-the-fire, the curious little man at Witches Cove, the mysterious room at the heart of the old fort, their pursuers this very night, it all appeared to be reaching out to join into a solid whole.

“It wouldn’t surprise me at all if Betty’s experience off Green Island with the big guns and the seaplane might prove to be a part of the drama, though how I can’t see.”

A sound from off the bay reminded her of the great dark seaplane Pearl had seen off Monhegan.

“Monhegan and the girl I saved from the sea,” she said to herself. “How do they work in? Well, perhaps they don’t. As life is built up, some stones must be thrown aside.

“Life,” she said quite suddenly, “life is a joke.”

Somehow the words did not seem to ring true. She was tempted to wonder how she had come to believe that at all.

“It was the way that boy said it, I suppose,” she told herself. “Some people have a way about them. They are hard to resist.”

Stepping to the chest of drawers in one corner of her room, she took out the figured taffeta dress. It was a very attractive dress—pink roses over a background of pale gray. She had never worn it. To wear it would be to declare to her little world that she believed life was a joke. At least that was the way she felt about it. So, as yet, she did not feel ready to put it on.

Spreading it out on the bed, she looked at it for a long time. Then, carefully folding it up again, she put it back in the drawer.

After that, with all the realization of what to-morrow might bring forth, she did something she had not done since she was a little child. She dropped on her knees beside her humble bed, and placed her palms together in prayer.

CHAPTER XVI

THE OLD FORT

Coming events do not always cast their shadows before them; or, if they do, those shadows are so filmy and ghostlike that only one endowed with the keenest of vision is able to see them. Never was there a fresher, calmer sea than that which greeted the three girls, Betty, Pearl and Ruth, when they pushed off in Ruth's punt that morning bound for Fort Skammel. A perfect morning, not a shadowy suggestion of adventure. And yet——

An hour after they left the sandy beach of the island, Ruth's unnerved fingers dropped a lighted electric torch on the floor at the heart of the ancient fort. It fell with a dull thud, and blinked out.

"Hot," Ruth whispered. "The air down there is hot!"

"I told you," Betty whispered back. She was working feverishly, struggling to free a second flashlight from the tangled mesh of her knitted sweater pocket.

Sensing what she was about, Ruth whispered:

"Get—get it?"

"Not yet." The younger girl's words came in short gasps.

Little wonder that they were startled. Having penetrated into the very heart of the old fort, having made their way through a one-time secret passage to a dungeon, they had come at last to the door in the floor. And the door stood wide open. Against their cheeks, grown cold from constant contact with clammy air, had blown a breath that seemed hot like the blast of a furnace.

They had come to a sudden halt, and there they stood.

Even in the broad light of day there is something gloomy, foreboding and mysterious about old Fort Skammel. Children who have ventured across the bay to the all but deserted island, where this ancient abandoned fort stands, will tell you of curious tales of adventures met with there, how the red eyes of rats as big as cats gleamed at them in the dark, how they have discovered secret passageways that led on and on until in fright they turned and went racing back into the bright light of day, and how at times ghostlike voices sounded down the echoing aisles.

In a little cove where the sand was snow white the three girls had drawn their punt high on the beach. Pearl had volunteered to stand guard outside. The other two had begun wending their way over a path that winds between tall grass and bushes to the fort.

Finding themselves at last before a great open stone archway that led directly into the chill damp of the fort, they had paused to listen and to think. The next moment, with a little quickening at her heart, Ruth had led the way into the semi-darkness of a stone corridor, and from there on and on into the deepening darkness. Now, here they were. Ruth had longed to look into that mysterious room. The opening to it was now at her feet, yet she felt more inclined to run away than to linger.

“Can’t you get it?” she whispered again, as no light appeared.

“It’s caught in my pocket. No, now I have it.”

The next instant a yellow light brought out once more the damp and dripping walls of stone with the mysterious opening in the floor at their feet.

“It was hot.” Ruth’s tone was full of awe. “I felt it. I felt hot air on my cheek!”

“So did I.”

Putting out two fingers, Ruth felt the fanning of hot air. “Warm,” she said, “not hot. Just seemed that way. But how could it be?”

“Can’t be a stove?”

“No. Tons of granite above.” Her eyes sought the low stone arch over their heads.

“Going to see,” said Ruth stoutly, dropping on her knees.

With a gasp Betty put out a hand to stop her. She was too late. Ruth had caught the ledge and swung down. Betty could but follow. The next instant they were looking upon a strange scene. This room, warmed by some mysterious power, as Betty had said, was piled high with bales and boxes of every description.

One of the boxes had slid from its place and burst open, revealing a half dozen silk dresses of bright and varied hues.

At once Ruth’s heart was in her throat. Here was treasure. Where was its keeper?

A rapid survey of the room revealed the surprising fact that there was no keeper, or at least, if there was one, he was away.

The thing that the two girls did after recovering from their astonishment might, by some cold and practical people, seem the height of folly. Certainly, under the circumstances, it could not be called wise. But who of us all behave wisely at all times?

Placing the flashlight carefully in the niche in the wall, Ruth picked up the top dress of the half dozen in the broken cardboard box.

It was a beautiful thing of purple, so thin and soft that it waved like a rippling sea.

“How strange!” she murmured. “Just my size.”

Before she knew what she was about, her khaki waist and knickers were off and the beautiful dress was on.

Not a moment had passed before Betty, too, was dressed in silk, a marvelous creation of flaming red.

And then, faint and from far away, there echoed down the long-abandoned corridors the sound of footsteps.

“This way!” Seizing the flashlight, with no thought of how she was garbed, Ruth leaped up and out, then on tiptoe went racing down the aisle that led away from the chamber of mysteries, and on and on into the dark.

Madly the feet of the two girls flew down a winding corridor, wildly their hearts beat, as they fled from resounding footsteps.

Now the round circle of yellow light from their electric torch guided them. And now, as Ruth suddenly realized that the light would reveal their whereabouts, the light blinked out, and, dropping to a walk, then to a slow creep, guided only by the sense of touch, they moved along between the dripping walls.

“Could anything be worse?” said Betty.

“Nothing,” Ruth came back.

She was thinking, thinking hard. Tales had been told of ancient wells dug there years ago to enable the garrison to withstand a siege. That the wells now stood uncovered down there somewhere in the depths of the earth, she knew all too well.

“If we blunder into one of those!” Her heart stopped beating.

“The dresses!” Betty whispered suddenly. “Our khakis! We left them. We must go back for them. They will have us arrested.”

“We can’t. They won’t,” said Ruth, still pushing ahead in the dark.

“Ought to turn on the light,” she told herself. “Must! It’s not safe.”

Pausing to listen, she caught the shuffling scamper of rats, the snap of bats. But louder still came the tramp—tramp of heavy feet.

In her fear and despair, she sprang forward, to go crashing against a solid wall.

Knocked half senseless, she sank to her knees. There for a moment she remained motionless. For a moment only, then she was on her feet and away. Her eyes had caught a faint glimmer of light. Far down the narrow passage to the left shone the steady light of day.

“Light!” she whispered solemnly. “Light and hope.”

One moment of mad racing and they were blinking in the sunlight.

The race was not over. Out of the passage, down a set of ancient stone steps, into the grass and bushes, skirts tight and high, they flew until they came up short and panting at the beach.

There in the calm morning were Pearl and the punt.

“You’re here!” Ruth puffed. “Thank God, you’re here!”

Next moment she stood knee deep in water, launching the punt. Then with a little gasp of hope, she swung the punt about and began rowing as if for her very life.

CHAPTER XVII

SECRETS TOLD

For a full ten minutes the three girls appeared to act a perfect scene in a moving picture. Ruth rowed furiously. Betty sat with eyes fixed on the receding shoreline. Pearl stared at Ruth and Betty with unbelieving eyes.

At the end of that time Ruth dropped her oars to mop her brow. They were now well out in the bay. Fishing boats and motor launch dotted the bay. It was day, bright and fair. No one was pursuing them. To all appearances they were as safe here as at home.

“Where did you get them?” Pearl was still staring at their silk dresses.

“Why—er—” Ruth began, with mock gravity, “that’s a marvelous place down there in the old fort. You go in dressed in cotton blouse and knickers and you come out all togged up in silk.”

“Ruth,” said Betty, “we’ll be arrested!”

“Let ’em try it!” said Ruth. “If we’d taken the whole pile they wouldn’t dare. They’re trespassers, smugglers, thieves, perhaps. It’s safe enough. But girls,” her tone grew suddenly sober, “it’s time some one in authority took a hand. This has been a perfectly glorious adventure, thrilling, mysterious and all that, but it’s gone quite far enough. Who shall we tell?”

“My little man at Witches Cove,” said Pearl. “He is a Secret Service man. Besides, he’s quite wonderful.”

“All right, then. Witches Cove it is,” said Ruth, gripping her oars once more. “We’ll hug the right shore. That way, anyone that’s watching can’t tell for sure

where we're going."

In spite of this precaution some one knew whither they were headed, and no good came of it.

The little man of Witches Cove had an uncanny way of anticipating the arrival of visitors to his rugged shores. They found him seated on a great boulder with his feet dangling perilously near the water.

"Well, now!" he exclaimed. "Here we are all dressed up for a party. Two sisters and Cinderella. I suppose I am to fit out our little sister with a silver slipper."

His round, good humored face grew suddenly sober as Ruth told their reason for coming. He interrupted her but once. Then he cautioned her to lower her voice.

"You have truly made a marvelous discovery," he said when she had finished. "I've been looking for some such thing. It comes a little sooner than I expected. Three of my men will be on the afternoon boat from Boston. As soon as they are here we will formulate plans for action. In the meantime I shall have an eye on the old fort. They cannot remove a schooner load of silks from under my nose, I assure you.

"As for you," his gaze swept the circle of three eager faces, "this, I take it, is going to be a splendid day for fishing. And when you fish," his smile broadened, "you keep very still. In other words, mum it is. You must not breathe a word to another soul."

"We won't," they said in unison.

So the day was well begun. But it was not ended, not by a good deal.

The three girls did not go fishing, at least not at once. They did accept the little man's counsel in regard to the earlier happenings of the morning. Not one word regarding them passed their lips.

They did wish to go fishing, later in the day, but in the meantime there was work to be done. Summer folks must have their clam chowder. To Ruth and Pearl fell the lot of digging the clams. All forenoon, under the boiling sun, ankle deep in mud and sand, they dug and clawed away with their clam forks until three great baskets were heaped high with blue-black clams. Then they hurried home to

dinner.

By mid-afternoon they were ready for a well-deserved lark.

Betty joined them at the pier. Ruth had drawn the *Flyaway* alongside, had put on board their lines, bait and lunch, and was preparing to cast off the line when her eyes fell upon a woebegone and drooping little figure on the dock.

“It—it—Well, I never!” she exclaimed. “It’s the little girl I saved from the surf up at Monhegan.”

“Hey, there!” she called. “I thought you’d gone back to Monhegan.”

“No.” The girl’s head shook slowly.

“Mother got afraid when we sailed away down here in that boat you fixed up. She thought Monhegan was too wild and dangerous. But it isn’t!” Her spirit flared up like a torch. “It’s just glorious. It’s dreadfully dull down here. We—” she looked at the boy at her side, and Ruth saw that it was her brother, “we’re going to do something terrible pretty soon!”

“Oh, please don’t,” said Ruth. “I say! We’re going fishing. Want to go along?”

The girl looked up at the boy. “Go ahead.” He pushed her toward the *Flyaway*.

Ruth recognized this as a generous act. She wanted to ask him to come, too, but it had been agreed that this was to be a girls’ party.

It was Don who saved the day for her. He was on the *Foolemagin*, busy mending a lobster trap.

“Going round the island in a little while to lift some traps,” he said, looking at the boy. “Care to go along?”

“Be glad to.” The boy turned and helped his sister aboard the *Flyaway*. Ruth cast off the line. The sail went up. She swung about. Then they went skimming down the bay.

Pearl and the little city girl went forward to lie upon the prow and watch the water gliding by. Ruth and Betty remained at the wheel.

“Betty,” said Ruth, quite suddenly, “is life a joke?”

“Is life a joke?” Betty gave her a quick look as she suspected her of playing a trick upon her. “No,” she said slowly when she realized that her friend was in earnest, “life is not a joke. Life is beautiful, wonderful. How could anything that is all this be a joke? Why? What made you ask?”

As the boat glided smoothly over the water, Ruth told her why; told her of the city boy’s laugh and of his remark about life. She told, too, of the figured taffeta dress, the alligator shoes and the gay hat.

When she had finished, little Betty, who was so young, yet who had seen so much of life, of its joys and sorrows, its struggles, pains and triumphs, sat with half-closed eyes, thinking.

“Do you know what life is?” she said at last. “Life is a struggle, a glorious, terrible battle. You begin it when you begin life. You end it when you breathe your last breath. To hope, to dream, to struggle on,” her slight figure grew suddenly tense, “to fall and rise again. To see a star, a gleam of hope, to battle toward it, to be beaten back, defeated, to turn again to hope and dream and win, only to see a fairer light, a lovelier vision farther on the way, then to hope and dream again. That—” she ended, throwing her arms wide, “that is life, a beautiful, glorious thing! No! No! It can’t be a joke! It can’t be!”

“But Ruth,” she said presently, “what have your new dress and shoes and hat to do with life being a joke?”

“Well,” the flicker of a smile played about the big girl’s face, “I thought if life were a joke, then one might as well have what she wants. I’ve always wanted those things, so I—I got them.”

“They spell happiness to you?”

“I—I suppose so.”

“Then you had a right to them. Everyone has a right to happiness. Did you ever think of that? Every man, woman and little child has a right to happiness bought at a fair price. And the price of a new dress, shoes and a hat is not too much. There now!” Betty ended, “I’ve done a lot of preaching. Here’s Witches Cove. Give me a nice fat clam and a big hook. I feel lucky to-day.” With a laugh she

began unwinding her line.

CHAPTER XVIII

KIDNAPPED

The dull gray of evening hung over a calm sea. From out the west came threats of sudden storm that, sweeping in with the speed of thought, might at any moment turn twilight into darkest night.

The two boys, Don and the city boy, Lester Hilton, had just completed the laborious task of dragging a heavy dory up a rock-strewn beach. Don had left some lobster traps here. He had come ashore to pick them up.

Shading his eyes, Don gazed out to sea. Some object out there caught his eye.

“It can’t be a barrel,” he said in a puzzled drawl. “It’s too big. Can’t be a sailboat, nor a motorboat, nor a punt, unless it is adrift. No one is staying out while such clouds are threatening.”

Climbing to a higher level, he paused to look again, and at once there came over his face a look of deep concern.

“It can’t be,” he muttered. “How could it happen on a calm sea?” Closing his eyes for a moment to secure a clearer vision, he stood there erect, motionless.

Then, with the suddenness of one who has received a terrible revelation, he exclaimed:

“It’s Pearl and Ruth and your sister in the *Flyaway*. Their mast is gone. They are powerless. In five minutes it will be dark. Soon the sea will be white with foam. They are out there, your sister and mine, out there! Just think!”

Lester did think. One instant his mind sped, the next his hand was on the dory.

“Yes,” said Don, “but you must go alone.”

“Alone?” The younger boy stood appalled.

“The dory will ride almost any storm. You must reach them, take them off the schooner and bring them round the island to the lee side.”

All the time he talked Don was helping to shove the dory off. “You can’t possibly reach them before the storm and complete darkness come. Both of us couldn’t, not half way.

“I will guide you. I’ll find you a light so strong you’ll see all the way.”

The younger boy stared as if he thought his companion mad.

“In the center of the island,” Don spoke rapidly, “there is a powerful searchlight, a government light for use only in time of war or a great emergency. You have no idea of its power, hundreds of thousands of candle power. The keeper is away, but I know how to swing it into place, to put on the power, to direct its rays. Go! Quickly!” He gave the dory a stout shove, then went racing up the bank.

The impossible sometimes happens. That a thirty-foot sailing vessel, as staunch a craft as ever sailed the rock-ribbed sea, with a mast twice the required thickness, should be drifting helpless with mast and sail cast off and lost from sight, should lie helpless in a calm sea while a storm came tearing in from off the land was, in time of peace, you might say, impossible. Yet all this was just what was happening. The *Flyaway* was hopelessly adrift. What was more, Pearl Bracket, the golden-haired, freckle-faced girl of Peak’s Island, and Ruth with her city friends, twelve-year-old Jessie Hilton and Betty, were aboard. How could all this happen in one calm afternoon?

It had all come about so suddenly that even the four girls shuddering there on the mastless schooner could scarcely believe it had happened at all. They had sailed to Witches Cove. Having dropped anchor within the shadows of the overhanging rocks, they had tried their hand at fishing.

It had been a curious afternoon, not exactly cloudy, yet not exactly clear. A haze, a lazy mist, drifted here and there. Never did Witches Cove seem so spooky as now. Once as Pearl looked up from her fishing she saw a film of gray rise in the darkest corner of the pool. As if fashioned by an invisible hand it took the form

of a witch with high hat and hooked nose. She was even riding a broom.

Pearl touched Ruth's arm and pointed. Ruth saw and shuddered.

"Gray Witch is riding to-day," she said. "Something is sure to happen." In this she was not wrong.

The fishing was unusually good. Soon the deck of the *Flyaway* was alive with flapping fish. In the excitement the Gray Witch and all else was forgotten.

Then had come the supreme moment. Jessie had hooked a twelve-pound rock cod. The cod had showed fight. Before she could draw him in he had fouled the line among the kelp. So securely was he hooked that even then he could not escape. So, with three girls tugging at one line and the fish at the other, the red kelp went swinging and swaying back and forth at the bottom of the pool.

It was just at the moment when the kelp seemed about to lose its hold on the rock and to come floating to the top with the magnificent fish in its wake, that Pearl, chancing to look away, dropped the line to spring back in an attitude of fear.

She found herself looking into a pair of dark eyes. Instinct told her to whom those eyes belonged. "The face-in-the-fire," her mind registered.

"The—the bombers!" she had whispered to Ruth.

Like a flash all that the little man of Witches Cove had told her passed through her mind. He, the man of the rocky island, was a Secret Service man in the employ of his government. He had been stationed there to trace and if possible capture two men who had been stealing high explosives from the Army and Navy store houses. These men were supposed to belong to a band that was opposed to all organized society. Several disastrous explosions had been laid to their door.

"If you can assist me in capturing them," the Secret Service man had said, "you will not alone perform a great service to your country, but may save many lives as well."

And here were the very men! Pearl could not doubt it. She shot one wild glance toward the cabin on the rocks. No one was in sight. Little hope for aid.

“No use,” she said aloud as she recognized the second man. It was one of the men who had stolen Ruth’s punt and loaded it with dynamite. A cold shudder ran up her spine.

“Not a bit of use in the world,” the man went on in a cold voice. “We got you. We’ll teach you to meddle!”

At that, to her great terror, he produced a long whip such as was once used by cruel slave owners. Cracking this about their ankles, he ordered them down into the *Flyaway’s* cabin. Once they were down, he closed the door behind them.

For a whole hour, feeling the gentle roll of the boat, knowing they were going somewhere but having no notion what the destination might be, they cowered in great fear. Finding courage only by praying to the great Father of all, they waited they knew not what.

At the end of that time they caught the sound of the strokes of an axe. This was followed by a sickening splash.

“The mast is gone!” Pearl thought to herself. “Will they sink our boat and leave us to drown?”

The two men had evidently planned for them a more cruel fate. Having cut away the mast and taken the oars, they set the motor boat in which they had reached the schooner going once more, and left the *Flyaway* and her crew to drift helpless in the storm.

“Be broken up on the rocks!” Pearl’s eyes were dry, but in her heart was a solid weight of sorrow.

* * * * *

Don was racing up a rocky trail while Lester was tugging with all his might at the long oars, driving the heavy dory farther and farther out into the face of the oncoming storm.

Then, like the dropping of a purple curtain on a stage, came wind, rain and deep darkness.

The testing of Lester Hilton, the reckless and daring city boy who believed that

life was a joke, was at hand. He now stood face to face with triple peril—night, the sea and the storm. He had no compass. There was no light to guide him. There was now only to wait and hope. This was hardest of all.

With unfaltering footsteps Don hastened on into the dark until just before him a long low bulk loomed. This was the power house. In this house was the hoisting machine and the powerful dynamos that lifted the great searchlight. To break a window, to crawl through, to touch a lever setting a dynamo purring, to switch on a light, to throw a second lever, was but the work of a moment.

Then again, he was outside. A little up the hill, like a gigantic black ghost, some object was rearing itself upward. This was a frame on which the powerful searchlight rested. When not in use it lay prone. It must now be raised to an upright position. Powerful machinery was doing this.

It was still leaning at a rakish angle when the boy sprang up the ladder. By the time it snapped into position he was in the small cabin above. Here again he threw on an incandescent lamp. One moment of suspense and a great light flashed far out over the sea.

“Ah!” he breathed.

With skillful hand he began spraying the sea with light as a gardener sprays a lawn. Here, there, everywhere the light traveled. Once, for ten seconds his eyes were fixed upon a small gasoline boat ploughing its way through the tossing waves. Then that spot went dark. As yet his search was unrewarded.

But now, as the light swung closer in, it fell upon a boy in a large dory. He was battling the storm to keep his dory afloat.

“Lester.” Don’s heart swelled.

Swift as the flight of a gull, the light shot outward until it fell upon a mastless boat wallowing in the trough of a wave. There it came to rest.

How the young city boy, little accustomed to the sea, pulling for the spot marked by that light, battled his way forward until at last, drenched, hands blistered, well nigh senseless with fatigue, he overhauled the crippled boat, and how after that three girls and a boy fought the storm and won will remain one of the tales to be told round island cottage fires on stormy nights.

One incident of that night will always remain burned on Don's brain. As he held his light steadily in its place, there struck his ears a deafening crash that was not thunder, and instantly the sky was illumined by a glare that was not lightning. When, a half hour later, he was free to search the sea for the floundering motor boat which his light had first picked up, it had disappeared.

CHAPTER XIX

A FIRE ON THE BEACH

As Don at last threw off the powerful searchlight and descended the steel stairway that led to the ground, two problems stood out in his mind. He had broken all rules in using the searchlight. There had been strict rules about that. No civilian was to touch it.

“Well,” he told himself, “they may send me to jail if they must. I’d do it again for my sister and for them.”

The other question that puzzled him was one regarding that explosion at sea. Since he knew nothing of the afternoon’s happenings at Witches Cove and their aftermath at sea, he could make little of it.

As for the four girls, they had, it seemed to Ruth at least, lived a lifetime in a few hours. In one short afternoon they had experienced peace, hope, joy, near triumph, fear, disaster and all but death. What more could there be to life?

The little city girl had behaved wonderfully. She had sat wide eyed, calm and silent through it all.

The city boy puzzled Ruth most of all. Battling the waves like a veteran seaman, he reached them alone in the heavy dory. Then, without a word, he put his shoulder to an oar and began helping them to beat their way back to land.

“And he thinks life is a joke,” Ruth told herself. Then in a flash it came to her. This boy once thought that life was a joke. He did not really believe it; was not living as if life were a joke.

“He’ll forget all he thinks,” she told herself, “and become a wonderful man. I am

glad.”

When they had circled a rocky point and come to the lea, they drove their boat on a narrow beach. There they built a roaring fire and sat down to dry their clothes. There Don joined them.

“How did you lose your mast? What was that explosion?” he demanded excitedly.

It was Ruth who told of the afternoon’s events. In the telling she was obliged to add much about old Fort Skammel and the bombing smugglers that he had not known before.

“But did you hear that explosion at sea?” he asked as she ended.

“Yes,” said Ruth, “and I have my ideas. Looks to me as if we had seen the last of those two men.”

“You think their motor boat blew up?”

“I think they had explosives on board and that the jarring of the waves set them off.”

“Hm!” said Don. “That might be true.”

Early next morning Don tuned up the *Foolemagin* and went in search of the *Flyaway*. He found her piled up on the beautiful broad beach on Long Island. Save for a bump here and there and the loss of her mast, she was quite unharmed.

In a half hour’s time he had her pulled off and in tow.

“Get her in shipshape by noon,” he told Pearl over a belated breakfast. “Uncle Joe has a mast he took from an old boat. I’ll put it in and you can give her a tryout.”

It was during this tryout of the *Flyaway* that the three girls bumped square into the last great adventure of the season.

CHAPTER XX

THE CHASE

They had just circled the last pleasure yacht anchored before the island and were squared away for a trip down the bay, when their attention was attracted by a small motor boat apparently stranded in mid-channel.

“The ferry will run them down if they don’t watch out,” said Ruth, reaching for their ancient brass field glass.

“It—well, now what?” She dropped the glass to stare at the boat with the naked eye. “It’s your little friend the Secret Service man from Witches Cove,” she told Pearl. “There are three men with him and they seem no end excited. One is trying frantically to get the engine going. The other three are waving wildly at us. Head her in that way. Give her all the sail.”

Pearl swung about. In an incredibly short time they were within hailing distance.

“That boat can sail some, can’t she?” the little man shouted.

“She can,” said Ruth through cupped hands.

“Come alongside and take us on board. They’re getting away.” The Secret Service man swung his arm down the bay, where through the light fog a second motor boat was just passing behind the island.

“Who’s getting away?” Ruth asked in some astonishment as they came close up.

“The bombers—the smugglers—the—the wild rascals, whoever they may be, you know as well as I.” The man was in a great state of perspiration. “They just left old Fort Skammel.”

The three girls stared as if they had seen a ghost.

“They can’t have,” said Ruth as soon as she found her voice. “They’re dead, blown into a thousand pieces by their own dynamite.”

“Strange,” puffed the little man as he scrambled aboard the *Flyaway*, followed by his three companions.

“Let her drift,” he said as he saw Ruth eyeing the stalled motor boat. “Someone will pick her up. There’s important matters afoot. What’s one motor boat more or less?”

“Dead! Blown to pieces!” he exclaimed as soon as he had taken three deep breaths. “Show us you are sailors, and we’ll prove to you that they are neither dead nor blown to pieces. I saw that wild looking fellow with the tangled black hair and shining eyes, saw him plainly.”

“The man of the face-in-the-fire,” Ruth said to Pearl, as she set the *Flyaway* to skimming up the bay. “The very one. Must be. What do you know about that!”

Not one of the three knew what about it, so they were silent until they too had rounded the island and saw the fleeing boat, a low, dark affair of moderate speed, popping along dead ahead.

“Well, will we overhaul them?” the little man asked anxiously.

“Will if the wind holds. May drop any time,” said Ruth. “Little fog. May burn off. May thicken. Can’t tell.” With a boy’s cap jammed tight over her head, she stood there swaying with the boat and giving her every inch of sail she’d carry.

“It’s to be a race,” she told herself, “a race between the *Flyaway* and that motor boat.” There was something altogether unusual about the whole affair. If these were the men, if indeed they had escaped the storm and the explosion, as indeed they appeared to have done, then the *Flyaway*, which they had attempted to destroy along with the three of them, was hunting down the very ones who had meant to destroy her.

“Good old *Flyaway*!” she whispered. “Do your best!”

“We’ll catch them,” she told herself a short time later. “And then?” She dared

not think what might follow. These were desperate men. If caught, they would serve long terms in prison. They would not surrender without a battle.

It was strange the thoughts that passed through her mind as they sped along. Now she was thinking of that secret room in old Fort Skammel. How was it heated? Were the silks still there? If the men were captured, what then? The silks would be confiscated by the customs office.

“There’s some sort of law that gives the finder a share,” she told herself. “We found them right enough.” She thrilled at the thought of owning a room half filled with silk dresses and bolts of silk cloth.

A moment later she was talking with the little Secret Service man, joining him in an effort to unravel the tangled web of mysteries that had been woven about them.

She spoke first of the ancient wood carrying schooner, of its dark foreign skipper and the bales of cloth in the hold. The little man seemed astonished.

“There,” he said, “I think you are entirely wrong. Did you ever happen to look at that skipper’s hands?”

Ruth had not.

“They’re hard as pine knots and the muscles of his arms are like wooden beams. You don’t get a man like that for smuggling or stealing. They love physical labor too much and the contentment that comes with it.”

He agreed with her when she said that the smugglers had a hand in the destruction of *Black Gull*. That the cache in the old fort was theirs, neither of them doubted.

When Ruth spoke of the dark seaplane Pearl had seen off Monhegan on that stormy night, he seemed greatly surprised and excited.

“Are we doing the best we can?” he asked suddenly, wrinkling his brow and looking up at the sail.

“Our level best,” said Ruth. “And if the wind holds it is good enough. See, we have gained half the distance already.”

It was true. They had now come so close to the fleeing craft that they were able to make out moving figures on her.

Lifting the glass, Ruth studied the sea and the power boat for a moment. Then, quite suddenly she dropped the glass. She had looked straight into that dark visage, the face-in-the-fire.

“How can one explain it?” she said, as a shudder ran through her stout frame.

“Explain what?” the little man asked.

Ruth told him of their harrowing experience of the previous day and of the tremendous explosion at sea.

“There is no explanation at present,” he said quietly. “There may never be any. We who spend our lives delving into hidden mysteries know that half of them are never solved.”

In spite of the realization that they were off on a perilous mission, Ruth felt a comforting warmth take possession of her. Only yesterday, with every hope apparently gone, she had been drifting on a sailless, mastless boat out to sea in the face of a storm. Now, with that same boat, she was treading on the heels of those who had willed her death. The end of all the summer’s excitement and mystery was near.

But what was this? A thin film of smoke rose from the power boat ahead. Ten seconds had not passed before this had become a veritable pillar of black towering toward the sky. “Their boat is on fire!” she cried.

“Smoke screen,” said the little man, still calm. “There! There! See? They are taking to their dory! We’ll get them now.”

“But what is that a little way over there to the right, close to that little rocky island?”

All eyes followed the direction she had indicated. Then as one, they exclaimed:

“A seaplane! A seaplane! The dark, trans-Atlantic plane! We have lost them!”

That the men should escape now seemed inevitable. The seaplane was moving

rapidly across the water. Soon she would be upon the dory from the smoking schooner. A hasty scramble aboard her, and they would rise to speed away at such a pace as no sailboat ever knew.

Ruth was ready to sit down and cry. She had risked so much. She had experienced such terrible things. She had hoped and hoped again. Truly she had come to know what life was. And now—

But again a surprise leaped at them from the air. The thunder of an airplane motor, not that of the dark seaplane, but another, struck their ears. As it doubled and redoubled in volume Ruth thought of the young air scout who had assisted her in saving Betty's life off Green Island, and a great surge of hope welled up within her.

CHAPTER XXI

ON AIR AND SEA

The scene that followed will remain in the memories of the three girls as long as life shall last. The sea, a thin fog, a great dark plane rising slowly like a black swan from the water, a small American pursuit plane appearing on the distant horizon.

“Is it our young aviator?” Ruth asked herself, gripping at her breast to still her heart’s wild beating. “Will he be in time?”

Higher and higher rose the giant plane. Nearer and nearer came its little pursuer.

When she had risen to a height of a thousand feet, the dark marauder began thundering away.

But of a sudden, a white gleam appeared above her. The little silver plane was possessed of great speed. The black giant, laden with hundreds of gallons of gasoline for a long journey, was slow in picking up. The tiny pursuer was upon her. The fight was on.

“It’s like a catbird attacking a crow,” Ruth told herself. “What will the end be?”

With a daring that set the girl’s blood racing, the young aviator swooped down upon his broad winged opponent.

“He—he’ll crash into them,” she thought in sudden terror, “He—he has!”

“No! No!” said Betty who, all unconscious of her actions, was dancing wildly about the deck. “There! There he is! He’s come out from behind.”

Again the little plane rose. Again, he came down, this time to the right and all but upon a broad wing of the Devil Bird.

Then came a short, sharp, insistent sound that was not made by motors.

“They—they’re shooting,” said Ruth as a fresh terror seized her. “We must get closer. They may bring him down.”

Gripping a rope, she sent her sail upward, then prepared to glide ahead at full speed.

But now, matters took a fresh turn. So close did the young aviator dive in that the great black plane was set wobbling. It was with the utmost difficulty that she righted herself.

Hardly had this been accomplished when the little plane, with all the ferocity of a bird robbed of her young, was upon her again.

“He’ll be killed!” screamed Betty, now fairly beside herself. “There! There he goes!”

But the little plane did not drop. It wobbled and twisted, turned half a flip-flop, righted itself and was at the dark antagonist once more.

Again the pop-pop-pop-pop of shots.

This time, however, it broke short off as the black plane, after an instant of seeming to hang motionless in air, suddenly went into a tail spin.

“There! There!” Betty closed her eyes.

When she opened them the black plane was gone.

“Where—where—” she stammered.

“Gone to the bottom,” said Ruth solemnly. “We’ll get over there at once. They may rise. It—it’s terrible to think—”

“Poor fellows,” said the little man. “They will never come up. The plane, with her heavy motors and her loaded tanks, took them straight to the bottom. They

deserved little enough. They were the enemies of law and order and all government. Since men must live as neighbors, laws of conduct cannot be avoided. They were blind to all this. They saw wrongs in every land; men rich and living extravagantly who deserved to live on hard bread and wear rags, other men living in poverty, and they said, 'We must destroy.'

"Nothing was ever gained by destruction. Wrongs must be righted by laws, and by instilling into the hearts of all men a feeling of brotherly kindness. Those who will destroy will in the end bring destruction upon themselves."

The little pursuit plane had come to rest on the sea. For a half hour both plane and sail boat cruised the waters there, but no sign of the missing plane rose from the depths.

When the little plane at last drew in close Ruth saw, with a sudden tremor at her heart, that the young aviator of that other day by Green Island was in the forward cockpit.

"Sorry to spoil your game," he said, standing up. "But he was about to get away. And that wouldn't do. Done enough damage already."

"Quite enough," said the little man. "We owe you a vote of thanks. You were lucky to escape. There was shooting."

"They did all the shooting," said the young man. "I was only trying to force them down for you."

"Well," said the little man, "you did that with a vengeance. And now," he said briskly, "we better get back to old Fort Skammel. These young ladies tell me that there's a secret cache of silks there. I have no doubt there are papers of great importance there too."

"Like to ride back with me?" said the young aviator, looking at Ruth. "I—I promised you a trip, you know."

"Yes," said Ruth, climbing into the plane.

"We'll get over to the fort and keep guard there until you arrive," said the aviator, waving them goodbye as Ruth's last strap was safely buckled into place.

It was a strange world that Ruth looked down upon as she sped along—her own little world seen from above. Islands, homes, ships, all floated like miniature affairs of paper beneath her. Then, much too soon, they were skimming the bay for a landing.

All was serene and dreamy about old Fort Skammel as the two, Ruth and her pilot, came ashore there. Dragon flies darted here and there. Spider webs drifted by.

“The calm of a Sabbath afternoon,” said the young pilot. “How good it is to be alive!”

“Life,” Ruth replied, blinking at the sun and struggling to reassemble her scattered thoughts, “could not be sweeter.”

An hour later, with the Secret Service man in the lead and an armed guard stationed along the corridors, the little company entered the room of many mysteries.

They were all there, Ruth, Pearl, Betty and even the little city girl who had come over in a row boat. And such a time as they had feasting their eyes on the softness and beauty of the silks laid out before them.

CHAPTER XXII

THE STORY TOLD

A few moments later the men from the revenue cutter were passing boxes and bales of silk up from the strangely snug underground room, and had begun carrying them down dim corridors to the ancient granite dock that had once served the fort.

“Ingenious chaps, those fellows were,” the little Secret Service man said, touching an electric heater. “Ingenious and resourceful. Heated the place with electricity.”

“But where did they get the current?” Ruth asked.

“There’s an electric power cable passing across the island. They wired this place, then waited for a time when the current was off to tap the line, I suppose.”

“So that’s it,” said Ruth.

“There is a great deal more that remains to be explained,” said the little man. “I fancy I shall find it all recorded here.” He patted a great heap of books and papers which he had collected from one corner of the room. “If you young folks wish to come out to Witches Cove rather late in the afternoon, I am quite sure I shall have a lot to tell. Like to come?”

“Would we!” said Ruth.

“Try us,” said Betty, standing on tiptoes in her excitement.

“That’s settled, then. Come in the *Flyaway* at dusk. I’m sure the three gray witches will be there to greet you. So will I, and my two black cats.”

“It’s a pity,” he said a little later as he stood by the great heap of silks that lay on the dock ready to be transported to the customs house, “that I can’t permit each one of you to select a wardrobe from among these beautiful creations, but the law wouldn’t permit that.”

As their eyes rested on the broken bundles from which rich garments of rare beauty shone through, they felt that he spoke the truth.

That evening, just as the shadows had turned the dark green waters of Witches Cove to pitchy black, the three girls, Ruth, Pearl and Betty, rode into that little natural harbor of many mysteries. Having dropped anchor, they rowed Ruth’s punt silently to the rocky shore, then mounted the rugged natural stairway to the cabin that crowned the crest.

A curious light, flickering and dancing, now waving, now glowing bright, played hide and seek through the cabin’s two small windows. A driftwood fire was burning in the large room of the place.

Before this fire, on the skin of some great bear whose grinning white teeth seemed ready to devour them, sat the little man. On either side of the hearth the two black cats sat blinking. Before him was a heap of papers and a thick black book.

“Sit down,” he said, moving over to give them room. Lifting a simmering pot from the hearth, he poured them delicious hot chocolate in cups as blue-green as the waters of Witches Cove.

“We drink to the health of all loyal sons and daughters of Maine,” he said, lifting a cup to his lips.

“It’s all written here,” he said after a moment of solemn meditation. “Written down in this book.” He patted the fat black book.

“It’s strange,” he said thoughtfully, “that men cannot resist recording deeds of daring. Whether they be done for lawful or unlawful purposes, makes no difference. Even the Buccaneers had their historians.

“The author of this,” again he touched the book, “was none other than that dark fellow, whom you called the ‘face-in-the-fire’ man.

“It’s a remarkable story,” he went on. “Lindbergh crossed the ocean once alone, and the whole world went mad. This man made seven round trips from Europe to America and there was not one shout. Because,” he paused—“because almost no one knew. Seven men knew. They dared not tell. He brought them to America one at a time in the gray seaplane in which he to-day met so tragic a death. Our nation refused them entrance. He brought them. Very soon now they will be found and sent back. But because these men could not pay him, he engaged in silk smuggling. He used the old fort as a hiding place because no one would expect to find him there.”

“But why?” Ruth leaned forward eagerly. “Why did he do all this?”

“He crossed the ocean seven times bringing each time a man,” the speaker went on impressively. “Each time he recrossed the lonely old ocean alone. Think of it! Seven times! An unbroken record!

“Loyalty,” he stared thoughtfully at the fire, “loyalty is a wonderful thing. But loyalty to a wrong cause can bring only disaster.

“This man and his seven friends believed that the private ownership of property was wrong, that your home, your boat, your horse, your dog, yes and perhaps your very father and mother, should belong to the State. That all men should own everything, and no individual anything.”

“How terrible!” said Ruth.

“You think so,” the little man said. “So do I. So do most Americans. And yet that was the principle for which they stood. For this principle they would smuggle, bomb, cast helpless girls adrift in a dismantled boat, destroy all.”

“That,” said Ruth, “is a terrible way to live.”

“We think so. We believe that you have done your country a great service. You will not go unrewarded.”

“The thing I can’t understand,” said Betty, “is why they remained in the old fort and kept their silks there after they knew that Ruth and I had been in that room.”

“They thought you were at the bottom of the sea where they meant you to be,” the little man smiled. “You would have been, too, had it not been for that chap

you call Don and the fearless city boy.”

“Yes, we would,” Ruth said solemnly.

“And that,” said the little man, “is the end of the story. You have all been fortunate. You have helped solve mysteries and have known adventures.

“Your lives from this day may flow as smooth as a river, but the memory of this summer, with its joys and hopes, its perils, despairs, its defeats and victories can never be taken from you.”

“To-morrow night,” he said, as he walked with them to their waiting boat, “Witches Cove will be dark. My black cats and I are leaving to-morrow. Good night, good-bye, and good luck.”

That night Ruth sat looking out once more from her room upon the moonlit bay. Her summer of adventure was over. Betty was returning to Chicago. The cottages were closing. Soon there would be left only the fisher folks and the sea.

“Life,” she told herself, “is quite wonderful, and not a joke at all.” She doubted if anyone really, truly in the depths of their hearts, ever thought it was.

So, sitting there in her chair, dreaming in the moonlight, she allowed her head to fall forward and was soon fast asleep.

THE END.

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