Betty Gordon in Washington

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Author: Alice B. Emerson

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BETTY GORDON IN WASHINGTON

OR

Strange Adventures in a Great City

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

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BETTY GORDON IN WASHINGTON

CHAPTER I

THE GORED COW

For lack of a better listener, Betty Gordon addressed the saucy little chipmunk that sat on the top rail of the old worn fence and stared at her with bright, unwinking eyes.

“It is the loveliest vase you ever saw,” said Betty, busily sorting the tangled mass of grasses and flowers in her lap. “Heavy old colonial glass, you know, plain, but with beautiful lines.”

The chipmunk continued to regard her gravely.

“I found it this morning when I was helping Mrs. Peabody clean the kitchen closet shelves,” the girl went on, her slim fingers selecting and discarding slender stems with fascinating quickness. “It was on the very last shelf, and was covered with dust. I washed it, and we’re going to have it on the supper table to-night with this bouquet in it. There! don’t you think that’s pretty?”

She held out the flowers deftly arranged and surveyed them proudly. The chipmunk cocked his brown head and seemed to be withholding his opinion.

Betty put the bouquet carefully down on the grass beside her and stretched the length of her trim, graceful self on the turf, burying her face luxuriously in the warm dry “second crop” of hay that had been raked into a thin pile under the pin oak and left there forgotten. Presently she rolled over and lay flat on her back, studying the lazy clouds that drifted across the very blue sky.

“I’d like to be up in an airplane,” she murmured drowsily, her eyelids drooping. “I’d sail right into a cloud and see—What was that?”

She sat up with a jerk that sent the hitherto motionless chipmunk scurrying indignantly up the nearest tree, there to sit and shake his head angrily at her.

“Sounds like Bob!” said Betty to herself. “My goodness, that was Mr. Peabody —they must be having an awful quarrel!”

The voices and shouts came from the next field, separated from her by a brook, almost dry now, and a border of crooked young willow trees grown together in an effective windbreak.

“Anybody who’ll gore a cow like that isn’t fit to own a single dumb creature!” A clear young voice shaking with passion was carried by the wind to the listening girl.

“When I need a blithering, no-‘count upstart to teach me my business, I’ll call on you and not before,” a deeper, harsh voice snarled. “When you’re farming for yourself you can feed the neighbors’ critters on your corn all you’ve a mind to!”

“Oh, dear!” Betty scrambled to her feet, forgetting the bouquet so carefully culled, and darted in the direction of the willow hedge. “I do hope Mr. Peabody hasn’t been cruel to an animal. Bob is always so furious when he catches him at that!”

She crossed the puttering little brook by the simple expedient of jumping from one bank to the other and scrambled through the willow trees, emerging, flushed and anxious-eyed, to confront a boy about fourteen years old in a torn straw hat and faded overalls and a tall, lean middle-aged man with a pitchfork in his hands.

“Well?” the latter grunted, as Betty glanced fearfully at him. “What did you come for? I suppose you think two rows of corn down flat is something to snicker at?”

They stood on the edge of a flourishing field of corn, and, following the direction of Mr. Peabody’s accusing finger, Betty Gordon saw that two fine rows had been partially eaten and trampled.

“Oh, that’s too bad!” she said impulsively, “What did it—a stray cow?”

“Keppler’s black and white heifer,” answered Mr. Peabody grimly. “Bob here is finding fault with me because I didn’t let it eat its head off.”

“No such thing!” Bob Henderson was stung into speech. “Because the poor creature didn’t get out fast enough to suit you—and you bewildered her with your shouting till she didn’t know which way to turn—you jabbed her with the pitchfork. I saw the blood! And I say nobody but an out and out coward would

do a thing like that to a dumb animal."

"Oh!" breathed Betty again, softly. "How could you!"

"Now I've heard about enough of that!" retorted Mr. Peabody angrily. "If you'd both attend to your own business and leave me to mind mine, we'd save a lot of time. You, Bob, go let down the bars and turn that critter into the road. Maybe Keppler will wake up and repair his fences after all his stock runs off. You'd better help him, Betty. He might step on a grub-worm if you don't go along to watch him!"

Bob strode off, kicking stones as he went, and Betty followed silently. She helped him lower the bars and drive the cow into the road, then put the bars in place again.

"Where are you going?" she ventured in surprise, as Bob moodily trudged after the animal wending an erratic way down the road.

"Going to take her home," snapped Bob, "Peabody would like to see Keppler have to get her out of the pound, but I'll save him that trouble. You can go on back and read your book."

"Just because you're mad at Mr. Peabody is no reason why you should be cross to me," said Betty with spirit. "I wasn't reading a book, and I'm coming with you. So there!"

Bob laughed and told her to "come on." He was seldom out of sorts long. Indeed, of the two, Betty had the quicker temper and cherished a grudge more enduringly.

"Just the same, Betty," Bob announced, as he skillfully persuaded the cow to forego the delights of a section of particularly sweet grass and proceed on her course, "I'm about through. I can't stand it much longer; and lately I've been afraid that in a rage I might strike Mr. Peabody with something and either kill him or hurt him badly. Of course, I wouldn't do it if I stopped to think, but when he gets me furious as he did to-day, I don't stop to think."

"Well, for mercy's sake, Bob Henderson," ejaculated Betty in an instant alarm, "don't kill him, whatever you do. Then you'd be put in prison for life!"

“All right,” agreed Bob equably, “I won’t kill him—just nick him in a few places—how will that do?”

“But I’m really serious,” insisted Betty. “Don’t let the cow turn up that lane. Think how awful you would feel if you were sent to prison, Bob.”

Bob took refuge in a masculine stronghold.

“If that isn’t just like a girl!” he said scornfully. “Who said I was going to prison? I merely say I don’t want to lose my temper and do something rash, and you have me convicted and sentenced for life. Gee, Betty, have a little mercy!”

Betty’s lips trembled.

“I can’t bear to think of you going away and leaving me here,” she faltered. “I’m not going to stay either, Bob, not one minute after I hear from Uncle Dick. I’m sure if the Benders knew how things were going, they would think we had a right to leave. I had the loveliest letter from Mrs. Bender this morning—but it had been opened.”

Bob switched an unoffending flower head savagely.

“You come out of that!” he shouted to the perverse cow that seemed determined to turn to the left when she was plainly asked to turn to the right. “Wait a minute, Betty; here’s Fred Keppler.”

The half-grown boy who accosted them with “What are you doing with our cow?” grinned fatuously at Betty, showing several gaps in a row of fine teeth.

“Keep your cow at home where she belongs,” directed Bob magnificently. “She’s been making her dinner off our corn.”

“Oh, gee,” sighed the boy nervously. “I’ll bet old Peabody was in a tearing fury. Look, Bob, something’s tore her hide! She must have been down in the blackberry bushes along the brook.”

“Well, see that it doesn’t happen again,” commanded Bob, gracefully withdrawing by walking backward. “Corn that’s as high as ours is worth something, you know.”

“You never told him about the pitchfork,” said Betty accusingly, as soon as Fred Keppler and the cow were out of earshot. “You let him think it was blackberry bushes that scratched her like that.”

“Well, his father will know the difference,” grinned Bob cheerfully. “Why should I start an argument with Fred? Saving the cow from the pound ought to be enough, anyway. Mr. Keppler has had to buy more than one animal out before this; he will not pay attention to his fences.”

Betty sat down on a broad boulder and leaned up against an old hickory tree.

“Stone in my shoe,” she said briefly. “You’ll have to wait just a minute, Bob.”

Bob sat down on the grass and began to hunt for four leaf clovers, an occupation of which he never tired.

“Do you think Mr. Peabody opened your letter?” he asked abruptly.

Betty paused in the operation of untying her shoe.

“Who else would?” she said thoughtfully. “It wasn’t even pasted together again, but slit across one end, showing that whoever did it didn’t care whether I noticed it or not. I’ll never mail another letter from that box. I’ll walk to Glenside three times a day first!”

“Well, the only thing to do is to clear out,” said Bob firmly. “You’ll have to wait till you hear from your uncle, or at least till the Benders get back. We promised, you know, that we wouldn’t run away without telling them, or if there wasn’t time, writing to them and saying where we go. That shows, I think, that they suspected things might get too hot to be endured.”

“I simply must get a letter from Uncle Dick or go crazy,” sighed Betty feverishly. She put on her shoe and stood up. “I wish he would come for me himself and see how horrid everything is.”

CHAPTER II

HOSPITALITY UNDER DIFFICULTIES

Betty Gordon had come to Bramble Farm, as Mr. Peabody's home was known, early in the summer to stay until her uncle, Richard Gordon, should be able to establish a home for her, or at least know enough of his future plans to have Betty travel with him. He was interested in mines and oil wells, and his business took him all over the country.

Betty was an orphan, and this Uncle Dick was her only living relative. He came to her in Pineville after her mother's death and when the friends with whom she had been staying decided to go to California. He remembered Mrs. Peabody, an old school friend, and suggested that Betty might enjoy a summer spent on a farm. These events are related in the first book of this series, called "Betty Gordon at Bramble Farm."

That story tells how Betty came to the farm to find Joseph Peabody a domineering, pitiless miser, his wife Agatha, a drab woman crushed in spirit, and Bob Henderson, the "poorhouse rat," a bright intelligent lad whom the Peabodys had taken from the local almshouse for his board and clothes. Betty Gordon found life at Bramble Farm very different from the picture she and her uncle had drawn in imagination, and only the fact that her uncle's absence in the oil fields had prevented easy communication with him had held her through the summer.

Once, indeed, she had run away, but circumstances had brought her and Bob to the pleasant home of the town police recorder, and Mr. and Mrs. Bender had proved themselves true and steadfast friends to the boy and girl who stood sorely in need of friendship. It was the Benders who had exacted a promise from both Bob and Betty that they would not run away from Bramble Farm without letting them know.

Betty had been instrumental in causing the arrest of two men who had stolen chickens from the Peabody farm, and at the hearing before the recorder something of Mr. Peabody's characteristics and of the conditions at Bramble Farm had been revealed.

Anxious to have Betty and Bob return, Joseph Peabody had practically agreed to treat them more humanely, and for a few weeks, during which the Benders had gone away for their annual vacation, matters at Bramble Farm had in the main improved. But they were gradually slipping back to the old level, and this morning, when Peabody had gored the cow with his pitchfork, Bob had thought disgustedly that it was useless to expect anything good at the hands of the owner of Bramble Farm.

As he and Betty tramped back after delivering the cow, Bob's mind was busy with plans that would free him from Mr. Peabody and set him forward on the road that led to fortune. Bob included making a fortune in his life work, having a shrewd idea that money rightly used was a good gift.

"Where do you suppose your uncle is?" he asked Betty, coming out of a reverie wherein he bade Bramble Farm and all the dwellers there with a single exception a cold and haughty farewell.

"Why, I imagine he is in Washington," returned Betty confidently. "His last letter was from there, though two days ago a postal came from Philadelphia. I think likely he went up to see his lawyer and get his mail. You know it was held there while he was out West. I hope he has all my letters now, and last night I wrote him another, asking him if I couldn't leave here. I said I'd rather go to the strictest kind of a boarding school; and so I would. I'll mail the letter this afternoon in Glenside."

"It's too long a walk for you to take on a hot afternoon," grumbled Bob. "I'm going over to Trowbridge, and I'll mail it there for you."

Betty pulled the letter from her blouse pocket and handed it to him.

"Where's Trowbridge?" she asked, as they came in sight of the boundary line of Bramble Farm and sighted Mr. Peabody in conversation with the mail carrier at the head of the lane. "Can I go with you?"

"We'd better hurry," suggested Bob, quickening his steps. "Trowbridge is four miles beyond Laurel Grove. You've never been there. No, you can't go, Betty, because I have to ride the sorrel. I suppose in time old Peabody will buy another wagon, but no one can tell when that will come to pass."

The wagon house had burned one night, and the master of Bramble Farm could

not bring himself to pay out the cash for even a secondhand wagon. As a result, the always limited social activities of the farm were curtailed to the vanishing point.

“What are you going for?” persisted Betty, who had her fair share of feminine curiosity with the additional excuse that interesting events were few and far between in her present everyday life.

Bob grinned.

“Going to a vendue,” he announced. “Now how much do you know?”

Betty tossed her head, and elevated her small, freckled nose.

“A vendue?” she repeated. “Why, a vendue is a—a—what is it, Bob?”

“A sale,” said Bob. “Some farmer is going to sell out and Peabody wants a wagon. So I have to ride that horse fourteen miles and back —and he has a backbone like a razor blade!—to buy a wagon; that is, if no one bids over me.”

“And Mr. Peabody won’t pay more than six dollars; he said so at the supper table last night,” mourned Betty. “You’ll never be able to buy a wagon for that. I wish I could go, too. Bob, I never saw a country vendue. Please, can’t I?”

“You cannot,” replied Bob with unaccustomed decision. Betty usually wheedled him into granting her requests. “Haven’t I just told you there is nothing to go in? If you see yourself perched on that raw-boned nag with me, I don’t, that’s all. But I tell you what; there’s a sale to-morrow at a farm this side of Glenside—I’ll take you to that, if you like. I guess Peabody will let me off, seeing as how there are wagons advertised. We can easily walk to Faulkner’s place.”

This promise contented Betty, and she ate her dinner quietly. Bob rode off on the old horse directly after dinner, and then for the first time Betty noticed that Mrs. Peabody seemed worried about something.

“Don’t you feel well? Won’t you go upstairs and lie down and let me do the dishes?” urged the girl. “Do, Mrs. Peabody. You can have a nice, long rest before it’s time to feed the chickens.”

“I feel all right,” said Mrs. Peabody dully. “Only—well, I found this card from

the new minister back of the pump this morning. It's a week old, and he says he's coming out to call this afternoon. There's no place in the house I can show him, and I haven't got a decent dress, either."

Betty swallowed her first impulse to say what she thought of a husband who would make no effort to see that his wife received her mail, and instead turned her practical mind to consideration of the immediate moment. The so-called parlor was hopeless she knew, and she dismissed it from the list of possibilities at once. It was a sparsely furnished, gloomy room, damp and musty from being tightly closed all summer, and the unpainted, rough boards had never been carpeted.

"There's the porch," said Betty suddenly. "Luckily that's shady in the afternoon, and we can bring out the best things to make it look used. You let me fix it, Mrs. Peabody. And you can wear—let me see, what can you wear?"

Mrs. Peabody waited patiently, her eyes mirroring her explicit faith in Betty's planning powers.

"Your white shirtwaist and skirt," announced the girl at length. "They're both clean, aren't they? I thought so. Well, I'll lend you a ribbon girdle, and you can turn in the high neck so it will be more in style. You'll see, it will look all right."

While Mrs. Peabody washed her dishes with more energy than usual because she had a definite interest in the coming hours, Betty flew to the shabby room that was titled by courtesy the parlor. She flung up the windows and opened the blinds recklessly. She would take only the plain wooden chair and the two rockers, she decided, for the stuffed plush furniture would look ridiculous masquerading as summer furnishings. The sturdy, square table would fit into her scheme, and also the small rug before the blackened fireplace.

She dashed back to the kitchen and grabbed the broom. She did not dare scrub the porch floor for fear that it would not dry in time, but she swept it carefully and spread down the rug. Then one by one, and making a separate trip each time, she carried out the table and the chairs. With a passing sigh for the bouquet abandoned in the field and probably withered by this time, she managed to get enough flowers from the overgrown neglected garden near the house to fill the really lovely colonial glass vase she had discovered that morning.

"It looks real pretty," pronounced Mrs. Peabody, when she was brought out to

see the transformed corner of the porch. “Looks as if we used it regular every afternoon, doesn’t it? Do you think it will be all right not to ask him in, Betty?”

“Of course,” said Betty stoutly. “Don’t dare ask him in! If he wants a drink of water, call me, and I’ll get it for him. You must be sitting in your chair reading a magazine when he comes and he’ll think you always spend your afternoons like that.”

“I’ll hurry and get dressed,” agreed Mrs. Peabody, giving a last satisfied glance at the porch. “I declare, I never saw your beat, Betty, for making things look pretty.”

Betty needed that encouragement, for when it came to making Mrs. Peabody look pretty in the voluminous white skirt and stiff shirtwaist of ten years past, the task seemed positively hopeless. Betty, however, was not one to give in easily, and when she had brushed and pinned her hostess’s thin hair as softly as she could arrange it, and had turned in the high collar of her blouse and pinned it with a cameo pin, the one fine thing remaining to Mrs. Peabody from her wedding outfit, adding a soft silk girdle of gray-blue, she knew the improvement was marked. Mrs. Peabody stared at herself in the glass contentedly.

“I didn’t know I could look that nice,” she said with a candor at once pathetic and naive. “I’ve been wishing he wouldn’t come, but now I kinda hope he will.”

Betty gently propelled her to the porch and established her in one of the rocking chairs with a magazine to give her an air of leisure.

“You’ll come and talk to him, won’t you?” urged Mrs. Peabody anxiously. “It’s been so long since I’ve seen a stranger I won’t know what to say.”

“Yes, you will,” Betty assured her “I’ll come out after you’ve talked a little while. He won’t stay long, I imagine, because he will probably have a number of calls to pay.”

“Well, I hope Joseph stays out of sight,” remarked Joseph Peabody’s wife frankly. “Of course, in time the new minister will know him as well as the old one did; but I would like to have him call on me like other parishioners first.”

CHAPTER III

BOB HAS GREAT NEWS

The new minister proved to be a gentle old man, evidently retired to a country charge and, in his way, quite as diffident as Mrs. Peabody. He was apparently charmed to be entertained on the porch, and saw nothing wrong with the neglected house and grounds. His nearsighted eyes, beaming with kindness and good-will, apparently took comfort and serenity for granted, and when Betty came out half an hour after his arrival, carrying a little tray of lemonade and cakes, he was deep in a recital of the first charge he had held upon his graduation from the theological seminary forty years before.

“There, that’s over!” sighed Mrs. Peabody, quite like the experienced hostess, when the minister’s shabby black buggy was well on its way out of the lane. “You’re dreadful good, Betty, to help me through with it. He won’t come again for another six months—it takes him that long to cover his parish, the farms are so far apart. Let me help you carry back the chairs.”

Betty longed to suggest that they leave them out and use the porch as an outdoor sitting room, but she knew that such an idea would be sure to meet with active opposition from the master of Bramble Farm. Long before he came in to supper that night the chairs had been restored to their proper places and Mrs. Peabody had resumed the gray wrapper she habitually wore. Only the vase of flowers on the table was left to show that the afternoon had been slightly out of the ordinary. That and the tray of glasses Betty had unfortunately left on the draining board of the sink, intending to wash them with the supper dishes.

“Whose glasses, and what’s been in ‘em?” demanded Mr. Peabody suspiciously. “There’s sugar in the bottom of one of ‘em. You haven’t been making lemonade?” He turned to his wife accusingly.

Bob had not come home yet, and there was only Ethan, the hired man, Betty, and the Peabodys at the supper table.

“I made lemonade,” said Betty quietly. “Those are my own glasses I bought in Glenside, and the sugar and lemons were mine, too. So were the cakes.”

This silenced Peabody, for he knew that Betty's uncle sent her money from time to time, and though he fairly writhed to think that she Could spend it so foolishly, he could not interfere.

As soon as it was dark the Peabody household retired, to save lighting lamps, and this evening was no exception. Betty learned from a stray question Mrs. Peabody put to Ethan, the hired man, that Bob was not expected home until ten or eleven o'clock. There was no thought of sitting up for him, though Betty knew that in all likelihood he would have had no supper, having no money and knowing no one in Trowbridge.

She was not sleepy, and having brushed and braided her hair for the night, she threw her sweater over her dressing gown and sat down at the window of her room, a tin of sardines and a box of crackers in her lap, determined to see to it that Bob had something to eat.

There was a full moon, and the road lay like a white ribbon between the silver fields. Betty could follow the lane road out to where it met the main highway, and now and then the sound of an automobile horn came to her and she saw a car speed by on the main road. Sitting there in the sweet stillness of the summer night, she thought of her mother, of the old friends in Pineville, and, of course, of her uncle. She wondered where he was that night, if he thought of her, and what would be his answer to her letter.

"Is that a horse?" said Betty to herself, breaking off her reverie abruptly. "Hark! that sounds like a trotting horse."

She was sure that she could make out the outlines of a horse and rider on the main road, but it was several minutes before she was positive that it had turned into the lane. Yes, it must be Bob. No one else would be out riding at that hour of the night. Betty glanced at her wrist-watch—half-past ten.

The rhythmic beat of the horse's hoofs sounded more plainly, and soon Betty heard the sound of singing. Bob was moved to song in that lovely moonlight, as his sorry mount was urged to unaccustomed spirit and a feeling of freedom.

"When in thy dreaming, moons like these shall shine again, And, daylight beaming, prove thy dreams are vain."

Bob's fresh, untrained voice sounded sweet and clear on the night air, and to

Betty's surprise, tears came unbidden into her eyes. She was not given to analysis.

"Moonlight always makes me want to cry," she murmured, dashing the drops from her eyes. "I hope Bob will look up and know that I'm at the window. I don't dare call to him."

But Bob, who had stopped singing while still some distance from the house, clattered straight to the barn.

Betty hurried over to her lamp, lit it, and set it on the window sill.

"He'll see it from the barn," she argued wisely, "and know that I am not asleep."

Her reasoning proved correct, for in a few minutes a well-known whistle sounded below her window. She blew out the light and leaned out.

"Oh, Betty!" Bob's tone was one of repressed excitement. "I've got something great to tell you."

"Have you had any supper?" demanded Betty, more concerned with that question than with any news. "I've something for you, if you're hungry."

"Hungry? Gee, I'm starved!" was the response. "I didn't dare stop to ask for a meal anywhere, because I knew I'd be late getting home as it was. The horse was never cut out for a saddle horse; I'm so stiff I don't believe I can move to-morrow. Where's the eats?"

"Here. I'll let it down in a moment," answered Betty, tying a string to the parcel. "Sorry it isn't more, Bob, but the larder's getting low again."

Bob untied the can and cracker box she lowered to him, and Betty pulled in the string to be preserved for future use.

"Thanks, awfully," said Bob. "You're a brick, Betty. And, say, what do you think I heard over in Trowbridge?"

"Don't talk so loud!" cautioned Betty. "What, Bob?"

"Why, the poorhouse farm is this side of the town," said Bob, munching a

cracker with liveliest manifestations of appreciation. “Coming back to-night—that’s what made me late—Jim Turner, who’s poormaster now, called me in. Said he had something to tell me. It seems there was a queer old duffer spent one night there a while back —Jim thought it must have been a month ago. He has a secondhand bookshop in Washington, and he came to the poorhouse to look at some old books they have there—thought they might be valuable. They opened all the records to him, and Jim says he was quite interested when he came to my mother’s name. Asked a lot of questions about her and wanted to see me. Jim said he was as queer as could be, and all they could get out of him was that maybe he could tell me something to interest me. He wouldn’t give any of the poorhouse authorities an inkling of what he knew, and insisted that he’d have to see me first.”

“Where is he?” demanded Betty energetically. “I hope you didn’t come away without seeing him, Bob. What’s his name? How does he look?”

“His name,” said Bob slowly, “is Lockwood Hale. And he went back to Washington the next day.”

Betty’s air castles tumbled with a sickening slump.

“Bob Henderson!” she cried, remembering, however, to keep her voice low. “The idea! Do you mean to tell me they let that man go without notifying you? Why I never heard of anything so mean!”

“Oh, I’m not important,” explained Bob, quite without bitterness. “Poorhouse heads don’t put themselves out much for those under ‘em —though Jim Turner’s always treated me fair enough. But Lockwood Hale had to go back to Washington the next day, Betty. There honestly wasn’t time to send for me.”

“Perhaps they gave him your address,” said Betty hopefully. “But, oh, Bob, you say he was there a month ago?”

Bob nodded unhappily.

“He hasn’t my address,” he admitted. “Jim says he meant to give it to him, but the old fellow left suddenly without saying a word to any one. Jim thought maybe he had the name in mind and would write anyway. I’d get it, you know, if it went to the poorhouse. But I guess Hale’s memory is like a ragbag—stuffed with odds and ends that he can’t get hold of when he wants ‘em. No, Betty, I

guess the only thing for me to do is to go to Washington."

"Well, if you don't go to bed, young man, I'll come down there and help you along," an angry whisper came from the little window up under the roof. "You've been babbling and babbling steady for half an hour," grumbled the annoyed Ethan. "How do you expect me to get any sleep with that racket going on? Come on up to bed before the old man wakes up."

Thankful that it was Ethan instead of Mr. Peabody, Bob gathered up his sardines and the remnants of the crackers and tiptoed up the attic stairs to the room he shared with the hired man.

Betty hastily slipped into bed, and though Bob's news had excited her, she was tired enough to fall asleep readily.

In the morning she watched her chance to speak to Bob alone, and when she heard him grinding a sickle in the toolhouse ran out to tell him something.

"You must let me lend you some money, Bob," she said earnestly. "I know you haven't enough to go to Washington on. I've been saving, thanks to your advice, and I have more than I need. Besides, I could borrow from the Guerins or the Benders. You will take some, won't you?"

"I have enough, really I have," insisted Bob. "You know Dr. Guerin sold every one of those charms I carved, and I haven't spent a cent. It's all buried in a little canvas bag under the rose bush, just like a movie. I hate to take money from a girl, Betty."

"Don't be silly!" Betty stamped her foot angrily. "It's only a loan, Bob. And you'd feel cheap, wouldn't you, if you had to come back after you ran away because you didn't have enough money? You take this, and you can pay it back as soon as you please after you have seen the old bookstore man."

She pushed a tight little wad of money into the boy's perspiring hand.

"All right," he capitulated. "I'll borrow it. I would like to know I had enough. Sure I'm not crippling you, Betsey?"

Betty shook her head, smiling.

“I’ve enough to buy a ticket to Washington,” she assured him. “That’s all we need, isn’t it, Bob? Oh, how I wish Uncle Dick would send for me!”

CHAPTER IV

AT THE VENDUE

“You, Bob!”

The shout awakened Betty at dawn the next morning, and running to the window she saw Bob disappear into the barn, Mr. Peabody close on his heels.

“Oh, goodness, I suppose he’s scolding about something,” sighed the girl. “There always is something to find fault about. I hope Bob will keep his temper, because I want him to be able to take me to the vendue this afternoon.”

Joseph Peabody came into breakfast in a surly frame of mind, a mental condition faithfully reflected in the attitude of his hired man who jerked back his chair and subsided into it with a grunt. Betty’s irrepressible sense of humor pictured the dog (the Peabodys kept no dog because the head of the house considered that dogs ate more than they were worth) tucking his tail between his legs and slinking under the table as a port in the storm. The dog, she decided, glancing at Mrs. Peabody’s timid face, was all that was needed to set the seal on a scene of ill-nature and discomfort.

Bob, when he came in late with the milk pails, wore a black scowl and set his burden down with a crash that spilled some of the precious fluid on to the oilcloth top of the side table.

“Be a little more careful with that,” growled Mr. Peabody, taking the last piece of ham, which left nothing but the fried potatoes and bread for Bob’s breakfast. “The cows are going dry fast enough without you trying to waste the little they give.”

Bob, looking as though he could cheerfully fling the contents of both pails over his employer, sullenly began to pump water into the hand basin. This habit of “washing up” at the kitchen sink while a meal was in progress always thoroughly disgusted Betty, and Bob usually performed his ablutions on the back porch. This morning he was evidently too cross to consider a second person’s feelings.

“Always ready enough to throw out what doesn’t belong to you,” went on Mr. Peabody grumbling. “Born in the poorhouse, you’re in a fair way to die there. If I didn’t watch you every minute, you’d waste more than I can save in a year.”

Bob, his face buried in the roller towel, lost his temper at this point.

“Oh, for Pete’s sake, shut up!” he muttered.

But Mr. Peabody had heard. With a quickness that surprised even his wife, for ordinarily he slouched his way around, he sprang from his chair, reached the side of the unconscious Bob, and soundly boxed his ears twice.

“I’ll take no impudence from you!” he cried, enraged. “Here, come back!” he yelled, as Bob started for the door. “You come back here and sit down. When you don’t come to the table, it will be because I say so. Sit down, I say!”

Bob, his face livid, his ears ringing, dropped into a chair at the table. Ethan continued to eat stolidly, and Betty kept her eyes resolutely fastened on her plate.

“Just for that, you stay home from the Faulkner sale!” announced Mr. Peabody who was more than ordinarily loquacious that morning. “I’ll find something for you to do this afternoon that’ll keep your hands busy, if not your tongue. Eat your breakfast. I’ll have no mincing over food at my table.”

Poor Bob, who had often been forbidden a meal as punishment, now mechanically tried to eat the unappetizing food placed before him. Betty was terribly disappointed about the sale, for she had set her heart on going. There were few pleasures open to her as a member of the household at Bramble Farm, and, with the exception of the Guerin girls in town, she had no girl friends her own age. Bob had proved himself a sympathetic, loyal chum, and he alone had made the summer endurable.

“Don’t care!” she cried, to console the boy, as Peabody and his helper went out of the house to begin the field work for the day. “Don’t care, Bob. I really don’t mind not going to the sale.”

Mrs. Peabody was in the pantry, straining the milk.

“We’re going,” whispered Bob. “You meet me right after dinner at the end of the lane. I’m sick of being knocked around, and I think Jim Turner will be at the

sale. I want to see him. Anyway, we're going."

"But—but Mr. Peabody will be furious!" ventured Betty. "You know what a scene he will make, Bob. Do you think we had better go?"

"You needn't," said Bob ungraciously. "I am."

"Of course, if you go, so will I," replied Betty, swallowing a sharp retort. Bob was badgered enough without a contribution from her. "Perhaps he will not miss us—we can get back in time for supper."

Immediately after dinner at noon Mr. Peabody sent Bob out to the hay loft to pitch down hay for the balers who were expected to come and set up their machine that night, ready for work the next day. He could not have selected a meaner job, for the hay loft was stifling in the heat of the midday sun which beat down on the roof of the barn, and there were only two tiny windows to supply air. Mr. Peabody himself was going up in the woods to mark trees for some needed fence rails.

Bob departed with a significant backward glance at Betty, which sent her flying upstairs to get into a clean frock. Mrs. Peabody manifested so little interest in her activities that the girl anticipated no difficulty in getting safely out of the house. As it happened, her hostess made the way even easier.

"If you're going to Glenside, Betty," she remarked dully, stopping in the doorway of Betty's room as the girl pulled on her hat, "I wish you'd see if Grimshaw has any meat scraps. Joseph might get me a bit the next time he goes over. Just ask how much it is, an' all—the hens need something more than they're getting."

Betty knew that Joseph Peabody would never buy meat scraps for his wife's hens. Indeed, she had priced stuff several times at Mrs. Peabody's request and nothing had ever come of it. But she agreed to go to Grimshaw's if she got that far in her walk, and Mrs. Peabody turned aside into her own room without asking any questions.

"Gee! thought you never were coming," complained Bob, when the slim figure in the navy serge skirt and white middy met him at the end of the lane road. "The sale starts at one sharp, you know, and we'll miss the first of it. Lots of 'em will come in overalls, so I'll be in style."

Before they had walked very far they were overtaken by a rattling blackboard, drawn by a lean, raw-boned white horse and driven by a cheerful farmer's wife who invited them to "hop in," an invitation which they accepted gratefully. She was going to the Faulkner vendue, she informed them, and her heart was set on three wooden wash tubs and seven yards of ingrain carpet advertised in the list of household goods offered for sale.

"My daughter's going to set up for herself next fall," she said happily, "and that ingrain will be just the thing for her spare room."

When they reached the Faulkner farm, a rather commonplace group of buildings set slightly in a hollow, they found teams and automobiles of every description blocking the lane that led to the house.

Bob tied the white horse to an unoccupied post for the woman, and she hastened away, worried lest the ingrain carpet be sold before she could reach the crowd surrounding the auctioneer.

Betty, for whom all this was a brand-new experience, enjoyed the excitement keenly. She followed Bob up to the front porch of the house where the household effects were being put up for sale, Bob explaining that the live stock would be sold later.

"Well, look who's here!" cried a hearty voice, as a man, moving aside to give Betty room, allowed the person standing next to him to see the girl's face. "Betty Gordon! And Bob, too! Not thinking of going to farming, are you?"

Gray-haired, kindly-faced Doctor Guerin shook hands cordially, and kept a friendly arm across Bob's thin shoulders.

"Friends of yours coming home next Tuesday," he said, smiling as one who knows he brings pleasant news. "The Benders are due in Laurel Grove. Mrs. Guerin had a postal card last night."

Betty was glad to hear this, for she did not want Bob to leave Bramble Farm without seeking the advice of the fine young police recorder who had been so good to them and whose friendship both she and Bob valued as only those can who need real friends.

"I came to bid on a secretary," Doctor Guerin confided presently. "It's the only

good thing in the whole house. Rest of the stuff is nothing but trash. That antique dealer from Petria is here, too, and I suspect he has his eye on the same piece. Don't you want to bid for me Bob, to keep him in the dark?"

Bob was delighted to do the doctor a service, and when the mahogany secretary was put up for sale the few other bidders soon dropped out, leaving the field to the Petria dealer and the lad in the faded overalls. The dealer, of course, knew that Bob must represent some buyer, but he could not decide for whom he was bidding, and so was in the dark as to how high his opponent would go. Had he known that Doctor Hal Guerin was bidding against him, he would have been enlightened, for the doctor's collection of antiques was really famous and the envy of many a professional collector.

"I suppose some rube wants the desk for his sitting room," thought the Petria man lazily, his eye, keen as it was, failing to see the doctor in the crowd. "Let him have it, and I'll buy it from him for ten dollars more before he leaves the sale. He can't resist turning over his money quick like that."

So when the auctioneer boomed "Sold for forty dollars," and in answer to his request for the buyer's name Bob said clearly, "Doctor Guerin," in his own language, the man from Petria was "just plain sick."

After the household things were sold—and Betty noted with satisfaction that the three tubs and the ingrain carpet went to the woman who had so coveted them—she and Bob went out to the barn and watched the horses and cows, wagons, harnesses and farm machinery sold. It was an absorbing and colorful scene, and the boy and girl, fascinated, lingered till the last item was checked off. Then, with a start, Bob heard a farmer announce that it was half past five.

"Oh dear!" sighed Betty nervously, "you ought to be milking this minute. Oh, Bob, let's not go home! Couldn't we stay overnight with Doctor Guerin?"

"Now don't you be afraid, there won't anything happen to scare you," responded Bob soothingly. It must be confessed that the knowledge of the little sum of money tucked away under the rosebush gave him a bolder outlook on the future.

Hiram Keppler, who owned the farm just beyond the Peabody place, gave them a lift as far as their lane, and as they hurried down the road Betty tried her best to master her dread of the coming interview. She had not a doubt but that Bob's absence would have been noticed. Looking ahead fearfully, she saw a sight that

confirmed her worst forebodings.

Joseph Peabody stood at the barnyard gate, a horsewhip in his hand

CHAPTER V

CONSEQUENCES

“Oh, Bob!” Betty clutched the boy’s sleeve in a panic. “And the balers have come!”

“So!” began Mr. Peabody, in tones of cold fury. “That’s the way you carry out my orders! Not one forkful of hay pitched down, and the men ready to go to work to-morrow. You miserable, sneaking loafer, where have you been?”

“To the vendue,” said Bob defiantly.

“Flatly refuse to mind, do you? Well, I’ll give you one lesson you won’t forget!” the man reached over and gripped Bob by his shirt collar. Struggling violently, he was pulled over the five-barred gate.

“I’ll learn you!” snarled Peabody, raising the whip.

Betty sprang up on the gate, her eyes blazing.

“How dare you!” she cried, her voice shaking with anger. “How dare you strike him! I’ll scream till some one comes if you touch him. Those men at the barn won’t stand by and see you beat a boy.”

“Hoity toity!” sputtered the amazed farmer, confronting the angry girl in the middy blouse with the blazing cheeks and tangled dark braids.

Bob tried to pull himself free, but was brought up short by a quick twist.

“I’m not through with you,” Peabody informed him grimly. He glanced quickly toward the barn and observed the men watching him covertly. It was the better part of discretion, something told him, not to flog the boy before so many witnesses.

“I’m through with you!” declared Bob through clenched teeth. “I’m going! You’ve had all out of me you’re going to get. Let go of me!”

For answer, Peabody tightened his hold on the worn shirt collar.

“Is that so?” he drawled. “Let me tell you, Mr. Smarty, you’ll go out to that barn and pitch down the hay you were supposed to do this afternoon or you’ll go back to the poorhouse. You can take your choice. The county has a place for incorrigible boys, and if you go far enough you’ll land in the reform school. Are you going out to the barn or not?”

“I’ll go,” agreed Bob sullenly.

“Then see that you do. And you needn’t bother to stop for supper —you’ve several hours’ lost time to make up,” said Peabody nastily. “Now go!”

He shook the boy till his teeth rattled and then released him with a powerful sling that sent him spinning into the dust. Bruised and shaken, Bob picked himself up and started for the barn.

“You hold your tongue a bit better, or something’ll come your way,” said Peabody shortly, eyeing Betty with disfavor and turning on his heel at a shout of “Ho, Boss!” from the foreman of the balers.

“Hateful!” cried Betty stormily, climbing down from the gate. “He’s the most absolutely hateful man that ever lived! I wonder if he could send Bob back to the poorhouse?”

The same thought was troubling Bob, she found, when after supper she went out to the barn and climbed the loft ladder to see him. She had brought him some bread and water, the latter contributed by the Peabody pump and the bread saved from Betty’s own meal.

“Do you know, Betty,” confided the boy, wiping the heavy perspiration from his face with a distressingly hot looking red cotton handkerchief, “I’ve been thinking over what old Peabody said. He might take it into his head to send me back to the poorhouse. He really needs a younger boy, one he can slam about more. I’m getting so I can fight back. I don’t fancy hanging on here till he makes up his mind to get another boy, and running away from the poorhouse isn’t a simple matter. I’d better make the plunge while there’s good swimming.”

It was stifling in the loft, and Betty felt almost giddy. She sat at the top of the ladder, her feet hanging over the edge of the floor and regarded Bob anxiously.

“Well, perhaps you had better go early next week,” she said judiciously. “It would be dreadful if he did return you to the poorhouse.”

“Therefore, I’m going to-night,” announced Bob coolly. “There’s an eleven-thirty train from Glenside that will make some sort of connection with the southern local at the Junction. Wish me luck, Betty!”

“To-night!” gasped Betty in dismay. “Oh, Bob! don’t go to-night. Wait just one night more, ah, please do!”

Betty had the truly feminine horror of quick decisions, and she was frankly upset by this determination of Bob’s. Even as she pleaded she knew he had made up his mind and that it was useless to ask him to change it.

“I don’t see how you can go—you’re not ready,” she argued feverishly. “Your shirts are on the line; I saw them. You’re dead tired after all this work, and it’s a long walk to Glenside. Wait just till to-morrow, Bob, and I won’t say a word.”

“No, I’m going to-night,” said Bob firmly. “I haven’t so much packing to do that it will take me over fifteen minutes. I’ll help myself to the shirts on the line as I go in. By to-morrow morning I’ll be as far away from Bramble Farm as the local can take me.”

“But—but—I’ll miss you so!” protested Betty, the catch in her voice sounding perilously close to tears. “What shall I ever do all alone in this hateful place!”

“Oh, now, Betty!” Bob put a clumsy hand on her shoulder in an effort to comfort her. “Don’t you care—you’ll be going to Washington as soon as you get word from your uncle. Maybe I’ll be there when you come, and we’ll go sightseeing together.”

“Are you going right to Washington?” asked Betty, drying her eyes. “And are you sure you have enough money?”

“Oceans of cash,” Bob assured her cheerfully. “That’s right, brace up and smile. Think what it will mean to have one peaceful breakfast, for the last week Peabody has ragged me every meal. Sure I’m going to Washington to dig out a few facts from this Lockwood Hale. Now I’ll throw down a little more hay for good measure and we’ll go on in. Mustn’t rouse suspicions by staying out too long. Peabody will probably sit up for me to come in to-night.”

Betty waited till the hay was pitched down, then followed Bob to the main floor of the barn.

“Couldn’t I walk just a little way with you?” she asked wistfully. “How soon are you going to start? I could go as far as the end of the lane.”

“I’d rather you went to bed and to sleep,” said Bob kindly. “You couldn’t very well traipse around at night, Betty, and I’m not going till it is good and dark. There’s no moon to-night, and you might have trouble getting back to the house.”

“Well—all right,” conceded Betty forlornly. “There doesn’t seem to be anything I can do. Whistle under my window, please do, Bob. I’ll be awake. And I could say good-by. I won’t make a fuss, I promise.”

The boy’s packing was of the simplest, for he owned neither suitcase nor trunk, and his few belongings easily went into a square of old wrapping paper. He had earned them, few as they were, and felt no compunctions about taking them with him.

After the bundle was tied up he waited a half hour or so, purely as a precaution, for the Peabody household went to bed with the chickens and, with the possible exception of Mrs. Peabody, slumbered heavily. Bob slipped down the stairs, waking no one, unfastened the heavy front door, never locked and only occasionally, as to-night, bolted with a chain, and stepped softly around to the bush where his precious tin box was buried.

This box was Bob’s sole inheritance from his mother, and he had only a vague knowledge of the papers entrusted to it. Among the yellowed slips was the marriage certificate of his parents, and he knew that there were one or two letters. When Joseph Peabody had taken him from the poorhouse, the lad had buried the box for safekeeping, and during the three or four years he had been with Mr. Peabody had never taken it up.

It was not buried very deeply, and he easily uncovered it, smoothing down the earth to hide the traces of his hasty excavating. He went around to Betty’s window and whistled softly, half hoping that she might be asleep.

“Hello, Bob dear!” she called instantly, leaning from the window, her vivid face so alight with affection and hope for him that it was a pity he could not see her

clearly. “I’m wishing you the best of luck, and I hope the old bookstore man has splendid news for you. You wait for me in Washington.”

“I will!” whispered Bob heartily. “And you tell Mr. Bender, won’t you? He’ll understand. I’ll write him the first chance I get, and Doc Guerin, too. Good-by, Betty—I—I—”

To his surprise and confusion, Bob suddenly choked.

“Here’s something to take with you,” said Betty softly, dropping a little packet that landed at his feet. “Good-by, Bob. I just know things will turn out all right for you.”

The dark head was withdrawn, and Bob, picking up the little package, turned and began his long walk to the Glenside station. A hoot-owl screeched at mournful intervals, and the night sounds would have tried a city lad’s nerves in that long dark stretch that led him finally to the station. But Bob could identify every sound, and nature had always proved kind to him, far kinder than many of the people he had known. He trudged along sturdily, and, twenty minutes before the train was due, found himself the solitary passenger on the Glenside platform.

He stood under the uncertain rays of the lamp to examine the parting gift Betty had given him. Tucked under half a dozen chocolate wafers was a five dollar bill folded into the tiniest possible wad. The choky feeling assailed Bob again.

“She certainly is some girl!” he thought with mixed gratitude and admiration.

CHAPTER VI

THE RUNAWAY MISSED

Bob's absence was not discovered till breakfast time, for Ethan, who was a sound sleeper, when he woke and saw Bob's empty cot, supposed the boy had risen earlier than usual and gone to the barn. Mr. Peabody, too, took it for granted that the boy was milking, and it was not until they were seated at the table and half way through the meal that anything out of the ordinary was suspected.

"Why in tarnation doesn't that good for nothing bring in the milk?" grumbled Mr. Peabody. "I declare he gets later and later every morning. The balers will be over to start work at seven, and if he thinks he's going to spend half an hour dawdling over his breakfast after they get here, he's much mistaken."

The men who were to bale the hay had slept at the adjoining farm, according to the agreement made, and would be at Bramble Farm for dinner and supper and to spend that night.

"You're finished, Ethan. Go hurry him up," ordered Joe Peabody. "Send him in here flying and turn the cows out to pasture."

"He hasn't milked!" Ethan cleared the porch steps at a single bound and burst into the kitchen, shouting this intelligence. Excitement was scarce in Ethan's life, and he enjoyed the pleasurable sensation of carrying unusual tidings, even if unpleasant. "The barn door was shut and the cows were bellowing their heads off. Not a one of 'em's been milked!"

"I want to know!" said Joseph Peabody stupidly. "Was he in bed when you came down, Ethan?"

"No, he wasn't," answered the hired man. "I thought he'd gone on out. Do you suppose something's happened to him?"

Mr. Peabody stepped to the porch and gave a quick glance at the bench where the milk pails were usually left to air and dry. They were there, just as they had been left the night before.

“I think he’s cleared out!” he announced: grimly. “Betty, do you know what this young scoundrel is up to?”

Betty’s eyes brimmed over, and she flung herself blindly into Mrs. Peabody’s arms which closed around her, though that good woman was unaccustomed to demonstrations of affection.

“There, there.” She tried to soothe the girl, for Betty’s convulsive sobbing really alarmed her.

“Don’t you go to feel bad, dearie. If Bob’s gone, he’s gone, and that’s all there is to it.”

Peabody, milk pail in hand, motioned to Ethan to go out and begin milking.

“That isn’t all there is to it, not by a long shot!” he growled at his wife. “If I get my hands on that boy he’ll rue the day he ever set foot off this farm. He’ll go back to the poorhouse and there he’ll stay till he’s of age.”

Betty sat up, pushing the tumbled hair from her hot forehead.

“I’m glad Bob ran away!” she cried recklessly. “He’s gone where you won’t catch him, either. You never treated him fairly, and you know it.”

Peabody banged the kitchen door by way of relieving his feelings, but the latch did not fasten so that he heard Betty’s next sentence addressed to his wife.

“I’m only waiting for a letter from Uncle Dick,” confided Betty. “Then I’m going to Washington. Things will never be any different here, Mrs. Peabody; you’ve said so yourself. I wish Uncle Dick would hurry and write. It’s been a good while since I heard.” And there was a catch in the girl’s voice.

The man slouched off the porch, a peculiar smile on his lean, shrewd face. One hand, thrust into his ragged coat pocket, rested on a letter there. As he felt it beneath his fingers, his crafty eyes brightened with a gleam of mockery.

Mrs. Peabody may have been curious about Bob’s departure, but she asked no questions, somewhat to Betty’s surprise.

“I’m glad she doesn’t ask me,” thought Betty, helping mechanically in the

preparations for dinner which were more elaborate than usual because of the presence of the three balers. “Bob must be half way to Washington by now, and I don’t believe they have the slightest idea he is headed for there.” The Peabodys, she reasoned, knew nothing of Lockwood Hale, and of the attraction the capital of the country held for the orphan lad.

Betty insisted on doing a fair share of the extra work after the noon meal, and then ran upstairs to get ready to go over to Glenside. She wanted to tell the Guerins that Bob had gone, and from their house she knew she could telephone to those other good friends, the Benders. Laurel Grove was too far to walk, even for a practised hiker like Betty.

To her dismay, as she left the house, Mr. Peabody joined her and fell into step.

“I’ll go as far as Durlings with you,” he announced affably, Durling being their neighbor on the south, his farm lying along the road in the direction of Glenside. “Sorry the horses haven’t shoes, Betty, or you might drive.”

Betty shot him a suspicious glance. The three horses never were shod, except when a certain amount of traveling had to be done on the stone road. In all the weeks she had spent at Bramble Farm a horse had never been offered for her convenience, and all of her trips to town had been either afoot, or taken with Bob in the rattling, shabby, one-horse work wagon.

“Where did you say Bob was going?” came next.

Betty bit her lip.

“I didn’t say,” she said evenly. “I—I don’t think it’s fair to ask me.”

“But you know,” snapped Mr. Peabody. “I guess I have a right to know where he’s gone. I’m responsible for him. I’ve got papers that show it. The poorhouse folks are going to ask me what becomes of him. You just tell me where he went, and I’ll satisfy ‘em. I won’t follow him and try to bring him back, Betty. He’s too old for that. Making his bed, he’ll have to lie on it. I won’t follow him.”

The girl twisted her handkerchief nervously. She was not afraid of the man. That is, she feared no physical violence at his hands, but he was capable, she knew, of forcing her back to the farm and locking her up in her room till she furnished him with the required information. And what harm could it do Bob? It was not

likely that Peabody could find the boy in a large city.

“He won’t be made to come back,” repeated her tormentor.

“I wish I could believe you,” said Betty pitifully.

She looked so young and helpless, trying to pit her girlish intelligence and strength against the wily miser, that another man would have been ashamed to press her. Not so Peabody—he had always considered that he was entitled to whatever he could get from others, information, cash, or work, it mattered not.

They were approaching the Durling farm now, and suddenly Betty’s pointed chin lifted.

“I won’t tell you!” she said firmly. “I do know where Bob went, but he was perfectly justified in leaving a place where he was treated worse than a dog. You would do him no good—I’m sure of that. And if the poorhouse authorities make a fuss about his running off, I’ll tell them what he had to endure.”

Joseph Peabody’s mouth dropped in astonishment. He had seen Betty lose her temper before, but she had never so openly defied him.

“You think you’re high and mighty,” he sneered. “Let me tell you, Miss, there’s more ways than one of getting what you want in this world. Joe Peabody isn’t checkmated very often, and it takes more than an impudent girl to do it. I’m going into Lem Durling’s and telephone Jim Turner, the poormaster. I kind of surmise he can give me a line on the direction Bob’s taken.”

Betty walked on, disdaining to answer, her head very high in the air but her heart in her shoes. Jim Turner would be sure to tell of Lockwood Hale, and Mr. Peabody would be astute enough to guess that Bob’s destination was Washington.

When she reached Doctor Guerin’s house, between the heat and the dust and the long walk and her anxiety, she was in a highly excited state, and the doctor’s wife made her lie down on the couch and rest before she would allow her to telephone to the Benders. Mrs. Bender’s sister answered the telephone. The recorder and his wife had made a detour on their homeward trip that would extend their absence for another week.

“Betty, you’ll be ill if you’re going to get all worked up like this,” scolded Mrs. Guerin, for Betty was crying as she hung up the receiver. “I never saw you so unstrung, my dear. You won’t be fit to go to your uncle when he does send for you. I wonder if the doctor hadn’t better see you?”

Norma and Alice Guerin, two pretty girls, the former about Betty’s age, the latter a year or two older, looked at her anxiously. Betty in tears was an unusual sight to them.

“I’m all right,” gulped that young person, inwardly alarmed at the thought of being too ill to travel when the word came. “I didn’t sleep very well last night, thinking of Bob. Is that the secretary he bid on at the Faulkner sale?”

Knowing that the quickest way for Betty to get control of her nerves was to forget her troubles, Mrs. Guerin entered into an enthusiastic description of the beauties of the old desk, showing the secret drawer and the half score of carved pigeonholes and dwelling on the doctor’s delight in securing such a treasure at a bargain. Mrs. Guerin succeeded in having Betty more like her old self before Doctor Hal Guerin came in from a round of calls.

He was delighted to see Betty, who was an especial favorite of his, and much interested in her account of Bob’s flight.

“Did the lad have money enough?” he growled. “I suppose he’d walk before he’d borrow from me.”

“He had enough,” Betty assured him. “All the charms you sold for him amounted to quite a lot, and he had saved every cent of that.”

“And you probably helped him out,” commented the doctor shrewdly. “Well, well, the lad may yet whittle his way to fame and fortune.”

He referred to Bob’s knack for fashioning pretty and quaint little wooden charms and pendants, which he polished to satin smoothness and painted and stained in bright colors. Norma Guerin had worn one at boarding school, and it was through her and her father that Bob had secured a large number of orders which had netted him a tidy little sum.

When the time came for Betty to go, the doctor insisted that he would take her as far as the lane, and on the trip she told him that as soon as she heard from her

uncle she meant to pack her trunk and leave for Washington.

“I don’t like the idea of your making the journey alone,” grumbled Doctor Guerin; “but I don’t see who there is to go with you. One thing, Betty girl, brushing up against the Peabodys has given you a practical fund of self-reliance. You’re better fitted than Alice to find your way about alone. Not that I would have chosen to have you get your knocks just in the manner they’ve been handed to you, but the results leave nothing to be desired. You’re standing squarely on your own feet, Betsey, and it’s this summer’s grilling training that has done it.”

CHAPTER VII

A BELATED LETTER

The hay was all baled by the next morning, and the balers, atop the lumbering machine, caroled loudly if not musically as the fat horses dragged them slowly up the lane. Neat bales of hay were piled high on the barn floor, to be carted over to Hagar's Corners and loaded on a freight car. That would be Ethan's job, and he grumbled at the prospect of doing it without Bob's help.

Betty, coming in from the garden, stumbled over something in the narrow entry. It was a man's coat—Mr. Peabody's, she recognized when she picked it up and shook it slightly to free it from dust. A letter fell from the pocket as she replaced it on the hook where it usually hung, and, stopping to pick it up, she saw to her surprise that it was addressed to her.

"From Washington!" she said aloud, deciphering the postmark. "And mailed five days ago! He's carried it in his pocket ever since it came!"

At first she feared it had been read, but evidently Mr. Peabody had not troubled to open it; so hastily tearing the envelope, she read the brief note. A check was enclosed for her, and Mr. Gordon suggested that she go to Pineville and visit old friends there for a week or two until his plans were definitely shaped.

"I know the Arnolds are in California," he wrote; "but the Bensingers will be glad to have you, or any of your mother's old friends. You do not have to stay one minute where you are unhappy."

Betty looked up as a shadow fell across the sunny floor. It was Mr. Peabody, and he had the grace to show confusion when he saw the letter in her hand.

Betty sprang to her feet.

"Why did you keep my letter?" she demanded hotly. "How did you dare to hold back mail? This must have been in your coat pocket three or four days. It was mailed five days ago!"

"Been rummaging in my coat pocket, have you?" sneered the farmer.

“I have not! The coat was on the floor, and I fell over it. The letter fell out while I was trying to hang it up. No one has a right to hold back another person’s mail!”

“Now hold your horses,” advised Peabody pacifically. “Who’s been holding back mail? If a body takes the mail out of the box and carries it around in his coat a day or two, because he doesn’t remember it, that ain’t such a crime that I ever knew. I just forgot there was a letter for you.”

Betty turned away in disgust and went out to her favorite apple tree to think things over. She did not believe for one moment that Mr. Peabody had forgotten her letter. Indeed, absent-mindedness was far from being one of his traits. However, there was absolutely nothing to be gained by arguing, and the way was now clear for her to leave Bramble Farm. Surely the worst of her troubles were over.

“I might go to Pineville,” she thought meditatively. “I’d love to see the Bensingers again and the dear little house where we lived. I’ll pack this afternoon.”

Betty was an orderly little person, and at her work that afternoon she stopped frequently to sew on a button here, to mend a rip in this garment or to whip a frayed edge that might mar an otherwise dainty belonging. Singing softly over her task, a timid knock at her door wakened the girl from a happy reverie.

“Come in, Mrs. Peabody,” she called cheerfully. “Do sit down and give me advice about where things should go. I thought I hadn’t bought anything this summer, but I seem to have a great deal more stuff than I brought with me.”

“You’re packing then?” asked Mrs. Peabody, taking a chair near the bed and regarding Betty oddly. “Are you really going, Betty?”

“Oh, yes,” Betty answered matter-of-factly, “Uncle Dick wants me to stop in Pineville and visit old friends for a bit. And there’s no use in pretending, Mrs. Peabody, that—that—”

“No, I suppose not,” sighed the woman, understanding only too well. “Land knows, if I could get away I’d have no misgivings about the right of it. I’ll miss you, though. You’ve been a sight of company this summer, and no one could have been sweeter to me, Betty.”

“Agatha!” came a stentorian shout from the front hall. “Are you going to stay up there all day?”

“My stars, I forgot what I came up for!” Mrs. Peabody rose hurriedly. “Joseph sent me up to tell you he wanted to ask you something, Betty. And here I sit right down and him waiting there all this time!”

Betty was far from concerned over Mr. Peabody’s wasted time, but she wondered uneasily what he could wish to ask her. Something connected with Bob, doubtless. She followed Mrs. Peabody downstairs and found the master of Bramble Farm striding up and down impatiently.

“Never saw the beat of women,” he muttered. “Gabble, gabble, and an hour right out of a day’s work means nothing to ‘em. Oh, here you are, Miss. You know that gray alpaca coat of mine you took the letter from this morning?”

“The coat the letter fell out of?” corrected Betty, knowing that such quibbling was foolish On her part and might provoke serious irritation in her questioner, yet unable to refrain. “Of course I remember it; what about it?”

Peabody accepted her description of the coat. He was plainly excited and nervous, and betrayed a curious disposition to conciliate Betty, instantly detected in his change of tone.

“Did you pick up any other papers?” he asked quite politely. “Any folded sheets, I mean, or a long envelope? I thought you might have put them back of the clock or somewhere for safe keeping and forgotten to mention them to me.”

Betty looked her astonishment. Automatically her eyes traveled to the clock which was pulled out of its place against the wall. So the man had actually looked there, believing that out of chagrin she might have concealed his papers from him!

“Nothing fell out of your pocket except my letter,” she said earnestly and with a quietness that carried conviction. “I saw absolutely nothing else on the floor. If I had picked up other papers, I should have returned them to you, of course.”

Mrs. Peabody cleared her throat, usually a sign of coming speech on the rare occasions when she did open her mouth in her husband’s presence.

“What you lost, Joseph?” she asked eagerly. “Something missing out o’ your pocket?”

“Yes, something out of my pocket!” said her husband savagely. “You wouldn’t know if I told you, but it’s an unrecorded deed and worth a good deal of money. And I’ll bet I know who took it—that measly runaway, Bob Henderson! By gum, he carried the coat up to the house for me from the barn the day before he lit out. That’s where it’s gone. I see his game! He’ll try to get money out of me. But I won’t pay him a cent. No sir, I’ll go to Washington first and choke the deed out of his dirty pocket.”

“Did Bob go to Washington?” quavered Mrs. Peabody, her mind seizing on this concrete fact, the one statement she could understand in her husband’s monologue. “How’d you find out, Joseph?”

“Not through Betty,” returned Peabody grimly. “She’s willing to take the scoundrel’s part against honest folks any time. Jim Turner told me. Leastways he told me of some old duffer who runs a crazy shop down there, and he thinks Bob’s gone looking him up to find out about his parents. Just let him try blackmailing me, and he’ll learn a thing or two.”

Betty had kept still as long as she could.

“Bob is no thief!” she said bravely. “You ought to be ashamed to say such a thing about him. I know he didn’t take your old deed. What earthly use would it be to him? Besides, Bob would never touch a thing that wasn’t his!”

“I don’t believe he would take anything, Joseph,” urged Mrs. Peabody with perfectly amazing temerity. As a rule she took neither side in a controversy. “Besides, as the child says, what good would an unrecorded deed do him? Unless—Joseph, have you bought the Warren lots?”

“You tend to your housework, and I’ll manage my own affairs,” snapped Peabody, turning a dull brick red, however. “I meant to put the thing in the safety deposit box over to the bank, and then that sick cow took my mind completely off it. If Betty didn’t take it, Bob did. It’s gone, and they’re the only two that could have put hands on it.”

“I tell you that I haven’t seen the deed,” said Betty firmly. “And I am equally certain that Bob never took it. He’s the soul of honor, whatever you may think,

and he would no more take what wasn't his than he would lie to you about it."

Peabody caught hold of her right hand suddenly.

"What you carrying?" he demanded suspiciously. "A trunk key? Looks mighty funny, doesn't it, to be packing up with something pretty valuable missing? The law would likely give me the right to search your trunk."

"What a dreadful old man you are!" cried Betty, involuntarily, shrinking from the sinister face that grinned malevolently into hers. "You have no right to touch my trunk."

"Well, no call to look like that," muttered Peabody, turning toward the door. "I knew that other young one took it, and I aim to make it hot for him."

"Bob didn't take any deed!" stormed Betty to Mrs. Peabody, her packing forgotten for the moment. "Why does he keep insisting Bob stole it? And why, oh, why did that poorhouse man have to tell where Bob had gone?"

Mrs. Peabody's natural curiosity had to be satisfied, and as it was no longer a secret Betty told her of Lockwood Hale and Bob's determination to find out more about himself.

"He doesn't want any deed," she finished scornfully. "Can't you make Mr. Peabody see how foolish such an accusation is?"

Mrs. Peabody leaned against the kitchen table wearily.

"I know what he's thinking," she said dully. "I know more than I want to know, Betty. Joseph has bought the Warren lots, and that means he's got 'em for his own price. Old man Warren is in his dotage and these lots have been surveyed and cut up into building plots on the stone road over t'other side of Laurel Grove where the trolley's coming through this spring. Joseph will probably sell 'em for three times what he's paid for 'em. That's why he doesn't have the deed recorded; Warren's children will get hold of it, and I doubt if the sale would hold in court. Everybody knows the old father isn't competent to handle his property. There was talk of having one of the sons made his guardian some months ago. Joseph has just talked him into selling. If he wasn't my husband, I should say the sale was a plain swindle."

CHAPTER VIII

GOOD-BY TO BRAMBLE FARM

Betty was still mystified.

“What has Bob to do with it?” she urged. “I don’t see how the deed would be of any use to him; he couldn’t claim the lots.”

“No, he couldn’t claim the lots,” admitted Joseph Peabody’s wife. “But he could hold the deed and threaten to notify George Warren, if Joseph didn’t pay him a good round sum of money. Mind you, I’m not saying he would do that, Betty, but he could. That’s what Joseph thinks he means to do.”

“Well, I call that very silly,” said Betty briskly. “Bob Henderson isn’t a thief or a blackmailer, whatever Mr. Peabody chooses to think. That deed is probably in another coat pocket this minute, or else he’s lost it over in Glenside.”

“I expect that worries him some, too,” confided Mrs. Peabody. “He would hate to have it known that he’s bought the Warren lots. But I guess it would have been better to have had the deed recorded than to run the risk of losing it and the whole town likely to pick it up on the street.”

Before supper that night Betty had her trunk packed and her simple belongings gathered up. She knew that Peabody was fully aware of her intention to leave, but, as her board was paid for nearly a week in advance, he could make no possible objection. It was sheer perversity, she decided, that kept him from mentioning the subject to her.

“I’m going to-morrow, Mr. Peabody,” she said pleasantly at the supper table, having waited till Ethan had gone to the barn to milk. “What time would be most convenient to take my trunk over to Glenside or to Hagar’s Corners?”

“I’m not going to either place to-morrow,” was the composed answer. “Don’t know exactly when I shall be going over again, either. Ethan and me’s got our hands full right here with the late-season cultivating.”

“But I have to get to the station,” protested Betty. “I can walk, of course, but

some one will have to take my trunk. You met me at the station when I came, or rather Bob did, you know. Why aren't you willing to help me go now that the summer is nearly over?"

"You haven't done me so many favors that I should put myself out for you," retorted Peabody sourly. "I don't care how you get to the station, but none of my rigs go off this place to-morrow, that's flat. And you haven't got that thieving nimble-fingers to plot and plan with you now. You'll have to manage by yourself."

"What are you going to do, Betty?" asked Mrs. Peabody anxiously, following the girl to the door after the meal was over. "You're not going to walk to Glenside to-night to try to get a team to come after you?"

"No, I'm only going over to Kepplers," replied Betty capably. "I'm sure one of the boys will drive me over, if not to Glenside, to Hagar's Corners, where I can get some kind of train for the Junction. All the through trains stop at Hagar's Corners, don't they? I came that way. Perhaps that station is better than Glenside, after all."

The walk across the fields tranquillized her, and she was able to enlist the aid of the Keppler's oldest boy without entering into too detailed an account of Mr. Peabody's shortcomings. Indeed, the Kepplers, father and sons, having been the nearest neighbors to Bramble Farm for eleven years, had a very fair idea of what went on there.

"Sure, I'll take you, and the trunk, too," promised Fred Keppler heartily. "Any time you say, Betty. There's a good train for Pineville, not too many stops, at twelve-three. How about that?"

It was settled that he should come for her about half past ten, and Betty walked home filled with thoughts of the little home town to which she would be speeding on the morrow.

"If Uncle Dick knew the things I've had to endure, I'm sure he'd say that I haven't lost my temper often, considering," she mused. "Is that something sticking out of the mail box? Why. it is, and a newspaper. I guess Mr. Peabody forgot to come down to the box to-day."

She opened the box and found the paper was addressed to her. The familiar

wrapper and type told her it was the *Pineville Post*, to which she had subscribed when she left the town, and, tucking it under her arm, she went on to the house, intending to read an hour or so before going to bed.

Lighting the lamp in her room, Betty glanced toward her trunk mechanically. She had left it locked, but the lid was now ajar. Had some one been tampering with the lock?

“He’s opened it!” she cried to herself, making a hasty examination. “How did he dare! And look at the mess everything’s in!”

Alas for Betty’s hour of neat and careful packing! Dainty garments were tossed about recklessly, her shoes rested on her clean handkerchiefs, and it was plain that no attempt had been made to conceal the fact that a heavy hand had thoroughly explored the contents of the trunk.

“I’m only thankful he didn’t break the lock,” said Betty, trying to find a ray of brightness. “Whatever he opened it with, nothing is broken. I suppose the only thing to do is to take everything out and do it all over. And to-morrow morning I’ll sit on the top till Fred Keppler comes.”

Taking out her clothes and repacking was a tiresome job, and all thoughts of reading well gone from Betty’s mind when the task was completed and the trunk locked for a second time. With the feeling that, in view of what the next day might bring, she ought to go to bed early, she began at once to prepare for bed. Brushing her thick, dark hair, her eyes fell on the unopened paper.

“I suppose I’ll be there to-morrow night,” she thought, picking it up and slitting the wrapper with a convenient nail file.

She opened and smoothed out the first page. The first words that caught her attention, in large black headlines across four columns, were:

GYPSY BAND STRICKEN WITH SMALLPOX:

WHOLE TOWN QUARANTINED!

Then followed the account of the discovery of illness among a band of gypsies camped on the outskirts of Pineville, of the diagnosis of smallpox, and of the strict quarantine immediately put in force. The issue of the *Post* was only two

days old.

“Well, I never!” gasped Betty, doing some rapid thinking. “I’m glad it didn’t happen after I got there. I might be held up for weeks. I can’t stay here, that’s certain. There’s nothing to do but drive to Glenside and take the train for Washington. I guess Fred will be willing to change his plans.”

She decided that she would say nothing to the Peabodys about the alteration of her traveling schedule, fearing that if Mr. Peabody heard she was going to Washington he might accuse her of a conspiracy with Bob in connection with the lost deed.

Bright and early the next morning she was up, her pretty traveling bag, the gift of her uncle, packed, her room in perfect order. There was really no one or nothing to say good-by to, for she felt more pity than affection for Mrs. Peabody, and the Bramble Farm animals had been too unused to petting to respond readily to her overtures. Betty, at the breakfast table, had a swift conviction that she would be leaving with far different feelings if Bob had been there to stay behind.

Mr. Peabody asked her no questions about her plans and stalked off as usual to the barn with Ethan when he had finished the meal.

“I declare I’m going to miss you, Betty,” said Mrs. Peabody once, in the middle of the dishwashing, with which Betty insisted on helping.

That was a good deal for her to say, and the girl, who had a natural longing to be missed, was grateful. And when Fred Keppler drove into the yard, promptly at half-past ten, and went upstairs for her trunk— for neither Peabody nor his hired man was in sight—Mrs. Peabody kissed her warmly and with tears in her eyes.

“Hop right in, Betty,” said Fred cordially. “Got a nice day for your trip, haven’t you? All fixed? All right, then.”

He gathered up the reins and had turned the horse’s head when, apparently from the clouds, Mr. Peabody appeared on the scene.

“Long as you’re going over to Hagar’s Corners you won’t mind giving me a lift, will you?” he drawled. “I have an errand over at the station, and it won’t take me a minute. I can come right back with you. Go on, Fred; I’ll sit in here with the trunk and you and Betty needn’t mind me.”

Without waiting for an invitation, he swung himself up on top of the trunk, and smiled pleasantly. He was saving his own horse a long drive and getting a necessary errand done at the expense of a neighbor, always a desirable consummation in the Peabody mind.

Fred opened his mouth and closed it wordlessly. His father would have known what to do, but fifteen-year-old Fred did not know how to deal with such a display of assurance. There seemed nothing to do but to take this unwelcome passenger to Hagar's Corners and back.

Betty, for her part, could have cried with vexation. Gone was her chance of asking Fred to take her to Glenside, and with it the hope of getting to Washington. She knew that after the noon train at Hagar's Corners there were no more till four o'clock. She wanted to say good-by to the Guerins and to cash her uncle's check. No wonder she was assailed by a strong desire to tumble the satisfied Mr. Peabody out head over heels.

The drive was taken almost in silence, each of the three busy with his own thoughts. At the station Betty and her trunk were put down, and then she had a few minutes to speak to Fred while Mr. Peabody was talking to the freight agent, who was also the passenger agent, the telegraph clerk and the janitor.

"Don't you want some money?" whispered Fred hurriedly. "Mother told me to ask you. And she sent you this."

He thrust into her hands a box of lunch.

"I have a check I want to cash," said Betty nervously. "Will the station agent do it, do you suppose? It's for fifty dollars. And, Fred, Pineville is quarantined for smallpox and I want to go to Washington, but I didn't want Mr. Peabody to know. Hush! Here he comes now!"

Fred Keppler had what his fond mother called a "good head," and as Peabody and the agent stopped in the station doorway to continue their discussion he proceeded to bear out her theory by thrusting a wad of bills into Betty's hand.

"Money for the calves," he explained. "Just fifty there. Haven't seen Dad to turn it over to him. Give me the check and it will be all right. And you ask Dan Gowdy, the agent, about trains. I guess he can dope out a way to get you to Washington. You still have ten minutes."

“Good-by, and thank you heaps!” cried Betty warmly, shaking his hand. “I don’t know what I should have done without you, Fred!”

CHAPTER IX

NEW FRIENDS

Her hands filled with the bank bills Fred had thrust into them, her bag under one arm and the lunch box under the other, Betty stood forlornly on the platform and watched the horse and wagon out of sight. Mr. Peabody had merely nodded to her by way of farewell, and Betty felt that if she never saw him again there would be little to regret. As a matter of fact, she was to meet him again and not under much more favorable aspects. But of that she was happily ignorant.

The whistling of the lanky young station agent, who was covertly staring at her under pretense of sweeping up the already neat boards before the door, roused her. She remembered that she did not want to go to Pineville.

“Why, I guess I can fix it up for you,” said Dan Gowdy cheerfully, when she had stated her predicament, withholding only the reason for not telling Mr. Peabody. “Let me see—twelve-three stops at Centertown. But you don’t want to spend the night on the train. Going from Centertown, you’d get to Washington about ten in the morning.”

“I’d rather not sleep on the train,” answered Betty timidly, hoping that she was not unreasonable. Aside from the expense, she was not used to traveling, and the idea of a night alone on the train for the first time rather daunted her.

“Well, then—Wait a minute, I’ve got it!” shouted the agent enthusiastically. “You buy a ticket up the line to Halperin. That’s quite a town, and the through trains all stop. My brother-in-law’s telegraph operator there, and I’ll send him a message to look out for you, and he and my sister will keep you over night. They’ve got a pretty place right in the country—trolley takes you to the door—and a baby that’s named for me and some kid if I do say it. Then in the morning you can take the seven-forty-five for Washington and get there at five-fifty-two if it isn’t late. How’s that?”

“But your sister!” stammered Betty. “She doesn’t know me. What will she say?”

“She’ll say you have eyes just like Juliet, the little sister who died when she was about your age,” declared Dan Gowdy gently. “Don’t you fret, Sister, she’ll be

glad to have you. Now here's your ticket, and I'll talk to Steve as soon as you're on board the train. That's her smoke now."

Betty was conscious that there was something else on her mind, but it was not until she was seated in the train and had had her ticket punched that she remembered. She had thanked kind Dan Gowdy rather incoherently, though as warmly as she could, and had only half heard his explanation that she was taking the 12:01 train up the line instead of the 12:03 down, and it was no wonder that in the bustle of boarding the train she had forgotten her intention of telegraphing to her Uncle Dick. He had given her his address as the Willard Hotel, and the letter was already six days old.

"But I really think in the morning will be better," decided Betty, watching the flying landscape. "He wouldn't have given me the address if he didn't expect to be there for some time. Before I take the Washington train I'll telegraph him and let him know when to meet me."

The train made three stops before Halperin was reached, and Betty stepped down to find herself before a pretty, up-to-date station built of cream-colored brick, with a crowd of stylish summer folk mingling on the platform with farmers and townspeople. Several automobiles were backed up waiting for passengers, and there were one or two old-fashioned hacks. A trolley car was rounding the street corner, the motorman sounding his bell noisily.

"Betty Gordon, isn't it?" asked a pleasant voice.

A round-faced man was smiling down at her, a young man, Betty decided, in spite of the white hair. His keen dark eyes were pleasant, and he held out his hand cordially.

"Dan told me you had cornflowers on your hat," he said quizzically, "and I, knowing that Dan calls all blue flowers cornflowers, picked you out right away. Only they are forget-me-nots, aren't they?"

"They're supposed to be larkspur," answered Betty, laughing and feeling at ease at once. "Perhaps the milliner didn't have a garden."

"Well, anyway, they're blue," said the brother-in-law comfortably. "Don't suppose Dan told you my name?"

He was guiding her around the station toward the trolley tracks as he spoke.

“He said the baby was named for him, but he didn’t say what your name was,” admitted Betty dimpling.

“Just like him!” grinned her companion. “Dan’s so all-fired proud of that youngster he never lets a chance slip to tell we named him Daniel Gowdy Brill. Though Dan senior usually forgets to add the Brill.”

“Does—does Mrs. Brill know I’m coming?” ventured Betty.

“She sure does! I telephoned her the minute I heard from Dan, and I suspect she and the baby are sitting out on the fence now watching for you to come along. Sorry I can’t go with you, but I’ve just come on duty. You tell the conductor to let you off at Brill’s, and I’ll see you at supper to-night.”

He helped her on the car, tipped his hat, and ran back to the station, leaving Betty with the comfortable feeling that the Brills were used to company and rather liked it.

She repeated her instructions to the conductor, who nodded silently, and, after a quarter of an hour’s ride, signaled to her that her destination was reached. They had passed the town limits, and were in the open country. Betty had noticed several farmhouses, of the artistic remodeled type, evidently summer homes of the well-to-do, as the car rattled along.

She saw one of these as she stepped from the trolley car, and also, under a tree, a young woman holding a beautiful, rosy baby. These two immediately swooped down upon her.

“I’m so glad you’ve come!” Mrs. Brill kissed her unaffectedly. “Kiss Danny, too! Isn’t he a nice baby? We waited lunch for you, and if you’re half as starved as we are—”

Still chattering, she led the way into the house. Mrs. Brill was an elder sister of the Hagar’s Corner’s agent and very like him in face, manner, and bright, cheery way of speaking. The house was tastefully furnished, and a white-capped maid could be seen hovering over the table as they went upstairs. Betty learned long afterward that Mr. Brill’s father was wealthy and idolized his son’s wife, who had given the younger man the ambition and spur his career had lacked until he

met and married her. It was lovely Rose Gowdy who persuaded Steve Brill to take the job of telegraph operator, forgetting his prematurely white hair, and she who encouraged him to work his way to the top of the railroad business. Rose, and Rose's son, were given all the credit of that ultimate success by the older Brill.

"I had a little sister once who looked just like you," said Mrs. Brill, as she watched Betty smooth her hair at the mirror in the chintz-hung guest room. "Her name was Juliet. Poor old Dan nearly broke his heart when she died."

"He said something about her," replied Betty shyly. "Oh, look at that cunning baby! He thinks he can eat his own foot!"

"He will, too, if he doesn't get his bottle soon," said the baby's mother, rising. "Come, dear, we'll go down. Danny has his bottle in his wheeler right in the dining-room."

The little maid served them a dainty meal, and the round-eyed baby fell asleep as they ate and talked, lying in blissful content in a white-enameled contrivance that was like a crib on four wheels, and sucking quietly on his bottle.

"Now if you want to lie down, you may," said Mrs. Brill when they had finished. "I'll be busy for the next couple of hours with two of my neighbors who are planning a minstrel show for the country club. They had already planned to come when Steve telephoned. If you're not tired, perhaps you'll enjoy looking over our farm. Even if you've spent your summer on one, you may find things to interest you."

Betty was not tired, and she had been longing to explore the belt of green fields that encircled the old farmhouse. Hatless, but carrying her sweater over her arm, she went happily out.

There was a small but well-kept poultry yard with some handsome white leghorns lazily sunning themselves; a gentle-eyed Jersey cow stood close to the first pair of bars; and a fat, lazy collie snoozed under a cherry tree but declined to accompany Betty on her explorations, though she petted and flattered and coaxed him with all her powers of persuasion. He wagged his tail cordially and beamed upon her good-naturedly, but as to getting up and walking about so soon after dinner—well, he begged to be excused.

“You’re a lazy thing!” said the girl indignantly, finally giving up the task as hopeless and climbing the fence into a larger pasture.

Over in one corner of the field she spied something that quickened her steps with pleasure. A baby colt, long-legged, sleek of head and altogether “adorable” as Betty would have said, ambled more or less ungracefully about enjoying the shade of a clump of trees and sampling the grass at intervals.

“Oh, I do hope you’re tame!” whispered Betty softly.

She was fond of animals, and Bramble Farm, with the exception of a few lambs, had had no young life in its pastures and stables. The little calves were always sold as early as possible that there might be more milk for butter, and Betty was fairly aching to pet something.

She walked cautiously up to the colt, who sniffed at her suspiciously, but stood his ground. He pricked his ears forward and looked at her inquiringly.

“You dear!” said the girl quietly. “You little beauty! You wouldn’t mind if I patted you, would you?”

She put out one hand and touched the rough side of the little animal. He stood perfectly still, and she stroked him for a minute or two, speaking gently to him. Presently he nuzzled her playfully.

“Oh, you darling!” she cried delighted. “Wouldn’t I love to take you with me and have you for a pet! If you wouldn’t grow any larger than you are now, I’d take you everywhere just like a dog.”

She had both arms around the colt’s neck now, and he seemed to enjoy being petted. All at once Betty thought she heard hoof-beats on the ground, and at the same time the colt raised his head and whinnied.

Betty looked up and across the field toward the house. She stood back from the colt and stared in dismay and astonishment at what she saw.

Tearing across the ground, headed directly for her, was a fierce animal with flashing red nostrils, huge mouth open wide and showing two great rows of strong yellow teeth bared to the gums. Sparks seemed to fly from the hoofs and a coarse black tail streamed in the wind.

“Good gracious!” gasped Betty weakly. “That must be the colt’s mother!”

The colt whinnied again in welcome and delight, but Betty felt rooted to the earth.

CHAPTER X

FELLOW TRAVELERS

It is sometimes said that in moments of danger one's whole life passes swiftly in review through the mind, but Betty always declared that she had just a single thought when it seemed that in another moment she would be trampled under the mare's hoofs; she had not telegraphed to her uncle and he would not know where she had gone.

The horse continued to cover the ground rapidly, and then, when it had almost reached the terrified girl, fear lent sudden wings to Betty's leaden feet. She turned and ran.

Speeding over the field toward the fence at the other end, she could hear the steady pounding of the mare's hoofs, though she did not dare to glance over her shoulder. Her thoughts worked busily, trying to figure out a way to climb over or under the fence, and she had a lively fear of those terrible teeth nipping her as she tried to climb. As the fence seemed to her strained vision to rise suddenly from the ground and come to meet her, a way to safety opened.

Before she began to run she had unconsciously stooped to gather her sweater from the ground where she had dropped it, and now she turned and waved the garment frantically in the furious animal's face. Bewildered and confused, the mare stopped, and, as Betty continued to flap the sweater, she turned and dashed back to her colt. Weakly the girl tumbled over the fence and the adventure was over.

"She thought you were going to hurt Pinto," said Mrs. Brill, when she heard the story. "Goodness, I certainly am glad you had the presence of mind to shake your sweater at old Phyllis. Wouldn't it have been dreadful if she had bitten you!"

The next morning, Betty said good-by to the hospitable family who had been so wonderfully kind to her, and, much refreshed after a luxurious hot bath and a night's sleep in the pretty guest room, took the trolley car into town with Mr. Brill, who at the station door bade her farewell in his capacity of host and two

minutes later as telegraph operator sent her message to Uncle Dick in Washington.

The 7:45 was on time to the minute, and as the long train pulled in and the porter helped her on, Betty drew a long breath of relief. Surely there could be no more delays and in a comparatively few hours she might hope to be with her uncle and know the comfort of telling him her experiences instead of trusting their recital to letters.

The train had been made up late the night before and many of the passengers were still sleepy-eyed after restless hours in their berths. A good many of them were at breakfast in the dining car, and as there was no parlor car Betty had to take half a section already occupied by a rather frowsy young woman with two small children.

“We take on a parlor car at Willowvale,” the porter assured Betty, only too sympathetically, for he had been waiting on the woman and her children since the afternoon before. “I’ll see that you get a chair then, Miss.”

Betty settled herself as comfortably as she could and opened her magazine.

“Read to me?” suggested a little voice, and a sticky hand caressed her skirt timidly.

“Now don’t bother the lady,” said the mother, trying to pull the child away. “My land, if I ever live to get you children to your grandmother’s I’ll be thankful! Lottie, stop making scratches on that window sill!”

Lottie pursed her pretty mouth in a pout and drummed her small heels discontentedly against the green plush of the seat.

Betty smiled into the rebellious blue eyes and was rewarded by a sudden, radiant smile. She closed her magazine and found the mother gazing at her with a look almost as childlike in its friendly curiosity as her little daughter’s.

“You’ve got a way with children, haven’t you?” said the woman wistfully. “I guess everybody on this train will be glad when we get off. The children have been perfect torments, and Lottie cried half the night. We’re none of us used to traveling, and they’re so mussed up and dirty I could cry. At home I keep ‘em looking as neat as wax. We’re going to see my husband’s mother, and I know

she'll think I started with 'em looking like this."

Betty was far older than many girls her age in some things. She was self-reliant and used to observing for herself, and she had a rich fund of warm and ready sympathy that was essentially practical. She saw that the mother of these lively, untidy children was very young, hardly more than a girl, and worn-out and nervous as a result of taking a long journey with no help and little traveling experience. She was probably, and naturally, anxious that her children should impress their father's mother favorably, and it took little imagination to understand that in her home the young mother had been used to praise for her excellent management. Betty, added to her qualities of leadership and sound judgment, had a decided "knack" with children. In Pineville she had been a general favorite with the little ones, and many a mother had secretly marveled at the girl's ability to control the most headstrong youngster. Now she seized the opportunity presented to help a fellow-passenger.

"Have you had your breakfast?" she asked. "No? I thought not. Well, I had mine before I got on the train. If you are willing to trust the children with me, I'll amuse them while you go into the diner and have a quiet meal. You'll feel much better then."

"Oh, it's been a nightmare!" confided the young mother with a sudden rush of feeling. "Nobody ever told me what it would be like to travel with two children. Lottie upset her milk and Baby spilled her supper on the floor. And people just glare at me and never offer to help. It will be heavenly to eat my breakfast without them, but I feel that I'm imposing on you."

Betty managed to send her off convinced that everything was as it should be, and to the mother's surprise the children snuggled down like little mice to listen to the honorable and ancient story of the Three Bears. By the time a rested and radiant mother came back to them, for she had stolen a little time in the dressing room and rearranged her fair hair and adjusted her trim frock, something she had found it impossible to accomplish with two restless children clinging to her skirts, Lottie and Baby were firm friends with Miss Betty.

"I never knew any one as lovely as you are!" The gratitude of the woman was touching. "I was just about crazy. My husband tipped the porter, and he did try to look after me, but he didn't know what to do. Usually there is a maid on this train, they told us, but she was taken sick, and there wasn't time to get any one to

fill her place. Now don't let the children bother you. They had their breakfast early, and I can read to them till we get to Willowvale where their grandmother will meet us."

But Betty had not finished. She loved the feel of soft little arms about her neck and there was not much connected with a baby's welfare she did not know about. Many a Pineville baby she had washed and dressed and fed as correctly as a model baby should be.

"Let me take them one at a time and tidy them up?" she suggested. "They'll take to it kindly, because I am new and that will lend to the washing a novelty. If we go in relays, we can't upset the whole car."

So first with Lottie, and then with Baby, who seemed to be without other name, Betty went into the dressing-room and there washed pink and white faces and hands till they shone, and brushed silk locks till they lay straight and shining. Clean frocks were forthcoming, and two spick and span babies emerged to beam upon a transformed world no longer seen through a veil of tears. This new friend could tell the most wonderful stories, invent delightful games, and sing dozens of foolish little rhymes in a low sweet voice that disturbed no one and yet allowed every word to be distinctly understood.

Both children went to sleep during the morning, and then Betty heard that Mrs. Clenning, as the mother introduced herself, lived in the West and that this journey to Willowvale was the first she had taken since the birth of the babies.

"My husband's mother is crazy to see them because they are her only grandchildren," she explained. "I didn't want to come without Mr. Clenning, but he couldn't get away for a couple of months. He is to come after us and take us home. If he didn't, I'm sure I'd live East the rest of my days, or at least till the children are grown up. I'll never have the courage to try a long train trip with them again."

Before Willowvale was reached Betty helped Mrs. Clenning get her wraps and bags together and tied the babies into bewitching white bonnets with long fluted strings. The porter came for the bags, but Betty carried the younger child to the car door and handed her down to the mother, who had gone first with Lottie. She saw a tall, stately, white-haired woman, dressed all in white from her shoes to her hat, gather all three into her arms, and then went back to her seat satisfied

that the mother’s troubles were over.

“Parlor car’s ready, Miss,” announced the porter, coming up to her. “Shall I take you on in?”

Betty followed him, to be established comfortably on the shady side of the car, with the window adjusted at the most comfortable height. She did not hear the porter’s comment to the conductor when he passed him in the vestibule of the parlor car.

“That girl in seat fourteen, she’s one perfect little lady,” said the dusky porter earnestly. “You jest observe her when you takes her ticket. ‘Member that lady with the two children what racketed all day and all night? Well, she done fix those two kids up till you wouldn’t know ‘em, and cheered their mother up, too. And all jest as pretty and like a lady. That mighty fine lady in the red hat (I give her a seat on the sunny side of the car a-purpose) wouldn’t do nothing yesterday when I axted her to hold a glass of milk while I went to get a extra pillow. Said she wasn’t going to be nursemaid to no stranger’s brats!”

So Betty was zealously looked after by the whole train crew, for the story had spread, and the siege of Clenning had been a protracted one with a corresponding fervency of gratitude for release; and at six o’clock that night the attentive porter handed her down the steps to the platform of the beautiful Union Station in Washington.

She had only her light traveling bag to carry, so she followed the crowd through the gates, walking slowly and scanning the faces anxiously in order that she might not pass her uncle. She did not wish to go through the station out on the plaza, lest she make it more difficult for him to find her, and she was keenly disappointed that he had not been at the gate, for the train was half an hour late and she had confidently expected him to be waiting. She took up her stand near the door of the waiting room and scanned the eddying circles of travelers that passed and repassed her.

“Something must have delayed him,” she thought uneasily. “He couldn’t miss me even in a crowd, because he is so careful. I hope he got the telegram.”

She had turned to compare her wrist-watch with the station clock when a voice at her back said half-doubtfully, “Betty?”

CHAPTER XI

A SERIOUS MIX-UP

“You are Betty, aren’t you?” the girlish voice insisted, and this time Betty identified it as belonging to a girl a year or two older than herself who stood smiling uncertainly at her.

“Yes, of course I’m Betty,” said Betty Gordon smiling.

The face of her questioner cleared.

“All right, girls,” she called, beckoning to two others who stood a little way off. “She’s Betty. I was sure I hadn’t make a mistake.”

Betty found herself surrounded by three laughing faces, beaming with good-will and cordiality.

“We must introduce ourselves,” said the girl who had first spoken to her. “This is Louise,” pointing to a gray-eyed miss apparently about Betty’s age. “This is Esther.” A girl with long yellow braids and pretty even white teeth bobbed a shy acknowledgment. “And of course I’m Roberta, Bobby for short.”

“And if we don’t hurry, we’ll be late for dinner,” suggested the girl who had been called Louise. “You know Carter isn’t as patient as he once was; he hates to have to wait.”

Bobby thrust her arm through Betty’s protectingly.

“Come on, Betty,” she said comfortably. “Never mind about your trunk check. Carter will drive down after it early in the morning.”

Betty’s bewildered mind was vaguely appreciative of the wide sweep of open plaza which lay before them as they came out on the other side of the station, but before she could say a word she was gently bundled into a handsome automobile, a girl on either side of her and one opposite, and the grim-faced, silver-haired old chauffeur, evidently slightly intolerant of the laughter and high spirits of his young passengers, had started to thread his way through the lane of

taxicabs and private cars.

Betty was intensely puzzled, to put it mildly. Her uncle had mentioned no girls in his letters to her, and even supposing that she had missed some letters, it was hardly possible that he should not have let fall an explanatory word or two from time to time.

“I thought Uncle Dick would come down to meet me,” she said, voicing her surprise at last.

“Oh, poor dear, his heart is almost broken to think he has to stay cooped up in the house,” answered Bobby, who seemed to be the general spokesman. “But how stupid of us—of course you don’t know that he hurt his foot!”

“Is he hurt?” Betty half rose from her seat in alarm. “Is he badly injured? When did it happen?”

Bobby pulled the excited girl down beside her.

“You see it happened only yesterday,” explained Louise, finding her voice with a rush. “You’d better believe we were frightened when they brought him to the house in the ambulance. His foot has some little bones broken in it, the doctor says, but he’ll be all right in a month or so. He has to hobble around on crutches till the bones knit.”

“But it isn’t serious, so don’t look like that,” urged Bobby. “Why, Betty, your lips are positively white. We’re so thankful it was his foot and not his head—that would have been something to worry about.”

“How—how did it happen?” gasped Betty, anxious and worried in spite of these assurances. “Was he in an accident?”

“He was the whole accident,” announced Bobby cheerfully. “You see he’s completely wrapped up in these new buildings they’re putting up on the outskirts. We’ll take you out to see ‘em while you’re here and perhaps you’ll understand the construction, which is more than I do. Anyway, the whole firm and every workman is absorbed in the experiment, and they’re burnt as red as the bricks from working outdoors all day.”

“Uncle Dick does love to be outdoors,” murmured Betty.

“He sure does,” agreed Bobby. “Well, nothing would do yesterday but that he must climb up on the roof of one they’ve just started and take a peek at the chimney. I guess it needed looking after, for the whole thing tumbled over on him, coming down full-weight on his right foot. Forcet, the foreman, had an awful time getting him down from the roof, and instead of telephoning for the car, some nervous person sent for the ambulance and scared us all into fits.”

Betty blinked again. No mention of building houses had been made in Uncle Dick’s letters to her.

“Did he get my telegram?” she asked, leaning forward to look at a monument they were passing.

“A little before noon,” replied Bobby. “Louise and Esther and I had such a violent argument as to which of us should come to meet you that we didn’t even dare draw lots; it seemed safer for us all to come along.”

Esther, who sat opposite Betty, had noticed her interest in the Washington Monument.

“We’re going to take you sightseeing to-morrow,” she promised. “Aren’t we, Bobby? And I don’t see why we don’t go home by way of Fort Myer. It doesn’t take any longer, and dinner isn’t till seven, you know.”

“All right.” Bobby leaned forward and spoke to the chauffeur. “Take us round by Fort Myer, please, Carter,” she directed.

The car turned sharply, and in a few minutes they were rattling over an old bridge.

“We live out in the country, Betty, I warn you,” said the voluble Bobby. “But it has its compensations. You’ll like it.”

Betty, a stranger to Washington, decided that the Willard must be a country hotel. It would be like Uncle Dick, she knew, to shun the heart of the city and establish himself somewhere where he could see green fields the first thing every morning.

“What is Fort Myer?” she asked with lively curiosity, as the car began to climb a steep grade. “Is that where they had training camps during the war?”

“Right,” said Bobby. “It’s an army post, you know. See, here are some of the officers’ houses. I only hope we live here when Louise and I are eighteen—they give the most heavenly dances and parties.”

Betty looked with interest at the neat houses they were passing. The names of the officers were conspicuously tacked on the doorsteps, and there was a general air of orderliness and military spic and spanness about the very gravel roads. Occasionally a dust-colored car shot past them filled with men in uniform.

“Do you ride?” asked Betty suddenly. “Uncle Dick has always wanted me to learn, but I’ve never had a good chance.”

“Well, you can begin to-morrow morning,” Bobby informed her. “We’ve three ponies that are fine under the saddle. Betty, I do wish you’d make up your mind to live in Washington this winter. There’s no reason in the world why you shouldn’t, and we were talking it over last night, making plans for you.”

“Why! that’s entirely as Uncle Dick says,” returned Betty, surprised. “I haven’t any say in the matter.”

Bobby shot a triumphant glance toward the other girls.

“He said he hadn’t much right to dictate, but I told him I knew better,” she said with satisfaction. “He wants you as much as we do, and that’s considerable, you know.”

Again a wave of doubt swept over Betty. Uncle Dick had said he had not much right to dictate! When he was her only living relative!

“Uncle hasn’t a fever or anything, has he?” she asked apprehensively. “I mean the injury to his foot hasn’t, it didn’t—” she floundered.

“Oh, that old hurt to his head never amounted to anything,” declared Bobby with convincing carelessness. “No, indeed, he’s perfectly well except for the crutches, and the doctor says keeping him indoors for a few days will give him a much-needed rest.”

Betty recalled the accident in which her uncle had been stunned when he had slipped down a bank into an excavation made along a road on which they had been driving. Bobby evidently referred to that old injury.

“Now you can begin to watch for the house,” said the silent Esther, as Carter swung the car around another curve in the beautiful road. “I don’t see why I couldn’t have been named Virginia!”

“Esther has a personal grievance because she’s the only one of us born in the South, and she had to be named for an aunt like the rest of us,” laughed Bobby. “Every tenth girl you meet down here seems to be named Virginia.”

“But was she born in Virginia?” asked Betty. “Where did you live then?”

Bobby stared. Then she laughed.

“Oh, I see,” she said. “We lived at Fairfields. Of course you know that. But, like so many friends, you have always thought of us as living in Washington. We’re in Virginia, Betty, didn’t you know that?”

“No.” Betty’s puzzlement was plainly written on her face.

“When we crossed the bridge, we left the District of Columbia,” explained Bobby. “Of course we’re very close to the line, but still we are not in Washington.”

“There’s the house!” exclaimed Louise. “I wonder if mother got back from shopping. I don’t see her on the porch.”

Betty saw a beautiful white house, dazzlingly white against a background of dark trees, with a broad lawn in front circled by a wide white driveway. A terraced garden at the side with a red brick walk was arranged with wicker chairs and tables and a couple of swings protected with gay striped awnings. It was a typical Southern mansion in perfect order, and Betty reveled in its architectural perfections even while she told herself that it did not look in the slightest like a hotel. What was it Bobby had called her home? “Fairfields”—that was it; and she, Betty, wanted to go to the Willard. Had they made a mistake and brought her to the wrong place?

There was no time to ask for explanations, however. The girls swept her out of the car and up the low steps through the beautiful doorway. A well-trained man servant closed the door noiselessly, and the three bore Betty across the wide hall into a room lined with books and boasting three or four built-in window seats, in one of which a gentleman was reading.

“We found her! Here she is!” shouted the irrepressible Bobby. “Don’t tell us we can’t pick a girl named Betty out of a crowd!”

The gentleman closed his book, and, steadying himself with a cane lying near by, rose slowly. There was no recognition in the gaze he fastened on Betty, and she for her part hung back, staring wildly.

“You’re not Uncle Dick!” she gasped accusingly.

CHAPTER XII

STRAIGHTENING THINGS OUT

Betty's speech was shock number one. Another quickly followed.

The gentleman tugged quizzically at his short gray mustache.

"And you," he announced quietly, "are not my niece, Betty Littell!"

Esther and Louise stared, round-eyed, while Bobby collapsed dramatically on a convenient couch.

"Have we kidnapped anybody?" she asked, a bit hysterically. "Good gracious, Dad, don't tell me I've forcibly run off with a girl? Haven't you made a mistake? She must be Betty—she said so."

"My darlings, I'm sorry to be late," said a new voice, a rich, sweet contralto, and a stout woman with a kindly, florid face swept through the doorway. "Why, what is the matter?" she demanded hurriedly, confronting the tense group.

"Momsie!" exclaimed Bobby, hurling herself upon the newcomer. "Oh, Momsie, isn't this Betty Littell? We went to meet her and she said her name was Betty, and all the way home she talked about Uncle Dick, and now she says dad isn't her uncle! I'm afraid I've made a mess of things."

"Yes, I think you have," said Betty, with blazing cheeks. "I came to Washington to meet my uncle, Mr. Richard Gordon, who is stopping at the Willard. Of course my name is Betty. I'm Betty Gordon, and he's my Uncle Dick. And goodness only knows what he is doing now—he'll be about crazy if he came to meet me."

Bobby began to laugh uncontrollably.

"I never heard of such a thing in my life!" she giggled, wiping her eyes. "Dad's name is Richard Littell, and we've been expecting our cousin Betty Littell to arrive to-day from Vermont for a long visit. We haven't seen her since she was six years old, but I took a chance on recognizing her. And then there was the name! How could I guess there would be two Bettys looking for two Uncle

Dicks! Don’t be mad, Betty; you can see a mix-up like that wouldn’t happen twice in a life time.”

“She isn’t mad,” interposed Mr. Littell, lowering himself carefully to the window seat, for he had been standing all this time and his foot began to pain again. “After she knows you a little better, Bobby, she will expect this sort of denouement to follow whatever you undertake. I say we ought to have some dinner, Mother, and then talk at the table.”

“Of course, of course,” agreed motherly Mrs. Littell. “The poor child must be famished. Take Betty—you don’t mind if I call you Betty, do you, dear?—up to your room, Bobby, and when you come down dinner will be served.”

“But my uncle!” urged Betty. “He will be so worried. And the other girl—where do you suppose she is?”

“By George, the child has more sense than I have,” said Mr. Littell energetically. “I’d give a fortune if Bobby had half as level a head. Our Betty is probably having hysterics in the station if she hasn’t taken the next train back to Vermont.”

His keen eyes twinkled appreciatively at Betty, and she knew that she liked him and also sensed instinctively that his eldest daughter was very like him.

“Why, Father, how you do talk!” reproved Mrs. Littell comfortably. “I’ll call up the station while the girls are upstairs and then Betty shall call the Willard, or you do it for her, and then perhaps we can eat dinner before the souffle is quite ruined.”

The girls took Betty upstairs to a luxurious suite of rooms they shared, and when she had bathed her face and hands and brushed her hair, they came down to find that Mr. Littell had called up the Union Station and discovered that because of a freight wreck the Vermont express had been delayed and would not be in before nine o’clock that night.

“So our Betty is probably having a comfortable dinner on the train,” he announced. “Now just a minute, and I’ll have the Willard for the other Betty. We’ll tell your uncle you are safe and that we’ll bring you into Washington to-night.”

In a few minutes he had the connection, and they heard him ask for Mr. Richard Gordon. His mobile face changed as the clerk answered, and Betty, watching, knew that he had disconcerting news. He turned to them, covering the mouthpiece with his hand.

“Mr. Gordon left early this morning for Oklahoma,” he said. “He left an address for mail, and there’s a telegram which came after he left. It was sent from Halperin and was received at eleven-thirty this morning.”

“That’s the one I sent!” answered Betty. “And Uncle Dick’s gone to Oklahoma! What on earth shall I do?”

“Do!” repeated Mr. and Mrs. Littell in concert. “Why, stay right here with us, of course! Do you suppose we’d let a young girl like you knock around alone in a city? We’ll be glad to have you stay as long as you will, and you mustn’t be uncomfortable another second. When you hear from your uncle there’ll be plenty of time to make other plans.”

Betty did not try to express her gratitude to these new kind friends, for she knew that she could never say one-half the thanks she felt toward them. They were cordiality itself, and did everything in their power to make her feel at home. An excellent dinner was served in the charming dining-room with a mixture of formality and simple home courtesy that was as unusual as it was delightful, and in this atmosphere of good breeding and tact, Betty bloomed like a little rose.

“A charming girl, whoever she is,” said Mr. Littell to his wife, as he smoked his cigar after dinner and the girls drew Betty to the piano. “She has plenty of spirit, but lacks Bobby’s boisterousness. It will be a good thing for the girls to have some one like her, self-reliant and quiet and yet with decided snap, to chum with.”

“I like the idea of five girls in the house,” beamed Mrs. Littell, who was the soul of hospitality and fairly idolized her three daughters. Whatever discipline they had came from their father. “And now I think I had better go to the station, after our Betty, don’t you?”

“Oh, Mother!” came in concert from the piano, where Bobby was rattling off a lively waltz. “We all want to go. Please? There’s plenty of room in the car.”

Mrs. Littell looked undecided.

“One of you may go with your mother,” said Mr. Littell decisively. “I think it had better be Louise. Now, there is no use in arguing. One girl is enough. Betty will be tired after traveling all night and all day, and she will be in no mood for talking and carrying on. I’ll tell Carter to bring the car around, Mother.”

Bobby pouted for a few moments after her mother and sister had gone, but her good-nature was easily restored and she and Betty and Esther were deep in an exchange of confidences when Mrs. Littell returned bringing the missing Betty with her.

“Now stand up for a minute, you two Bettys,” commanded Bobby, when greetings had been exchanged and explanations made. “I want to see if I made such a dreadful mistake in taking Betty Gordon for Betty Littell.”

The two girls stood side by side, and though they both had dark eyes and hair, there the resemblance ceased. Betty Littell was a dumpling of a girl with curly hair, a snub nose and round face. She looked the picture of good-nature, and her plumpness suggested a fondness for sweets that subsequent acquaintance with her fully sustained.

Betty Gordon had grown tall through the summer, and she was of a slender, wiry build that hinted of a fondness for outdoor life. Her heavy straight hair was wrapped around her well-shaped little head in braids, and her exquisite little hands and feet, so far her one claim to beauty, though later promises lay in her glowing face, gave her, as Louise afterward confided to her mother, “an air like an Indian princess.”

“No, you don’t look much alike,” conceded Bobby, after a prolonged scrutiny. “But Betty Gordon looks the way I thought Betty Littell would look, so I don’t see that I am to blame.”

“Trust Bobby to excuse herself from a scrape,” chuckled her father. “By the way, how are you going to arrange about names? Two Bettys in the family will involve complications.”

“I think we’ll have to call Betty Littell, ‘Libbie’” suggested Mrs. Littell, smiling. “That was your mother’s name at home, always, Betty.”

“Yes, I know it; and that’s why they called me Betty,” replied the Littell girl. “Two names, the same names, I mean, do make confusion. I’m willing to be

called Libbie, Aunt Rachel, if you let me have a little time to get used to it. If I don't answer right away, you'll understand that I'm listening for 'Betty.'"

"Well, Mother, I think at least two of these girls need sleep," announced Mr. Littell. "Betty Gordon looks as if she couldn't keep her eyes open another moment, and Betty Littell has yawned twice. I should say we all might retire—it's after eleven."

"Goodness, so it is," said his wife hastily. "Time does fly so when you're talking. Come, girls, if you are going sightseeing to-morrow, you'll need a good night's rest."

There were three bedrooms and a private bath at the disposal of the girls, and separate beds in all the rooms. Betty Gordon shared a room with Bobby, Louise and Betty Littell had the one adjoining, and Esther slept alone in the third room, which was also connected with the others.

Long after the other girls were asleep Betty lay awake, thinking over the happenings of the day. Finally she worked around to the suggested change in names.

"They must expect me to stay if they plan to avoid confusion of names," she thought. "I must talk to Mr. Littell in the morning and ask him if it's really all right. I feel as if it were an imposition for me, a perfect stranger, to accept their hospitality like this."

In the morning she was up and dressed before the rest, fortunately having a fresh blouse in her bag so that, although she had nothing but her suit skirt, she looked well-groomed and dainty. Betty Littell was also without her trunk, though Bobby promised that both trunks should be brought from the station that morning.

"I'd like to speak to your father a minute," said Betty, when she was dressed.

Bobby, on the floor tying her shoes, blew her a kiss.

"You'll find him on the terrace probably," she said confidently. "Go ahead, dear, but it won't do you any good. We're determined to keep you to play with us."

So the astute Bobby had guessed what she wanted to say! Nevertheless, Betty was determined to carry out her resolution. She went slowly down the wide

staircase and stepped out through double screen doors on to the bricked terrace. Sure enough, there sat Mr. Littell, smoking comfortably and reading his morning paper.

CHAPTER XIII

WASHINGTON MONUMENT

“You’re up early!” the gentleman greeted Betty cordially. “Guess you’re ahead of even Esther, who usually leads the van. Sleep well? That’s good,” as she nodded. “No troubles this bright morning?”

Betty gave him a grateful glance.

“I can’t help it,” she said bravely. “You know how I feel, coming here like this—you don’t know me—”

“No-o,” drawled Mr. Littell, pulling forward a gay-cushioned chair and motioning for her to sit down. (“Can’t have any manners when your foot is smashed,” he explained in an aside.) “No, Betty, it’s true we don’t know you. But mother and I think we know a nice girl when we see her, and we’re glad to have you stay with us just as long as you can feel comfortable and at home. If I were you, I’d just bury these uneasy feelings you speak of. Fact is, I’ll give you two good reasons why you should make us a little visit. One is that if we had had the pleasure of your acquaintance you would have had a regular letter from mother weeks ago, asking you to come and spend the summer with us. The second is that I know how your uncle would feel to think of you alone in the city or the country. Guess how I’d take it if one of my own daughters was waiting for word from me and no one made things pleasant for her. Won’t you shake hands and make a bargain with me that you’ll try to see our side of it, your uncle’s and mine, and then just plan to have a happy time with the girls until we can reach him in the West?”

Betty placed her small hand in the larger one held out to receive it, and smiled back at Mr. Littell. He had a smile very few people could resist.

“That’s better,” he said with satisfaction. “Now we’re friends. And, remember, I’m always ready to give advice or listen. That’s what fathers and uncles are for, you know. And I’d like to have you look on me as a second Uncle Dick.”

Thus encouraged, Betty briefly outlined for him her story, touching lightly on her experiences at Bramble Farm, but going into detail about Bob Henderson,

her uncle, and her pleasant recollections of Pineville.

By the time she had finished, the four girls had joined them on the terrace and presently a table was brought out and spread with a cloth, and, Mrs. Littell following the maid with a silver coffee urn, breakfast was served.

“The girls will want to go into town to-day, I suppose,” said the motherly lady, selecting the brownest muffin for Betty and signaling her husband to see that the maid served her an extra portion of omelet. “I have some shopping to do, so I’ll go in with them in the car. But I absolutely refuse to ‘do’ the Monument again.”

“Poor mother!” laughed Bobby. “She hates to ride in an elevator, and yet I know by actual count she’s gone up in the Monument a dozen times.”

“I suppose every one who comes to Washington wants to go sightseeing,” said Betty Littell, or, as she must begin to be called now, Libbie, “I know how it is in our little town at home. There’s just one monument—erected to some Revolutionary hero—and I get fairly sick of reading the inscription to all the visiting aunts and uncles.”

“Well, I like to go around,” declared the energetic Bobby. “But just once I had an overdose. We had a solemn and serious young theological student who made notes of everything he saw. He was devoted to walking, and one of his favorite maxims was never to ride when he could walk. He dragged me up every one of those nine hundred steps in the Washington Monument and down again, and I was in bed for two days.”

“Wait till you see the steps, and you’ll understand,” said Louise to Libbie and Betty. “If you try to walk down you’re apt to get awfully dizzy.”

After breakfast Carter brought the car around, and Mr. Littell hobbled to the door to see them off.

“Betty wants to send a telegram to her uncle,” he said in an aside to his wife, while she stood at the long glass in the hall adjusting her veil. “Better help her, for she’ll feel that she is doing something. If Gordon is in the oil regions, as I think from what she tells me he is, there isn’t much chance of a telegram reaching him any quicker than a letter. However, there’s no use in dampening her hopes.”

“Now we’ll drop you at the Monument,” planned Mrs. Littell, as the car bore them down the driveway. “You can walk from there to that pretty tea-room—what is its name, Bobby?—can’t you?”

“The Dora-Rose, you mean, Mother,” supplied Bobby. “Of course we can walk. But Carter is taking the longest way to the Monument.”

“We’re going to the station first,” answered her mother. “Betty wants to send her uncle a telegram, and Carter is going to leave directions to have the trunks sent up to the house. You have your baggage checks, haven’t you, girls?”

They produced them, and Carter slipped them into his pocket. Betty had leisure and opportunity to enjoy the beauty of the handsome building as they approached it this perfect morning, and she could not help exclaiming.

“Yes, it is fine, every one says so,” admitted Bobby, with the carelessness of one to whom it was an old story. “Finer, daddy says, than the big terminals in New York.”

Libbie had the advantage of being the only one of the girls who had been to New York.

“This has lots more ground around it,” she pronounced critically. “Course in a city like New York, they need the land for other buildings. But you just ought to see the Pennsylvania Station there!”

“All right, take your word for it,” said Bobby. “Where do we go to send a telegram, Momsie?”

Mrs. Littell smiled.

“Betty and I are all who are necessary for that little errand,” she said firmly. “The rest of you stay right in the car.”

Carter opened the door for them and then went in search of the baggage man. Betty and Mrs. Littell found the telegraph window and in a few minutes a message was speeding out to Richard Gordon, Flame City, Oklahoma, telling him that his niece was in Washington, giving her address and asking what he wished her to do.

“I’ll write him a letter to-night,” promised Mrs. Littell when this was accomplished. “Then he’ll know that you are in safe hands. You must write to him, too, dear. Flame City may consist of one shack and a hundred oil wells and be twenty miles from a post-office, you know.”

Carter reported that the trunks were already on their way to Fairfields, and now the car was turned toward the gleaming Monument that seemed to be visible from every part of the city, Betty, her mind relieved by the sending of the telegram, abandoned herself to the joys of sightseeing. Here she was, young, well and strong, in a luxurious car, surrounded by friends, and driving through one of the most beautiful cities in the United States. Any girl who, under those circumstances, could remain a prey to doubts and gloom, would indeed be a confirmed misanthrope.

The car was stopped at one of the concrete walks leading to the base of the Monument, and with final instructions as to the time and place they were to meet her, Mrs. Littell drove away.

“Why, there’s a crowd there!” cried Libbie in wonder.

“Waiting to be taken up,” explained Louise. “Come on, we’ll have to stand in line.”

The line of waiting people extended half way around the Monument. The girls took their places, and when the crowd streamed out and they were permitted to go inside, Betty and Libbie, the two strangers, understood the reason for the delay. The elevator seemed huge, but it was quickly filled, and when the gates were closed the car began to mount very slowly.

“We’d be sick and dizzy if they went up as fast as they do in department stores and office buildings,” said Bobby. “It takes about fifteen minutes to reach the top. Watch, and you’ll see lots of interesting things on the floors we pass.”

Betty was wondering how Bobby had ever survived the climb up the stairs and the trip down again with the enthusiastic theological student, when a cry somewhere in the back of the car startled her.

“What’s the matter?” demanded the elevator operator, without turning his head.

“John isn’t here!” declared a hysterical feminine voice. “Oh, can’t you stop the

car and go down and get him? He pushed me in, and I thought he was right behind me. Aren't you going back?"

"Can't, Madam," was the calm answer. "Have to finish the trip. You can go right back with the next load."

"Oh, goodness gracious," moaned the voice. "What'll I do? If I go back I may miss him. If I wait at the top it will be half an hour. Suppose he walks up? Maybe I'd better start to walk down to meet him."

Bobby stifled a giggle with difficulty.

"Bride and groom," she whispered to Betty. "Washington's full of 'em. Guess the poor groom was lost in the shuffle. Is she pretty—can you see?"

Betty tried to look back in the car, though the press of passengers standing all about her made it difficult. The bride was easily identified because she was openly crying. She was an exceedingly pretty girl, modishly gowned and apparently not more than twenty years old.

"We'll get hold of her and persuade her to wait," planned Bobby. "I'll show her the sights to amuse her while we're waiting for the next elevator load to come up. Here we are at the top."

A crowd was waiting to descend, and as they walked from the elevator, the bride meekly following, Bobby plucked her sleeve.

"Excuse me," she said bluntly, but with a certain charm that was her own, "I couldn't help hearing what you were saying. Your husband missed the elevator, didn't he?"

The bride blushed and nodded.

"Well, don't try to walk down," advised Bobby. "I did it once, and was in bed for two days. He'll come up with the next load. No one ever walks up unless they are crazy—or going to theological seminary. Your husband isn't a minister, is he?"

"Oh, no, he's a lawyer," the bride managed to say.

“All right,” approved Bobby, noting with satisfaction that the elevator gate had closed. “Come round with us and see the sights, and then when your husband comes up you can tell him all the news. This is Betty Gordon, Libbie Littell and Louise, Esther and Bobby Littell, all at your service.”

“I’m Mrs. Hale,” said the bride, stumbling a little over the name and yet pronouncing it with obvious pride.

CHAPTER XIV

LIBBIE IS ROMANTIC

The girls, marshaled by Bobby, made a tour of the windows, and though Betty was fascinated by the views of the city spread out before her and bought post cards to send to the Pineville friends and those she knew in Glenside and Laurel Grove, her mind was running continuously on young Mrs. Hale's announcement.

"She couldn't be the old bookstore man's wife," she speculated, her eyes fixed on the Potomac while Bobby cheerfully tangled up history and geography in a valiant effort to instruct her guests. "Lockwood Hale was an old man, Bob said. He didn't say he had a son, but I wonder–-Oh, Bobby, the Jesuit fathers didn't sail down the Potomac, did they?"

"Well, it was some river," retorted Bobby. "Anyway, Miss, you didn't seem to be listening to a word I said. What were you thinking about in such a brown study?"

Betty made a little face, but she had no intention of revealing her thoughts. She wanted to find out about the bookshop quietly, and if possible get the address. Always providing that Mrs. Hale was related to the man who had shown such an interest in Bob Henderson's almshouse record.

"Of course Hale is an ordinary enough name," she mused. "And yet there is just a chance that it may be the same."

The girls were planning to take the next car down, and yet when it came up they lingered diplomatically to catch a glimpse of the bridegroom. "John" proved to be a good-looking young man, not extraordinary in any way, but with a likeable open face and square young shoulders that Libbie, who startled them all by turning poetical late that night, declared were "built for manly burdens."

Louise, Esther and Bobby were the last to squeeze into the car, Libbie, the prudent, having ducked earlier. As Betty turned to follow them, the gate closed.

"Car full!" said the operator.

"Oh, Betty!" Bobby's wail came to her as the car began to disappear. "We'll wait

for you," came the parting message before it dropped from sight.

Mrs. Hale laughed musically.

"Now you know something of how I felt," she said merrily. "May I present my husband? John, those five girls have been so nice to me. And now you'll go round with us, won't you?"

But Betty knew better than that.

"I'm going to write some of my post cards," she said. "But I would love to ask you a question before you go. Do you know a man in Washington who keeps a bookshop? His name is Lockwood Hale."

Mr. and Mrs. Hale exchanged glances.

"Know him?" repeated the young man. "Why, I should think we did! He's my great-uncle."

"I'm very anxious to see him to ask about a friend of mine," explained Betty. "Mr. Hale thought he might be able to tell him something of his parents who died when he was a baby. As soon as I heard your name I hoped you could tell me where to find the bookstore."

"Yes, uncle is a wizard on old family records," admitted the nephew. "Sometimes I think that is why he hates to part with a book. He keeps a secondhand bookshop, you know, and he's positively insulting to customers who try to buy any of the books. The old boy is really queer in his head, but there's nothing to be afraid of. He wouldn't hurt a flea, would he, Elinor?"

Mrs. Hale said doubtfully, no, she supposed not.

"Elinor didn't have a very good impression of him," laughed her husband. "We're on our wedding trip, you know,"—he blushed slightly— "and mother made us promise we'd stop in to see the old man. He hasn't seen me since I wore knickerbockers, and we had a great time making him understand who we were. Then he said that he hoped we liked Washington, and went back to his reading."

"And the shop is so dirty!" shuddered the bride. "I don't think she ought to go to such a place alone, John."

“I won’t,” promised Betty hastily. “If you’ll let me have the address, I’ll be ever so grateful and it may be a great help to my friend.”

Young Mr. Hale wrote down the street and number on the back of the brand-new visiting card his wife pulled from her brand-new purse, and Betty thanked them warmly and turned to her card writing, leaving them free to enjoy each other and the view to their hearts’ content. She had directed post cards to a dozen friends before the elevator returned, and this time both she and the bridal couple made sure that they were among the first to step in.

Betty felt of the little slip in her purse several times during the afternoon, inwardly glowing with satisfaction. If she could find Bob Henderson in Washington through the old bookseller, or learn something definite of the lad, she would find it easier to wait for word from her uncle.

After luncheon, which was calculated to please healthy appetites of five girls to a nicety, they went into several of the large shops with Mrs. Littell, and then, because it had begun to rain and did not promise pleasant weather for driving, they went to a moving picture show.

“Had a full day?” asked Mr. Littell at dinner that night. “Libbie, what did you see?”

Libbie’s answer provoked a gust of laughter. She was so essentially a matter-of-fact little personage in appearance and manner that when she opened her red mouth and announced, “A bride and groom!” the effect was startling.

That started Bobby, and she told the story of the lost John, told it as her father would have, for neither Bobby nor Mr. Littell were at all inclined toward sentimentality.

“Well, Betty,” Mr. Littell beckoned to her afterward when they were all in the pleasant living-room across the hall, “think you’re going to like Washington, even if it is overrun with brides and grooms?”

“It’s lovely,” Betty assured him fervently. “We’ve had the most perfect day. And, Mr. Littell, what do you think—I’ve found out something important already.”

She had told him about Bob that morning, and he was interested at once when she narrated what the bride and groom had told her of old Lockwood Hale.

“Why, I know where his shop is. Everybody in Washington does,” said Mr. Littell when she had finished. “He has lots of rare books mixed in with worthless trash. Funny I didn’t take in you meant that Hale when you spoke of him. I suppose you’ll want to go there to-morrow Carter will take you in the car, and you’d better have one of the girls go with you. Bobby is all right—she may be scatter-brained but she doesn’t talk.”

For some reason none of the girls was sleepy that night, and after going upstairs they all assembled in Bobby and Betty’s room to talk. Libbie could not keep her mind off the bride.

“I wonder how I’d look in a lace veil,” she said, seizing the fluted muslin bedspread and draping it over her head. “It must be lovely to be a bride!”

“You’ve been reading too many silly books,” scolded Bobby. “Anyway, Libbie, you’re too fat to look nice in a veil. Better get thin before you’re old enough to be married, or else you’ll have to wear a traveling suit.”

Libbie eyed her scornfully and continued to parade up and down in her draperies.

“Betty would look pretty in a veil,” said Louise suddenly. “Come on, girls, let’s stage a wedding. Libbie won’t sleep all night if she doesn’t have some romantic outlet. I’ll be the father.”

She seized a pillow and stuffed it in the front of her dressing gown so that it made a very respectable corpulency.

“I’ll be the mother!” Esther began to pin up her hair, a dignity to which she secretly aspired.

“I’m your bridesmaid, Libbie,” announced Betty, catching up the bride’s train and beginning to hum the wedding march under her breath.

“If you *will* be silly idiots, I’m the minister,” said Bobby, mounting the bed and leaning over the foot rail as if it were a pulpit.

The bride stopped short, nearly tripping up the devoted bridesmaid.

“I don’t think you should make fun of ministers,” she said, looking

disapprovingly at her cousin. “It’s almost wicked.”

“I’d like to know how it’s any more wicked than to pretend a wedding,” retorted Bobby wrathfully. “Weddings are very solemn, sacred, serious affairs. Mother always cries when she goes to one.”

Betty began to laugh. She laughed so hard that she had to sit down on the floor, and the more the two girls glared at each other, the harder she laughed.

“I don’t see what’s so funny,” resented Bobby, beginning to snicker, too. “For goodness sake, don’t have hysterics, Betty. Mother will hear you and come rapping on the door in a minute.”

“I just thought of something.” The convulsed Betty made a heroic effort to control her laughter and failed completely. “Oh, girls,” she cried, wiping her eyes, “here you are bickering about the bride and the minister, and not one of us thought of the bridegroom. We left him out!”

Louise and Bobby rolled over on the bed and had their laugh out. Libbie collapsed on the floor, and Esther leaned against the bureau, laughing till she cried.

“They say the bridegroom isn’t important at a wedding, but I never heard of ignoring him altogether,” gasped Bobby, and then they were off again.

They made so much noise that Mrs. Littell tapped on the door to ask why they were not in bed, and when Bobby told her the joke, she had to sit down and laugh, too.

“I’ll send you up some sponge cake and milk if you’ll promise to go right to sleep after that,” she told them, kissing each one good night all over again. “Libbie shall at least have the wedding cake, if she can’t have a wedding.”

CHAPTER XV

OFF TO INVESTIGATE

Drip! drip! drip!

Betty listened sleepily, and then, as she raised herself on one elbow to hear better, she knew the noise was made by the rain.

“If that isn’t too provoking!” Bobby sat up with an indignant jerk and surveyed Betty across the little table at the head of the beds. “I thought we’d all go down to Mount Vernon to-day, and now it’s gone and rained and spoiled it all. Oh, dear! I don’t think I’ll get up”; and she curled down in a dejected heap under the white spread.

“Well, I’m going to get up,” announced Betty decidedly, springing out of bed with her accustomed energy. “Rainy days are just as much fun as sunny ones, and there’s something I have to do to-day, weather or no weather.”

“She’s a dear,” said Louise warmly, smiling as the sound of Betty’s carolling came to them above the sound of running water in the bathroom. “Mother says she likes her more and more every day. I wish her uncle would never write to her and she’d just go on living with us all the time.”

“And go to school with us in the fall. That would be nice,” agreed Bobby reflectively. “But, of course, Betty’s heart would be broken if she never heard from her uncle. However, we’ll be as nice to her as we can, and then maybe she will want to stay with us anyway, even if he does send for her.”

“What are you two plotting?” asked Betty gaily, emerging warm and rosy from her vigorous tubbing. “Do you know, I’ve just remembered that I promised to show Libbie how to make mile-a-minute lace before breakfast? I hope there is time.”

“What on earth do you want to make lace for?” demanded the practical Bobby, as her cousin appeared in the doorway, rubbing sleepy eyes. “It’s too early to begin on Christmas presents.”

Libbie was not at all confused in her ideas, and she had a very clear reason for wishing to add this accomplishment to her rather limited list.

“It’s for my hope-chest,” she informed Bobby with dignity, and not even the shout of laughter which greeted this statement could ruffle her. “You may think it’s funny,” she observed serenely, “but I have six towels and three aprons made and put away all ready.”

“My aunt!” sighed Bobby inelegantly, shaking her head. “You believe in starting young, don’t you? Why, I’m fourteen, and I’ve never given a thought to a hope-chest.”

Here Esther, the early riser of the family, created a diversion by coming in fully dressed and announcing that Mammy Lou was willing to teach as many girls as cared to come after breakfast how to make beaten biscuit.

“Take Libbie,” giggled Bobby, whose sense of humor was easily tickled. “She’s collecting stuff for her hope chest and I should think biscuit recipes would be just the thing. Do you want to learn to cook, Betty? Esther has a kitchen hobby and rides it almost to death.”

“I do not!” retorted Esther indignantly. “Do I, Louise? Mother loved to cook when she was a girl, and she says she likes to see me fussing in the kitchen.”

Betty was showing Libbie how to hold her crochet hook, and now she looked up from her pupil.

“Why, I’d love to learn to make those wonderful biscuits Mammy Lou makes,” she said slowly, “but I really have to go into Washington to-day. That is, if it will not upset any one’s plans? I can easily walk to the trolley line, and I won’t be gone longer than a couple of hours.”

A trolley line ran about half a mile from the house, and to Betty who had frequently walked ten miles a day while at Bramble Farm, this distance seemed negligible.

“Let me go with you, Betty?” coaxed Bobby. “Carter will take us in the machine. I won’t bother you, and if you have personal business to attend to, I’ll wait for you in the library or some place. Cooking and making lace drives me wild, and if you leave me at home as likely as not I’ll pick a quarrel with some one before

the morning is over."

"Worse than that, she'll insist on singing while I'm trying to practice," said Louise. "I'm three or four days behind with my violin, and a rainy morning is a grand time to catch up. Do take her with you, Betty."

"Why, goodness, she will be taking me," insisted Betty. "Of course you know I'll love to have you, Bobby. As a matter of fact, I wanted to ask you to go with me because it is a strange place and your father said not to go alone. Only I didn't want to disturb any plans you might have made for to-day. I'll tell you about it on the way," she added noting the look of growing curiosity on Bobby's face.

After breakfast the girls scattered to their chosen occupations, and Mrs. Littell settled herself to read to her husband on the glass enclosed piazza that extended half way across the back of the house. The car was brought round for Betty and Bobby and, commissioned to do several small errands in town, they set off.

"Now where are we going?" demanded Bobby bouncing around on the seat cushions more like a girl of seven than fourteen. "Do tell me, for I'm simply devoured with curiosity."

So Betty briefly outlined for her a little of Bob's history and of what she knew Lockwood Hale had told the poorhouse master. She also explained how she had obtained the old bookshop man's address from the bride they had met in the Monument the day before.

The rain came down steadily, and the country road was already muddy, showing that it had stormed the greater part of the night. Carter was a careful driver, and the luxurious limousine had been substituted for the touring car so that the girls were protected and very comfortable. Quite suddenly Carter brought the car to a stop on a lonely stretch of road just above a sharp turn.

"Goodness, I hope he hasn't a puncture," said Bobby. "I was so interested in listening to you I never heard anything. What's wrong, Carter?" she called.

"There's a little dog in the road, Miss Bobby," said Carter slowly and distinctly, as he always spoke. Bobby had once declared that she did not believe a fire would shake Carter from his drawling speech. "A puppy, I guess you'd call it. I'll have to move it to one side before we can drive past, because it is in the middle of the road."

Bobby leaned out to look.

“It must be hurt!” she cried. “Bring it in here, quick, Carter. Why, it’s just a tiny puppy, Betty,” she added; “a black and white one.”

Carter, mingled pain and reproach in his face, brought the dog to them, holding it gingerly away from him so as not to soil his coat.

“It’s very muddy, Miss Bobby,” he said disapprovingly. “Your mother won’t like them nice gray cushions all stained up.”

“Well, couldn’t you lend me your handkerchief, Carter?” suggested Bobby gently. “I’ll wipe him off. There now, he’s all right. My handkerchief’s so small it wouldn’t have done one of his paws.”

Carter, minus his handkerchief, started the car and they rounded the curve. The puppy seemed to be all right except that he was wet and shivering, and Bobby and Betty had decided that he was very young but otherwise in perfect health when the car stopped again.

“There’s another one of ‘em, Miss Bobby,” groaned Carter. “You don’t want this one, do you?”

The girls thrust out their heads. Sure enough, another black and white puppy lay abandoned in the roadway.

“Certainly, we’ll pick it up,” said Bobby indignantly. “Do you suppose we’re going to go past a dog and let it die in the rain? Bring it here, please, Carter.”

The old man got down stiffly and picked up the dog. This time he handed over a second handkerchief with a ludicrous air of “take-it- and-ruin-it.”

“That’s the last handkerchief I have with me, Miss Bobby,” he announced feelingly, watching his young mistress mopping water and mud from the rescued puppy.

“Well, there won’t be any more puppies, Carter,” Bobby assured him cheerfully.

But they had not gone twenty rods when they found another, and, after that, a few rods further on, a fourth.

“Here’s where we use our own handkerchiefs,” giggled Bobby. “And what are we going to do with a car full of dogs?”

The problem was solved, however, before they crossed the bridge into Washington. On the hill leading to the bridge they overtook a small colored boy weeping bitterly. Bobby signaled Carter to stop, and leaning out asked the child what the matter was.

“I done lost my dawgs!” he sobbed. “We-all is moving, and I had ‘em in a basket with a burlap bottom. I done tol mammy that burlap was rotten.” He held up the basket for them to see the hole in the cloth tacked across the bottom. “I was going to sell them dawgs for fifty cents apiece when they was bigger,” he finished with a fresh burst of grief.

His joy when the girls showed him the puppies and explained how they had found them was correspondingly noisy. He had an old gingham apron with him, and into this the dogs were unceremoniously bundled and securely knotted. Betty and Bobby each gave him a shining tencent piece, and a blissful boy went whistling over the bridge, his world changed to sunshine in a few brief minutes.

The car threaded a side street, turned twice, and brought up before a quaint old house with a basement shop tucked away under a bulging bay-window.

“This is Hale’s bookshop, Miss,” said Carter respectfully to Betty,

CHAPTER XVI

WHAT HALE HAD TO TELL

The door of the bookstore opened with a loose old-fashioned latch, and one fell down two steps without warning into a long, narrow room lined with books. Betty went first, and Bobby, stumbling, would have fallen if she had not caught her.

“Gracious! I’m a little bit scared, aren’t you?” Bobby whispered. “It seems like such a spooky place.”

It was certainly very quiet in the shop, and for a few moments Betty thought they must be alone. Then some one stirred, and, looking down the room, they saw an old man bent over a book open on a table near a dusty window. He wore big horn spectacles and was evidently extremely nearsighted, for he kept his face so near the book that his nose almost touched the pages.

“That must be Mr. Hale,” said Betty. “I wonder if it’s all right to interrupt him?”

“I should say the only way to make him understand you’re here, would be to go up and take that book away,” rejoined Bobby.

“He can’t be very anxious to sell anything, or he’d pay more attention to his store,” giggled Betty.

“I’ll wait here,” said Bobby hastily, as Betty moved toward the rear of the store. “I’d probably say the wrong thing anyway. Let me see, I’ll be reading this fat brown book. They all look alike to me, but this may be thrilling in spots.”

Betty approached the motionless old man, whose lean brown forefinger traced the curious black characters in the book before him so slowly that it did not seem to budge at all.

“I beg your pardon?” she said tentatively.

No response.

“I want to ask you–-” Betty began again, a little breathlessly. “I want to ask you about a boy named Bob Henderson.”

“Name’s Hale,” said the old man, without looking up and speaking in a cracked, hoarse voice. “Lockwood Hale, dealer in new and secondhand books. Just look around on the tables and you’ll likely come across what you want. I’ll wrap it for you when you find it. Just now I’m busy.”

Betty looked desperately at Bobby, who was listening over the top of her book, and stifled a desire to laugh.

“I don’t want a book,” she insisted gently. “I want to ask you a question. About Bob Henderson. You know you were interested in the records of the Oliver County almshouse, and you thought you might know something of his people.”

The old man pushed his spectacles up on his forehead fretfully and regarded the girl impatiently from a pair of nearsighted blue eyes.

“The books weren’t worth anything,” he told her seriously. “I spent near a day going over ‘em, and there wasn’t a volume worth bringing back with me. Folks get the idea in their heads that a book’s worth money just because it is old. ‘Tain’t so—I could fill my tables and shelves with old trash and still not have any stock. Jim Turner don’t know a valuable book from a turnip.”

Mr. Hale gave every indication of returning to the absorbing volume before him, and Betty plunged in hastily with another question.

“You know a boy named Bob Henderson, don’t you?” she urged.

“Yes, he was in here some time last week,” answered Hale calmly. “Was it Wednesday, or Tuesday—that load of old almanacs was delivered that same afternoon.”

“Well, I’m a friend of his.” Betty almost stuttered in her eagerness to explain before the old man should be lost again in his book. “He worked on the farm where I spent the summer, and he told me about you and how anxious he was to see you and find out about his people. I’ve been anxious, too, to learn if he reached Washington and whether he is here now. Do you know?”

Now that the shopkeeper’s mind was fairly detached from his printed page he

seemed to be more interested in his caller, and though he did not offer to get Betty a chair, he looked about him vaguely as though he might be seeking a place for her to sit.

“I don’t mind standing. I mustn’t stay long,” she said hurriedly, afraid to let him fix his attention on outside objects. “Didn’t Bob Henderson say where he was going? Did he mention anything about leaving Washington?”

“Well, now let me see,” considered the old man. “Bob Henderson? Oh, yes, I recollect now how he looked—a manly lad with a frank face. Yes, yes, his mother was Faith Henderson, born a Saunders. That’s what caught my eye on the almshouse record book. Years ago I traced the Saunders line for a fine young lady who was marrying here in Washington. She wanted a coat of arms, and she was entitled to one, too. But there was a break in the line, one branch ending suddenly with the birth of Faith Saunders, daughter of Robert and Grace. I never forget a name, so when I read the almshouse record and saw the name of this lad’s mother there I knew I had my chart complete. Yes, the boy was interested in what I could tell him.”

Betty, too, was interested and glad to know that Bob had succeeded in finding the old bookseller and learning from him what he had to tell. But if Bob was still in Washington, she wanted to see him. He could doubtless tell her what to do in case she did not hear from her uncle within a few days—and Betty was growing exceedingly anxious as no answer came in reply to her telegram. And above all, she wanted to see an old friend. The Littells were kindness itself to her, but she craved a familiar face, some one to whom she could say, “Do you remember?”

“Didn’t Bob say where he was going?” she urged again.

“Going?” Mr. Hale repeated the question placidly. “Oh, I believe he went to Oklahoma.”

Oklahoma! Betty had a sudden wild conviction that her thoughts had been so centered on that one locality that she was beginning to lose her mind and imagine that every one repeated the word to her.

“Did you—did you say Oklahoma?” she ventured. “Why, how funny! I have an uncle out there in the oil fields. At least we think he is in the oil fields,” she added, a sudden look of worry flashing into her eyes. “It seems so funny that Bob should go away off there.”

The old man peered up at her shrewdly.

“Aye, aye, funny it may be,” he croaked. “But suppose I should tell you I advised the lad to go there? Would that seem funny, eh?”

Betty stared in complete bewilderment.

“Oh, it isn’t always in the story books, sometimes it happens to real boys,” he nodded exultantly. “Suppose I told you, in strictest confidence, young lady, for I think you’re a true friend to him, that he has relatives out there? His mother’s two sisters, both of ‘em living on the old homestead? Neither of ‘em married and without near kith or kin so far as they know? Suppose I tell you that the old farm, as I locate it, is in the oil section? Suppose the lad is entitled to his mother’s interest in the place? Eh? Suppose I tell you that?”

He made a question of each point, and emitted a dry cackle after every assertion.

“I told the lad to go out there, and if he had any trouble proving who he was to come back here to me,” said Hale importantly. “I can help him straighten out the tangles. I’ve untied many a knot for families more tangled up than this. So he may be back, he may be back. Drop in any day, and I’ll tell you whatever I know.”

Betty thanked him warmly and he followed the girls to the door, repeating that he would be glad to tell them everything he knew.

They were going to one of the large shops to do a few errands for Mrs. Littell, and since their visit to the bookstore had taken so long they agreed to separate and each do one or two commissions and then meet at the door within half an hour.

Betty’s mind was busy with the astonishing revelations Lockwood Hale had made, and as she deftly matched wool for a sweater, she turned the information over in her mind.

“I don’t believe Bob has gone so far West at all,” she said to herself firmly. “He wouldn’t have money enough, I’m sure. I suppose he has written to me, but my mail will go to the farm, of course, and Mr. Peabody would be the last person to forward it. I must write the postmaster to hold and redirect my mail—when I know where I am to be.”

Although she had promised herself not to worry, Betty was becoming very anxious to hear from her uncle. She had written to the Benders in Laurel Grove and to Norma Guerin at Glenside, explaining her situation and asking them to let her know as soon as the quarantine in Pineville should be lifted. She knew that she could visit friends there indefinitely. But that did not much lighten the burden. Anxiety for her uncle and growing fear that she might never again hear from him, it had already been so long a time since his last letter, at times oppressed her.

Their chopping finished, she and Bobby were reunited and were glad to enter the car and drive quietly home to luncheon. It was still raining, and they found the other girls impatient for their return.

“We know all about beaten biscuit,” boasted Esther. “And I stirred up a gold cake every bit myself.”

“Practising all done,” reported Louise. “And I’m just aching for a good lively game. No wedding stuff, Libbie, I warn you. I can see a romantic gleam in your eye.”

Libbie said nothing then, but after lunch when they were debating what to do, she had a suggestion.

“Let’s play hide-and-go-seek,” she said enthusiastically.

“Well, I didn’t know you had that much sense,” approved Bobby, who was blunt almost to a fault but undoubtedly fond of her younger cousin. “Come on, girls, we’ll have one more good game before the family begin to hint I’m too old for such hoydenish tricks. We’ll go up to the attic and make as much noise as we can.”

CHAPTER XVII

MORE SIGHTSEEING

Libbie waited till they were safely in the attic before she followed up her suggestion.

“I read the loveliest story last summer,” she said dreamily. “It was about a bride __”

A shout of laughter from the listening girls interrupted her.

“I knew there would be a bride in it somewhere,” rippled Bobby. “Now, Libbie, once and for all, this is hide-and-go-seek, not a mock wedding.”

“You might let me finish,” protested Libbie. “I only meant to say this story was about a bride who ran away from her wedding guests for fun and hid in a great carved chest; the chest had a spring lock and it closed tight when she pulled it down. Her husband and all the guests hunted and hunted, and they never found her. Years and years after, when they opened the chest, there were only some bones and the wedding dress and veil.”

“And you call that a lovely story!” Bobby’s scorn was immeasurable. “Well, I think it’s gruesome. And what kind of housecleaning did they have in those days? My mother opens every chest and trunk and box in the house at least twice a year.”

The game started merrily, and, forewarned by Libbie’s story, the girls knew exactly where to find her when she hid from them and unerringly pulled her out of every chest into which she hopefully squeezed her plump self.

“You never should have mentioned ‘chest’ to us,” laughed Betty, when Libbie was “it” for the third time. “We know your line of reasoning now, you see.”

Libbie good-naturedly began her counting, and Betty looked about for a good place to hide. The attic was long and wide and a splendid place to play. It was rather too well lighted for hide-and-seek, but the trunks and boxes arranged neatly around the walls offered a fair chance to escape detection. A peculiar fan-

shaped box near a window attracted Betty's attention, apparently being a built-in box.

"I'll hide there," she resolved, running lightly over to it.

Louise and Esther and Bobby were already stowed away in various corners, and Betty slipped into the box noiselessly. Libbie ceased counting.

The three Littell girls reached "home" without being detected, and then perched merrily on an old trunk to watch Libbie prowl about after Betty. A five-minute search failed to reveal her, and Libby gave up.

"All safe, you may come in!" they called in unison.

No Betty appeared, and they shouted again.

"Well, if that isn't queer!" Louise looked at Bobby in doubt. "Where do you suppose she is hiding?"

Bobby, a furrow of anxiety between her eyes, searched the attic with level glances, her sisters and cousin watching her apprehensively.

"Something must have happened to her," Louise was beginning, when Bobby gave a cry and raced for the door.

"I'll bet I know where she went," she flung over her shoulder. "Haven't time—to stop—don't bother me–-" She flew down the stairs, the others after her at top speed.

Down, down, down, through the third, second and first floors, the four girls fled like a whirlwind, down, always following flying Bobby, to the laundry in the basement where modern electric equipment made washing clothes a scientific process.

Bobby brought up her mad flight before a tall cupboard in one corner, turning the catch on the door, opened it and out tumbled— Betty!

"Are you hurt?" demanded Bobby, helping her to her feet. "Oh, Betty, darling, do say you're all right! It's a wonder you weren't suffocated or didn't break any bones."

“I’m all right,” said Betty, smoothing out her skirts. “But I’m still a bit dazed. It was such a sudden drop. What have I done that I shouldn’t, Bobby?”

Libbie, too, was bewildered, and stared at the disheveled Betty with puzzled wonder.

“Why, my dear child,” explained Bobby, with a funny maternal manner, “you fell down the laundry shoot. It opens into the attic for good ventilation. I’m glad there were some soiled clothes at the bottom for you to land on, otherwise you might have had a bad bump. Sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, indeed,” insisted Betty. “I thought I was climbing into a box and went in feet first without looking. Instead of hitting the floor, I slid gently on and on. I hadn’t any breath to scream with I went so fast. Anyway, there wasn’t time to scream. I just sat here for a time after I landed. And I was wondering where I was and how I could get out when you opened the door for me.”

That ended the game for the day, and the rest of the afternoon the girls were content to spend quietly, Betty in writing a long letter to Mrs. Arnold, one of her mother’s old friends who had moved to California, and the others with books and sewing.

The next morning was fair and sunny, and before breakfast Bobby had it planned that they should spend the day at Mount Vernon. Of course Betty and Libbie were very anxious to see the famous place, and the three sisters were glad to have the opportunity to take them for the first time.

“It’s never the same again,” explained Louise, obligingly tying Esther’s hair-bow for her. “There’s a wonderful thrill you get when you see the things that really were Washington’s and were handled by him that never comes again. Though we love to go there and never tire of looking at the rooms.”

“What a chatter-box you are, child!” expostulated her mother, who had come up to tell them breakfast was ready. Indeed the gong had sounded fully fifteen minutes before. “How nice you look, all of you! I’ll be proud to take five girls to Mount Vernon. We’re going to-day, aren’t we?”

Dear Mrs. Littell! Betty already loved her dearly, as indeed did every member of the household. She was so unaffected, so affectionate and generous, and she allowed money to change her simple, happy nature not at all. The Littells had not

always been wealthy, and the mistress of the beautiful mansion did not hesitate to tell of the days when she had done all of her own housework and taken care of two babies.

Soon after breakfast the party started, the plan to go by motor being abandoned in favor of the trip down the river. It was decided that Carter should come down later with the car and bring a basket luncheon, taking them home in the afternoon.

Mount Vernon is sixteen miles below Washington, and the sail down the Potomac was delightful in the cool of the morning, and Betty thought she had never seen anything more beautiful than the deep greens of the trees and grass on either bank. By common consent the boatload of chattering people became silent as they came in sight of Mount Vernon, and as the glimmer of the house showed white between the trees. Betty's heart contracted suddenly. Louise, who was watching her, squeezed her arm sympathetically.

"I know how you feel," she whispered. "Mother told me that the first time she went abroad and dad took her to see the Colosseum she cried. You're not crying, are you, Betty?"

Betty shook her head, but her eyelashes were suspiciously damp.

Libbie was staring in unaffected enjoyment at the scene before her and fairly dancing with impatience to be off the boat.

"I do want to see Martha Washington's things," she confided, as they went ashore. "Her ivory fan and her dishes and the lovely colonial mahogany furniture."

"George Washington's swords for mine," announced Bobby inelegantly. "I've seen 'em every time I've been here, and I'd give anything to have one to hang in my room."

"Bobby should have been a boy," remarked Mrs. Littell indulgently. "You're mother's only son, aren't you, dear?"

"Well, my name is as near as I'll ever come to it," mourned Bobby. "However, I manage to have a pretty good time if I am only a girl."

Mrs. Littell led them first to the tomb of Washington. The plain brick building was directly at the head of the path leading from the landing, and a reverent group stood, the men with bared heads, for a few moments before the resting place of the Father of his Country.

High above the river, overlooking the land he loved, stands the Mount Vernon mansion. From the tomb the Littell party went directly to the house.

Each of the girls, although interested in the whole, showed her personality distinctly in her choice of special relics.

It was Betty who lingered longest in the library, fascinated by the autographed letters of Washington, his tripod used in surveying, and his family Bible. Bobby had to be torn bodily from the room which contained the four swords. Esther spent her happiest hour in the old kitchen, admiring the huge fireplace and the andirons and turnspit.

Louise and Mrs. Littell were able to go into raptures over the old furniture in Martha Washington's bedroom and sitting room, though they, of course, had seen it all many times before.

Mrs. Littell herself had a collection of antique furniture of which she was justly proud, and mahogany furniture was sure of her intelligent appreciation. Strange to say, Libbie remained cool toward the very things she had voiced a desire to see, and in the middle of the morning they missed her.

They were on their way to the barn Washington's father had built, and Betty volunteered to run back and see if the missing girl had stayed behind in the house.

CHAPTER XVIII

BETTY UNDERSTANDS

Betty hurried back and began a hasty inspection of the rooms. She recollected seeing Libbie upstairs at the door of Washington's room the last time she had definitely noticed her, and she ran upstairs to see if she might not be there.

No Libbie was in any of the rooms.

Downstairs she searched hurriedly, peeping under people's elbows, trying not to annoy others and yet to make a thorough hunt in a short time so as not to keep the others waiting. Then in the music room, or East Parlor, as it is often called, she found the truant, gazing with rapt eyes at the quaint old harpsichord which had belonged to Nellie Custis.

"Every one is waiting for you," announced Betty, pulling her gently by the sleeve. "Come on, Libbie, we're all going. We've seen the whole house."

Libbie followed in a sort of daze, and when they rejoined the others she seemed to be still in a brown study.

"For goodness sake," prodded Bobby impatiently, "what were you doing back there? We nearly went off and left you. Where did you find her, Betty?"

"I was in the music room," announced Libbie with dignity. "I wanted to see the harpsichord. Say, girls, did you know Washington gave that to Nellie Custis when she was married? He wore his uniform when he gave her away, and—"

"Well, for pity's sake!" Bobby's disgust was ludicrous. "Trust Libbie to dig up a romance wherever she goes. What else did you find connected with weddings, Lib?"

Libbie was inclined to be ruffled, but Mrs. Littell soothed the troubled waters by telling them that the old barn, which they had reached by this time, was built in 1733 by Washington's father and that the bricks were supposed to have been imported from England.

The beautiful old formal garden further mellowed their tempers, for it was impossible to say sharp things walking along the very paths which George Washington had often trod and between the rows of box brushed by the silken skirts of Mrs. Washington. Where her rose bushes used to be are planted others, and Mrs. Littell assured the girls that it was one of the great pleasures of the First Lady of the Land to gather rose leaves for her potpourri jars and to make a perfumed unguent for which she was famous among her friends.

“She was a wonderful housekeeper,” added Mrs. Littell, smiling at Libbie, whose momentary resentment had quickly faded, “and a very fine manager. We are told that she was thoroughly domestic in her tastes and that she made her husband ideally happy.”

Presently Carter came with a hamper of luncheon and their appetites did full justice to Mammy Lou’s dainties. Betty wondered, sitting on the grass, the Potomac flowing lazily several feet below, whether she was dreaming and might not wake up to find herself at Bramble Farm with Mr. Peabody scolding vigorously because something had not gone to suit him. She often had this odd feeling that her present happiness could not be real.

This, too, brought the thought of her uncle to her mind, and again she wondered if she would ever hear from him—if something dreadful had not happened to him, leaving her almost as much alone in the world as Bob Henderson. She shivered a little, then resolutely threw herself into the chatter of the other girls and soon forgot all but the present pleasure and excitement.

After rambling about the grounds another hour or so, the party from Fairfield was ready to go, and they all found it restful to lean back in the comfortable car and spin back to the city.

“If you’re not too tired I think we might drive down Pennsylvania Avenue,” suggested Mrs. Littell. “Our guests haven’t seen the White House yet, have they?”

Neither Betty nor Libbie had, and as the car turned into the famous thoroughfare both girls sat up alertly so as not to miss a single sight of interest. Carter slowed down as they approached a high iron fence, and at the first glimpse of the white mansion separated from the fence and street by a wide stretch of lawn, Libbie shouted joyfully.

“The White House!”

“Well, you needn’t tell everybody,” cautioned Bobby. “Think of the weddings they’ve held in there, Libbie!”

“I imagine any one who has ever seen a picture of the White House recognizes it instantly,” said Betty, fearing a resumption of cousinly hostilities. “How beautiful the grounds are.”

“You must go through it some day soon,” said Mrs. Littell. “And now we’ll drive to the Capitol. Day after to-morrow would be a good time for you to take the girls to the Capitol, Bobby.”

The Capitol reminded Libbie of a pin tray she had at home, and awoke recollection in Betty’s mind of a bronze plaque that had been one of Mrs. Arnold’s treasures in the stiff little parlor of the Pineville house. All good Americans know the White House and the Capitol long before they make a pilgrimage to Washington.

On their arrival at Fairfields they found Mr. Littell playing solitaire, and something in his undisguised relief at seeing them made Betty wonder if time did not hang heavily on his hands.

After dinner Bobby proposed that they turn on the phonograph and have a little dance among themselves.

“Oh, that will be fine!” cried Betty.

“Then you can dance?”

“A little—mother taught me.”

So the girls danced and had a good time generally for an hour or more, with Mr. and Mrs. Littell looking on. Then Betty sank down on the arm of Mr. Littell’s chair.

“I’ve been thinking of something,” she half whispered. “Do you like to play checkers? If you do, I know how.”

Maybe Mr. Littell understood that she was doing it largely to keep him company.

But he said nothing, and they played checkers for nearly two hours. Betty was a fairly good player and managed to land several victories.

“With a little more practice you’ll make a very good player,” declared Mr. Littell. “I appreciate your staying to play with a cripple like me,” he added gratefully. “Does your Uncle Dick play?”

“I don’t really know,” replied the girl, and now her face clouded for an instant. Oh, why didn’t she hear from Uncle Dick?

The next few days were filled with sightseeing trips. Betty was kept too busy to have much time to worry, which was fortunate, for no word came from her uncle and no word reached her from Bob Henderson. The Guerins and the Benders wrote to her, and each letter mentioned the fact that Bob had sent a postal from Washington, but that no later word had come from him.

“I met Peabody on the road yesterday,” ran a postscript to Norma Guerin’s letter, written by her doctor father. “He hinted darkly that Bob had done something that might land him in jail, but I couldn’t force out of him what fearful thing Bob had done. I hope the lad hasn’t been rash, for Peabody never forgives a wrong, real or fancied.”

Betty knew that the farmer’s action had to do with the unrecorded deed, but she did not feel that she should make any disclosures in that connection. Of Bob’s innocence she was sure, and time would certainly clear him of any implication.

The girls visited the Capitol, seeing the great bronze doors that are nineteen feet high and weight ten tons. Betty was fascinated by the eight panels, and studied them till the others threatened to leave her there over night and call for her in the morning. Then she consented to make the tour of the three buildings. But the historical paintings again held her spellbound. When she reached the Senate chamber, which was empty, except for a page or two, the Senate not being in session, she dropped into a gallery seat and tried to imagine the famous scenes enacted there. They spent the better part of a day at the Capitol, and saw practically everything in the buildings. They were so tired that night that Libbie went to sleep over her dessert, and Betty dreamed all night of defending the city with a shotgun from the great gilded dome. But she and Libbie agreed that they would not have missed it for anything.

CHAPTER XIX

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING

“That’s twice you’ve made a wrong play, Betty,” observed Mr. Littell. “What lies heavy on your mind this evening?”

Betty blushed, and attempted to put her mind more on the game. She was playing checkers with Mr. Littell, whose injured foot still kept him a prisoner most of the time, and she had played badly all the evening, she knew. Truth to tell, she was thinking about her uncle and wondering over and over why she did not hear from him.

After the rubber was played and the other girls who had been around the piano, singing, had gone out to get something to eat, for the maids had the evening off, Betty spoke to her host.

“I suppose you think I’m foolish,” she ventured; “but I am really worried about Uncle Dick now. He has never answered the telegram and the two letters I’ve written. His Philadelphia lawyer writes that he is waiting to hear from him. He seems to have dropped out of the world. Do you think he may be sick in some hospital and not able to communicate with us?”

“That’s a possibility,” admitted Mr. Littell soberly. “But I tell you honestly, Betty, and not simply to relieve your mind, that I consider it a very remote one. Business men, especially men who travel a great deal, as you tell me your uncle does, seldom are without somewhere on their person, their names and addresses, and directions about what is to be done in case of sickness or accident. I never travel without such a card. Ten to one, if your uncle were ill or injured, his lawyer would have been notified immediately.”

A weight of anxiety slipped from Betty’s heart, for she immediately recognized the sound common sense in this argument. Still, something else was troubling her.

“Don’t you think,” she began again bravely, “that I had better go to Pineville? The quarantine is lifted, I hear, and the Bensingers will take me in till I can hear from Uncle Dick. You and Mrs. Littell and the girls have been so lovely to me,

but—but—” her voice trailed off.

Mr. Littell leaned back in his chair and lit a fresh cigar.

“Well, now of course,” he said slowly, “if you feel that you want to go to Pineville, we really have no right to say anything. But if I were you, I’d stay right here. Your uncle may be intending to come back to Washington. In any case, he will address his letter to you here. Of that much we are certain. You’ll hear more quickly if you don’t move about. Besides, there is that Henderson lad. I’m counting on making his acquaintance. He’s likely to bob up any day—though I didn’t mean to pun. If you want my advice, Betty, it is to stay here quietly with us and wait as patiently as you can. We like to have you, you know that. You’re not a stranger, but a friend.”

He went on to explain to her in his quiet, even, matter-of-fact way, that to the disturbed girl was inexpressibly soothing, his belief that her uncle was on an exploration trip for oil and might easily find a month’s accumulation of mail awaiting him on his return.

“It’s only here, in the heart of civilization, that we think we can’t live without four mails a day,” Mr. Littell concluded. “I’ve been out of touch with a post-office for three weeks at a time myself, and our sailors, you know, often go much longer without letters.”

On one particularly lovely morning the four girls, with Mrs. Littell, started off on the pleasant mission of seeing the White House. Betty’s and Libbie’s acquaintance with it was confined solely to the glimpses they had had from the street, but Louise and Bobby had attended several New Year’s receptions and had shaken hands with the President.

The party spent a delightful morning, visiting the famous East Room, admiring the full length portraits of George and Martha Washington, about which latter the story is told that Mrs. Dolly Madison cut it from its frame to save it from the approaching enemy in 1814. They were also fortunate to find a custodian taking sightseers through the other official apartments so that they saw more than the casual visitor does in one visit. They visited in turn, the Green Room, the Red Room, and the Blue Room, saw the state dining-room with its magnificent shining table about which it was easy to imagine famous guests seated, and enjoyed a peep into the conservatory at the end of the corridor. They did not go

up to the executive offices on the second floor, knowing that probably a crowd was before them and that an opportunity to see the President on the streets of the city was likely to present itself.

“Well, I shouldn’t want to live there,” sighed Betty, as they came down the steps, “It is very grand and very stately, but not much like a home. I suppose, though, the private rooms of the President and his family are cozy, if one could see them.”

“Beyond a doubt,” agreed Mrs. Littell.

They lunched at one of the large hotels, and afterward Mrs. Littell had a club engagement. The girls, she announced, might spend the afternoon as they chose, and she would pick them all up at five o’clock with Carter and the car.

“Esther and I want to see ‘The Heart of June,’” announced Libbie, who found romance enough to satisfy her in the motion-pictures.

Louise was interested, too; but Betty had promised to take some papers for Mr. Littell and see that they reached an architect in one of the nearby office buildings. Bobby elected to go with her, and they decided that, that errand accomplished, they might do a little shopping and meet the others at the theater door at five o’clock.

“Mr. Waters won’t be in till three o’clock,” announced the freckle-faced office boy who met them in the outer office of the architect’s suite.

“Then we’ll have to come back,” decided Betty, glancing at her watch. “It is just two now.”

“You can leave anything with me,” said the boy politely. “I’ll see that he gets it as soon as he comes in.”

“Yes, do, Betty,” urged Bobby. “Dad would say it was all right to leave that envelope of papers. They’re not terribly important.”

“We can do our shopping and then come back,” insisted Betty, to the evident disgust of Bobby and the hardly less concealed impatience of the office boy.

“Why wouldn’t you leave ‘em?” demanded Bobby, when they were once more

in the street.

“Dad hasn’t any secret service stuff, I’m sure of that. Now we have to come all the way back here again, and that means hurrying through our shopping.”

“You needn’t come,” said Betty mildly. “Your father asked me to give those papers personally to Mr. Waters. He didn’t say they were important; I don’t know that they are. But if I say I am going to give an envelope personally to any one, I don’t intend to give that envelope to a third person if there’s nothing in it more valuable than—hair nets!”

The window they were passing suggested the comparison, and Bobby laughed good-naturedly and forebore to argue further. Promptly at three o’clock she and Betty entered the elevator in the office building and were whirled up to the fifth floor to find Mr. Waters in his private office.

“Mr. Littell telephoned half an hour ago,” he told them, taking the envelope and running over the papers with a practised eye as he talked. “He hoped to catch you before you left here. I believe he wants to speak to his daughter. There’s a booth right there, Miss Bobby.”

Bobby had a brief conversation with her father and came out in a few minutes in evident haste.

“He wants us to do a couple more errands, Betty,” she announced. “We’ll have to hurry, for it’s after three.”

The architect had written a receipt for the papers, and Bobby now hurried Betty off, explaining as they went that they must take a car to Octagon House.

Octagon House proved to be the headquarters for the American Institute of Architects, and Bobby’s errand had to do with one of the offices. Betty admired the fine woodwork and the handsome design of the house while waiting for her companion, and in less than fifteen minutes they were back on the street car bound for “the tallest office building in Washington,” as Bobby described it.

“Dad wants an architectural magazine that’s out of print, and he thinks I can get it there,” she said. “Afterward, if we have time, we’ll go to the top of the building. The root is arranged so that you can step out, and they say the view is really splendid. Not so extensive as from the Monument, of course, but not so

reduced, either. I've always wanted to get up on the roof and see what I could see."

Finding the office her father had specified did not prove as easy a task as Bobby had anticipated, and she said frankly that if she had been alone she would have given up and taken another day for the search.

"But if you can keep a promise down to the last dot of the last letter, far be it from me to fall short," she remarked. "Oh, Betty, do you see any office that looks like Sherwood and David on this board?"

At last they found it under another name, which, as Bobby rather tactlessly told the elevator boy, was not her idea of efficiency. The copy of the magazine Mr. Littell especially wanted was wrapped up and placed safely in Bobby's hands.

"And now," declared that young person gaily, "as the reward of virtue, let's go up on the roof. It is after four, but we'll have time if we don't dawdle. We can get from here to the theater in fifteen minutes."

They started for the elevator, and as a car came up and the gates opened a boy got off. He would have brushed by without looking up, but Betty saw him at once.

"Bob!" she cried in amazement "Why, Bob Henderson!"

CHAPTER XX

MUTUAL CONFIDENCES

“Betty! Oh, Betty! *Betty!*” Bob Henderson’s familiar, friendly voice rose to a perfect crescendo of delight, and several passengers in the elevator smiled in sympathy.

Bobby Littell, who had entered the car, backed out hastily and the gate closed.

“Bobby, this is Bob Henderson,” Betty performed a hasty introduction. “And, Bob, this is Roberta Littell, always called Bobby.”

The latter held out an instant cordial hand to Bob.

“I know about you,” she proclaimed frankly. “Betty thinks you are fine. We ought to be good friends, because our names are almost alike.”

“I must talk to you, Bob,” said Betty hurriedly. “Where are you going? Have you heard from Bramble Farm or Uncle Dick? How long have you been in Washington? Did you get out to Oklahoma?”

Bobby laughed and touched Betty on the arm.

“There’s a seat over by the elevator,” she suggested. “Why don’t you sit there and talk? I’ll come back and get you at a quarter to five— I want to get some new hair-ribbons for Esther.”

“But you wanted to go up on the roof!” protested Betty, longing to talk to Bob and yet mindful of Bobby’s first plans.

“Plenty of other days for that,” was the careless response. “See you quarter to, remember. Good-by, Bob—though I’ll see you again, of course.”

She disappeared into a down elevator, and Betty and Bob sat down on the oak settle in the corridor.

“Wasn’t it lucky we met you!” exclaimed Betty, getting a good look at the boy

for the first time. “Seems to me you’re thinner, Bob. Are you all right?”

“Couldn’t be better!” he assured her, but she noticed there were rings under his eyes and that his hands, white enough now in contrast to the tan which still showed at his wrists, were perceptibly thinner. “Fact is, I work in this building, Betty. Kind of junior clerk for a man on the fourth floor, substituting while his clerks are away on vacation. Hale got me the place.”

Betty told him of her interview with the old bookshop man, and Bob listened intently.

“So that’s how you heard about Oklahoma,” he commented. “You could have knocked me down with a feather when you said it. I guess Hale forgot I was working here—he really is dreadfully absent-minded—or else he thought you weren’t to be trusted with so important a secret. He’s as queer as they make ‘em, but he was very good to me; couldn’t seem to take enough pains to trace out what he knew of my mother’s people.”

Bob went on to explain that his money had given out and that he had to work in order to get together enough to pay his fare out to the West and also to board himself and pay for some new clothes. Betty guessed that he was scrimping closely to save his wages, though she did not then suspect what she afterward learned to be true, that he was trying to live on two meals a day, and those none too bountiful. Bob had a healthy boy’s appetite, and it took determination for him to go without the extra meal, but he had the grit to stick it out.

“When Bobby comes back you must go with us and meet Mrs. Littell,” observed Betty. “She’ll want to take you home to dinner. Oh, Bob, they are the loveliest people!”

Bob shifted his foot so that the patch on one shoe was hidden.

“I’ll go with you to meet her on one condition,” he said firmly. “I won’t go to dinner anywhere to-night—that’s flat, Betty. My collar isn’t clean. And who are the Littells?”

That led to long explanations, of course, and Betty told in detail how she had left Bramble Farm, of the mix-up at the Union Station, and her subsequent friendship with the hospitable family. She also told him of Mr. Gordon’s sudden trip to Oklahoma and his almost inexplicable silence, but kept to herself her worry over

this silence and as to her own future if it continued. She gave him the latest news of the Benders and the Guerins and handed over the two letters from these friends she happened to have in her purse that he might read and enjoy them at his leisure. In short, Betty poured out much of the pent-up excitement and doubt and conjecture of the last few weeks to Bob, who was as hungry to hear as she was to tell it.

“They certainly are fine to you!” he exclaimed, referring to the Littells. “There isn’t another family in Washington, probably, who would have been as kind to you. I think you’ll hear from your uncle soon, Betty. Lots of times these oil wells, you know, are miles from a railroad or a post-office. You take that Mr. Littell’s advice—he sounds as if he had a heap of common sense. And whatever they’ve done to you, you’re looking great, Betty. Pretty, and stylish and—and different, somehow.”

Betty blushed becomingly. She had brightened up amazingly during her stay in Washington, despite her anxiety about her uncle and, lately, Bob, The serene and happy life the whole household led under the roof of “Fairfields” had a great deal to do with this transformation, for the bickering and pettiness of the daily life at Bramble Farm had worn Betty’s nerves insensibly. She tried to say something of this to Bob.

“I know,” he nodded. “And, Betty, what do you think? I met the old miser right here in Washington!”

Instinctively Betty glanced behind her.

“You didn’t!” she gasped. “Where? Did he—was he angry?”

“Sure! He was raving,” replied Bob cheerfully. “What do you think he accused me of this time? Stealing an unrecorded deed! Did you know anything about that, Betty?”

Betty described the incident of her delayed letter and told of the morning she had picked it from the floor and hung up Mr. Peabody’s coat.

“He insists you took it, but I never believed it for one moment,” she said earnestly. “I’m sure Mrs. Peabody doesn’t either; and I didn’t think Mr. Peabody really thought you took it. You know how he flies into a temper and accuses any one. But if he came down to Washington and said pointblank to you that you

took it, it looks as if he thought you did, doesn't it?"

"You wouldn't have any doubts if you had heard him," Bob said grimly. "He had me by the coat collar and nearly shook my teeth loose. Perhaps he expected to shake the deed out of my pocket. What on earth does he think I could do with his old deed, anyhow?"

Betty explained the transaction of the lots as Mrs. Peabody had explained it to her, and Bob understood that the farmer, basing his reasoning on his own probable conduct under similar conditions, suspected him of intended blackmail.

"How did you get away from him?" asked Betty presently. "Where did he shake you? Couldn't you call a policeman?"

"He wanted a policeman," said Bob, chuckling. "He walked me about two blocks, hunting for a cop. Then a crowd collected and I decided it was better to wriggle out, and I did, leaving the only coat I owned in his hands. But I never go out without looking up and down the street first. I don't want to be arrested, even if I didn't steal anything. Besides, with Peabody, I have a feeling that he might be able to prove whatever he wanted to prove."

"You've bought a new suit," said Betty irrelevantly. "You don't suppose Mr. Peabody will stay in Washington, hunting for you, do you?"

"If he doesn't have to pay too much for board he will," said Bob. "That deed evidently means a lot to him. I wish I could find it, if only to send him back to the farm. I'll bet a cookie it's in some of his coat pockets this minute, and he hanging down here to nab me. Sure, I bought a new suit—had to, before I could get a job. By the way, Betty, if you need some cash—" He patted his pocket invitingly.

"Oh, I have enough," Betty assured him hastily. "I'd feel better if the Littells would only let me spend a little money. Why, what's this?"

For Bob had put a small white envelope into her reluctant hands.

"That's the loan," he said gravely. "I've carried it just like that for days, ready to give you the first time I saw you. You're a great little pal, Betty. If it hadn't been for you, I never should have got to Washington."

Betty put the money away in her purse, conscious that it meant self-denial on the lad's part, but knowing that she would hurt his pride irreparably did she refuse to take it.

"Have you written to Mr. Bender?" she prodded gently. "You promised to, Bob."

The police recorder had taken a warm interest in Bob, and Betty knew from his wife's letters that he was anxious to hear from him.

"I will write," promised Bob. "I'm tired at night, Betty, and that's the truth. I never seem to get enough sleep. But I will write, perhaps this Sunday."

"Well, folks, all talked out?" called Bobby's gay voice, and she came smilingly up to them. "Betty, mother and the girls are downstairs in the car. I met them on the way and they know all about our meeting with Bob. Mother wants him to come home to dinner."

Bob replied that while he appreciated Mrs. Littell's kindness, he could not come that night, and, as he followed Bobby to the elevator, gave Betty a significant glare which, correctly interpreted, read: "Don't forget what I told you!"

Mrs. Littell took to Bob at once, and the bevy of girls, simple and friendly and delightfully free from selfconsciousness, adopted him at once as Betty's friend and theirs. When the mother found that he could not be persuaded to come home with them that night—and Betty loyally supported him, mindful of the collar—she would not be satisfied until she had arranged for him to spend the next Saturday afternoon and Sunday with them at "Fairfields," promising to send the car in for him at noon, so that he might have lunch with them.

"Betty hasn't tried her riding habit on once," said Mrs. Littell when Bob had promised to come. "Perhaps when you come out the girls will find time to give her, her delayed riding lesson. They've been doing Washington pretty thoroughly."

This reminded Betty of Bobby's plan to visit the roof of the office building, and Bob had the same thought.

"Couldn't you all come in to-morrow morning and let me take you up on the roof?" he asked them. "The view is really worth while, and I'm up there anyway half the morning looking after my employer's experiments. He is head of a dye

house, and is always trying the effect of sunlight on new shades."

So it was decided that the girls should come in again in the morning. Then they drove away home, and Bob went on his errand. Luckily he had been told that he need not return to the office that afternoon after its completion, or he might have found himself involved in a maze of explanations and excuses for his lengthy absence.

CHAPTER XXI

THE ACCIDENT

“I’d like to live up here!” It was Esther who spoke so enthusiastically, as she stood, with Bob Henderson and the four girls, on the roof of the building proudly pointed out as the tallest in Washington.

A soft breeze was blowing, and it was a cloudless day so that the city was clearly spread before them.

“Wouldn’t I like to go up in an airplane!” exclaimed Betty. “See, they’re flying over the Navy Yard now. I’d give anything to know how it feels to fly.”

“If you go much nearer that edge you’ll know how it feels all right,” Bob warned her. “Come down here and I’ll show you our drying racks. Perhaps that will keep your mind off airplanes.”

The wooden racks held lengths of silk and cloth, weighted at the ends to keep them from blowing away. The materials were dyed in crude, vivid colors, and Bob explained that they were brought from the factory after being dipped so that his employer might personally observe the changes they underwent after exposure to strong sunlight.

“We only take orders and send out salesmen from the office downstairs,” he said. “The factory is near Georgetown and employs about two hundred hands.”

After they had made the circuit of the roof, picking out familiar landmarks and wrangling lazily over distances and geographical boundaries, they were ready to go down. Bob must return to work, and the girls had planned a trip to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing.

“I tell you I was glad our office wasn’t on the top floor this morning,” Bob casually remarked as they stood waiting for the elevator. “Something was the matter, and everybody had to walk up. The fourth floor was plenty far enough up for us then.”

“Mother always says we don’t appreciate conveniences till we have to do

without them," said Bobby. "Here comes the car."

The grinning negro boy who operated the elevator smiled a wide smile as they filed into his car.

"You-all get a nice view?" he asked sociably.

They assured him that they had, and he seemed pleased, but his red light glowing at that moment, he gave all his attention to stopping at the next floor. Two women got on and, at the next floor, two men.

The gate had just closed after this last stop, and Betty had opened her mouth to tell Bobby that her hat was tipped crookedly when with a sickening speed the car began to drop!

"We's slipping! I can't stop her! Oh, good gracious, the brakes or nothin' don't work!" The frenzied wail of the negro who was working valiantly at his levers gave the first intimation of danger.

Betty saw Bob spring to his aid, saw Esther sink in a miserable little white heap to the floor, Bobby put her hands up to her eyes as if to shut out the light, and Louise mechanically try to defend herself from the strangle hold of the woman who stood next to her. It seemed minutes to Betty that the car was falling, and she watched the others' behavior with a curious, semi-detached interest that was oddly impersonal. One of the men passengers began to claw at the gate frantically and the other kept muttering under his breath, softly and steadily, biting off his words crisply and quite unconscious of what he was saying. The woman who had clutched Louise was silent at first, but her companion instantly screamed, and in a fraction of a second she, too, was screaming.

Now Betty had never heard the sound of women in terror, and she was unprepared for the wild anguish of those shrill voices.

The experience was terrifying, but it was all over very swiftly. The mechanism jammed between the third and second floors and the elevator came to a stop with a suddenness that jarred the teeth of the passengers. It had begun to fall after leaving the seventh floor.

For a moment every one stared at every one else stupidly. Bobby Littell was the first to find her voice.

“Well, I guess we’re all here,” she observed matter-of-factly. “Esther, are you hurt?”

“No-o, I think not,” said Esther slowly. “Wasn’t it awful! Let’s get out of here, quick.”

A hasty investigation proved that no one was injured, and as one of the men said, shaken nerves could not be allowed to count.

“That was a narrow escape, a mighty narrow escape!” said the other man. “I fully expected to be smashed in the wreck of the car when it struck the concrete well.”

“I’ll never ride in another elevator, never!” ejaculated the woman who had seized Louise. “Why, I’ll dream of this for weeks to come.”

The girls said nothing, though their lips were white and Betty’s knees were trembling. She was rather angry that she should feel this loss of control after everything was over, but it was natural.

“How do we get out?” Bob addressed the operator briskly. “Can you open the doors? Come on now, nothing is going to hurt you—the danger is over.”

The poor darky was actually gray with fright, and his face was bruised where he had been thrown against the grating when the car stopped.

“I doan know how you-all kin get out, Boss,” he said tremulously. “We’s stuck between the floors.”

“Hello! Hello you, down there! Anybody hurt?” a friendly bellow came down to them from the grating of the floor above.

A crowd had collected on each floor, having heard the screams, and all these people now ran downstairs to get as close to the stranded car as they could. They collected about the gate on the third floor, and many from the street, hearing that there had been an accident, crowded around the shaft on the second floor. They were advised that no one was hurt and what was needed was a way of escape from the brass cage.

“Knock a hole in the roof,” some one advised cheerfully. “You can crawl out on

the top of the car and then shinny your way up to us. Or we'll let down a rope to you."

"What'll we knock a hole in the roof with?" demanded Bob, and when offers were made to drop an axe down to him he had difficulty in calming the woman who had so nearly strangled Louise, and who had visions of being accidently decapitated.

"I cain't get the doors open," announced the darky, after tinkering vainly with them. "I reckon the lock's done got jammed. If I could get 'em open the lil girl under the seat could shinny up the wall and that would be one out, 'tannyrate."

Attention thus focused upon her, Libbie crawled from under the seat where she had dived, following an ostrich-like impulse to hide her head from coming danger. Her confusion was increased by the tactless comment of the operator who, seeing her "full view" for the first time, exclaimed:

"Lawsy, Missie, you couldn't shinny up no wall. You is too fat."

Many suggestions were forthcoming, all of them impractical, and the already frayed nerves of the passengers began to show evidence of reaching the snapping point. Bob's employer was among those who had gathered in the corridor, and he decidedly favored the axe idea.

The plan to chop their way out gained in favor, and a boy had been dispatched for one of the fire axes when the woman who had grasped Louise created a diversion by going into hysterics and declaring that she would not have them dropping axes on her head. Her companion tried in vain to soothe her, but she was in a highly nervous state and it was impossible to explain or reason with her. She began to scream again, and this was more than those imprisoned in the car with her could be expected to stand.

"That settles it—call off the axe!" shouted the older man, exchanging a desperate glance with Bob. "If this goes on much longer we'll be floated out on a river of salt tears. It's all right, Madam, they are not going to send any axes down."

The women continued to sob violently for a time, but at last they got her quieted and were free to consider other ways and means of escape.

Pat Kelly, the genial engineer of the building, was sent down to the basement to

see what he could do with the refractory machinery, for although the elevator people had been telephoned to, their men had not yet put in an appearance. Pat's contribution was to create a horrible din by hammering on every pipe he came to, stopping at three-minute intervals to yell, "Can ye be moving now?"

"Call that man off!" shouted the younger of the two men passengers. "What do you think this is—a boiler factory? About all the good he'll do will be to dislodge the car, and we'll fall the rest of the way."

This was a bad suggestion, and only by hard work were two more cases of hysterics averted.

"I think what we need is a drink of water," declared Betty timidly. "Do you think they could get some down to us? And, Bob, why don't they send for the fire department?"

"I suppose because we are not on fire," answered Bob seriously. "What good could the firemen do?"

"Oh, I don't know," said Betty vaguely. "Only in Pineville the firemen get people out of all sorts of scrapes. They can climb you know, and they have long ladders and ropes–-"

"By George, the girl is right!" The elder man looked at Betty admiringly. "Hey, some of you who want to help! Go and 'phone the fire department. And say, send us down some water—we're dry as dust after this rumpus."

Half of the waiting crowd scattered to telephone to the fire department and the other half ran for the water coolers. Their zeal outstripped their judgment in this latter service, and the result was an icy stream of water that poured into the car.

CHAPTER XXII

BEING RESCUED

The water struck the lady given to hysterics, and she promptly opened her mouth and shrieked again.

“We’re drowning!” she cried, her terrified mind picturing a broken water pipe. “I tell you, we’re drowning!”

“And I tell you we’re not!” Betty stifled a desire to laugh as one of the men contradicted her. “Some idiot—”

The crash of the water cooler against the top of the car as it slipped from the hands of the person holding it interrupted his assurance and weakened it hopelessly. A chorus of shrieks arose from those in the car.

“Well, there’s your drink, Betty,” grinned Bob, assisting the girls to crowd on to the one seat, for the floor was soaked with ice-cold water. “And here come your firemen—maybe they’ll have better luck.”

Some of the firemen went to the third floor and others obeyed orders to stay on the second.

“I’d say knock ‘er down,” said the grizzled old fire chief after a careful inspection of the wedged car. “We’ll fix it up to break the fall. And, anyway, a drop from the third to the basement would not be dangerous.”

But the occupants of the elevator protested vigorously against this plan. They made it quite clear that they had had all the “drop” they wanted for that day, and some of them intimated that they preferred to spend the night there rather than be experimented with.

“Women is like that,” they heard the fire chief confide sadly to his lieutenant. “You can’t reason with ‘em. Well, we’ll have to dope out another scheme.”

After a consultation, it was proposed, via the chiefs voice which had a carrying quality that was famous throughout the city, to let a ladder down from the third

floor, have a fireman chop a hole in the top of the car, and assist the prisoners up the ladder to safety.

This plan met with the approval of all but the two rather prim and elderly women who flatly refused to walk up a ladder, even to get out of their present unpleasant predicament.

“Well, then, you’ll have to stay here,” announced the fire chief disgustedly. “The others are willing, and we can’t hang around here all day. If there was a fire you wouldn’t be consulted. A fireman would have you up or down a ladder before you could open your mouth to object. I ain’t used to arguing with anybody.”

“There’s another way that might work, chief,” suggested his aide. “If we can fix ropes and rig up a windlass, we can maybe hoist the car up to the level of the gate.”

It was decided to try this plan, but the wily chief first extracted a promise from every one in the car that if the scheme failed, they would submit to a ladder rescue.

“‘Cause I ain’t saying this will work, and I don’t aim to cook up a different plan every minute till you’re all suited,” he declared, with commendable precaution. “You all agree to the ladder if this ain’t a go?”

An unanimous chorus assured him that they did.

It took some time to arrange the ropes, but at last, creakingly and slowly, the car began to make its ascent.

“Bless the Lord!” ejaculated the darky operator fervently, “I done guess our troubles is ovah!”

He changed his mind in a minute when it was discovered that the car gates were jammed. There the eleven imprisoned passengers stood, on a level with the third floor, a crowd gathered in the corridor as far as the eye could see, a thin iron grating separating them from escape.

“I don’t know but I’d just as lief stay here as to face that mob,” murmured Bob, but some one heard him.

“You’re among friends, bub,” a man called. “Keep up a stout heart.”

There was a general laugh, and some one was dispatched to get a file. Ten minutes’ work with this, and the stubborn catch was filed through, the gates slid back and those behind them found themselves once more on good solid mosaic tiling.

Bob’s employer came up to him, and was presented to the girls. He was a pleasant, prosperous-looking man, middle-aged, and evidently fond of Bob. He immediately offered him the rest of the day off, insisting that after such an experience he should rest quietly for a few hours.

“By the way,” he remarked *sotto voce*, “those two young men over there at the head of the stairs are newspaper reporters. One has a camera. I imagine they want to get a story on your morning’s sensations.”

Bob had not yet met Mr. Littell, but he had a lively idea of what that gentleman might say should he find his daughters’ pictures spread over the first page of the evening papers, accompanied by a more or less accurate analysis of their emotions during the trying period through which they had just passed.

“Whisk us into your office, can’t you, Mr. Derby?” he urged, “They’re stopping people as they go down; they’ll take no notice of us if we go on up to the fourth floor.”

The crowd, satisfied that no one had been killed or was likely to be, had drifted down the staircase, the two alert youths questioning each one in an effort to get the stories of those who had been in the stalled car. The negro operator had already furnished enough copy for a half-column of thrills.

Mr. Derby managed to usher the girls and Bob upstairs to his office without exciting suspicion, and once there the question of how to get to the street was considered. There were still enough people in the corridors to make a quick run down impossible, and the elevator was, of course, out of commission.

“I’ll tell you,” said Mr. Derby suddenly. “Go down the fire escape to the second floor and get in at the hall window. It’s always open. I’ll have to wait here for Anderson, Bob. He had an appointment at eleven, but telephoned he was delayed. But perhaps the nerves of the young ladies are not equal to a climb down the fire escape? In that case you could all remain here and I’ll have lunch

sent in."

The girls, however, ridiculed the idea of nervousness. And indeed, with the elasticity of youth, they had already dismissed the accident from their minds except as an exciting story to tell at home that afternoon or evening.

"I'll go first," said Bob, stepping out on the fire escape. "All there is to do is to take it easy, don't hurry, and don't push. There's only two flights, so you can't get dizzy."

"Isn't this a lark!" chuckled Bobby, as she and Betty waited for the younger girls to go first after Bob. "I never had so much fun in my life. What's Bob stopping for?"

Bob was working with the window directly over the fire escape on the second floor. The girls caught up with him before he turned with a flushed face.

"The blame thing's locked," he announced. "Isn't that the worst luck! It's a rule of the building that all hall windows be left open unless there's a storm. Well, I suppose we might as well go back. There's no window on the first floor."

"We could climb in there," suggested Betty, pointing to another window, half-opened. "See, Bob, I can reach it easily."

She drew herself up before Bob could stop her, and, raising the window as high as it would go, scrambled over the sill.

"It's fine—come on in," she laughed back at the others. "Cunning office and no one in it. I suppose the owner has gone out to see us rescued."

Bob lifted up Libbie, who was the shortest, and, one after the other, the girls climbed in, Bob following last.

It was a finely furnished office and one Bob had never been in, though he had a speaking acquaintance with many of the tenants in the building. A pair of tiny scales and a little heap of yellow dust lay on the highly polished mahogany desk.

The door into the corridor was partly open, and as they had to pass the desk to reach the door, it was natural that the group should draw nearer and glance curiously at the pair of scales.

“No nearer are you to come!” snapped a sharp voice with the precision of a foreigner who is not sure enough of his English to speak hurriedly. “I warn you not to put a finger out.”

Libbie squawked outright in terror, and the others fell back a step. A little man with very black eyes stood facing them, and at them he was leveling a small, businesslike looking revolver. The door had closed noiselessly, and he had evidently been behind it.

“I saw you all to enter,” he informed them sternly. “I, of all in the building, remembered that it is in excitement that sneak thieves do their best work. Mr. Matthews is trusting, but I—I stood on guard. It is well. You are not to move while I telephone to the police.”

“Look here,” said Bob determinedly, almost overwhelmed with his responsibility and blaming himself for having placed the girls in such an awkward position. “We’re no thieves. You can telephone upstairs to Mr. Derby and he’ll vouch for us.”

“I know no Mr. Derby,” said the little man stubbornly. “Why should you pick out a jeweler’s office and creep in through the window? Answer me that! Are there not stairs?”

“Well we wanted to avoid some—er—men,” blurted Bob.

“Yah—already the police seek you!” triumphed their captor. “Well, they will not have long to seek.”

“They were not the police.” Betty found her voice and spoke earnestly. “They were reporters, and we didn’t want to be interviewed. We came down the fire escape from the fourth floor, and found the hall window locked. This window was open, and we crawled in, intending to get out into the hall. That is the absolute truth.”

CHAPTER XXIII

ANOTHER RESCUE

The black eyes of the little man suddenly disappeared. They were so bright and glistening that their disappearance was noticeable. He had closed them tight and was laughing!

As suddenly as he had laughed, his mirth stopped, and he stared sternly at the anxious Betty.

“You expect me to believe that?” he asked incredulously.

“It is true,” she said quietly.

“True—bah!” The vehemence of his tone quite startled her. “True! When all you had to do to reach the first floor—had access to the street been your object—was to let down the folding flight to the ground.”

Betty’s jaw dropped. She and Bob looked at each other helplessly.

“We—we never thought of that!” she faltered.

It was true. In her excitement she had not noticed the folding flight of steps that let down to the ground in an emergency, and for protection against sneak thieves was always drawn up except during fire drills. Bob had been equally careless. As for the Littell girls, like docile sheep, they had never thought to question their leaders.

Still keeping the revolver pointed at them, the little man took down the telephone receiver.

“Bob!” whispered Betty. “Oh, Bob, this is dreadful! What will Mrs. Littell say? And those reporters! If they get hold of this, the elevator story will be nothing.”

Bobby and Louise and Esther and Libbie stood in a forlorn group, their gaze fixed trustingly on Bob and Betty, whom they trusted to get them out of this scrape somehow.

As for Bob, he was handicapped by numbers. He could easily have planned a way to get himself and one girl out of the room, but to hope to spirit away five substantial maidens under the black eyes fastened unwaveringly upon him, was too great a problem for quick solution. He did not fear trouble in establishing their innocence, but the notoriety accompanying such an episode could not be otherwise than distinctly unpleasant.

“I suppose that’s gold dust in the tray,” thought Bob wretchedly. “Of all the poor luck, to pick out an office with gold dust floating around as free as air! Why didn’t the dub lock it up in his safe?”

The little man was having trouble to get “Central.” He jiggled the hook frantically in flat defiance of all telephone rules, and he shouted loudly into the transmitter, as though enough noise could rouse the number he sought.

Just at this moment the outer door opened and a man entered. He was a man of middle age with a closely clipped gray moustache and kindly gray eyes. It was Mr. Matthews, the owner of the business.

The little man, seeing him, flung the receiver into the hook with a bang and poured forth a volley of French, emphasized by wild gestures.

After listening for a few moments, Mr. Matthews turned a wondering gaze on the group of subdued looking young people. His expression soon turned to one of amusement.

After a word or two in French to the little man, evidently of thanks for his zeal, he said to Bob and the girls:

“Won’t you please tell me your side of the story? I find it hard to believe that you have set forth to rob and steal.”

The tale came out with a rush, Bob, Betty, and Bobby taking turns or all talking together, the others, fortunately, being content to let the three tell the story.

Mr. Matthews was sympathetic and apologetic, but he was also amused, and he laughed heartily. It seemed he knew Mr. Littell. The “robber band,” as Bobby afterwards named them, laughed with him; in fact, in their relief, laughing till the tears came. The black-eyed man, meanwhile, left the room, still, evidently, suspicious of them.

“Monsieur Brissot,” explained Mr. Matthews, “is a Belgian diamond cutter who has just come to this country. He seems to be suspicious of everybody, and, I fear, does not always use judgment in his handling of such matters. I am grateful, however, for the interest he takes in my business, and trust you young people will overlook his excess of zeal.”

Mr. Matthews showed them to the door, and as by this time the reporters were well away intent on other affairs, they went out of the building in the regular way-a more seemly way than scuttling down fire escapes and breaking into jewelry shops, so Betty declared.

“Well, good gracious!” observed Bobby, when they were once outside. “If this hasn’t been an exciting morning! First we get nearly killed, then we’re rescued, and next we’re almost arrested.”

They boarded a street car and went to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing, where they spent an interesting afternoon touring the immense plant, the best equipped of its kind in the world.

The recital of their adventures at the dinner table that night provoked mingled merriment and concern.

“Never mind, it will teach ‘em self-reliance,” Mr. Littell insisted, when his wife protested that the girls would have to be more closely chaperoned on subsequent trips. “Falling into scrapes is the finest lesson-book ever opened to the heedless.”

Sunday morning the girls and Mrs. Littell motored to Washington and attended services in one of the fine old churches. There they had an excellent opportunity to observe the President of the United States and his wife, who, as Libbie said disappointedly at dinner that day, “looked just like anybody.”

“I hope you didn’t expect them to get up and make a speech?” teased her uncle. “However, I’m glad you saw them, my dear. A country where the head of the government ‘looks just like anybody’ and goes to church as simply and reverently as any one else is the finest in the world.”

Early in the new week Bobby announced that it was their duty, meaning the girl contingent, to go into the city and pay a call upon a friend of the Littells’ who was staying with an aunt at one of the large hotels. They had met them at church, and a tentative promise had been given, which Bobby was determined should be

kept.

“If it wasn’t for me this family would have no manners,” she scolded. “Now, I don’t like Ruth Gladys Royal a bit better than you do, Louise; but I hope I know what is the right thing to do.”

Mrs. Littell, who was hopelessly unfashionable as far as conventions that were merely polite went, announced serenely that she was going to her sewing circle and that if the girls chose they might go calling. Her engagement stood.

“Mother thinks Ruth Royal is snobbish,” commented Bobby, as her mother serenely departed for the little sewing circle of the country church in which she maintained a keen interest and which she virtually supported. “As far as that goes, I think she is. But Louise told her we’d come and call on her, and I think a promise ought to be kept.”

“Well, I’ll go with you if Betty will,” said Louise. “I don’t see why you pick out a perfectly lovely afternoon to martyr us all in, but if it must be done, let’s get it over with. Esther and Libbie have wheedled dad into taking them to the movies, and I suppose we can go in the car with them.”

The three ascended the stairs to put on their best bibs and tuckers and came down again to find Mr. Littell and the other two girls joyously arranged on the back seat, with Carter having hard work to keep from smiling at their jokes and quips.

“How elegant we look,” jeered Mr. Littell, whose injured foot was still stiff but who began to talk about returning to his office. “I don’t suppose you could be persuaded to go to see ‘The Rose-Pink Curtains’ with us, and have a sundae afterward?”

Bobby shook her head sternly.

“Don’t tempt us when we’re having a hard time to do our duty,” she admonished. “We have to go to see Ruth Royal; honestly we do. But we’ll meet you for the sundae; won’t we, girls?”

It was arranged that they should meet at quarter to five, and then the three callers were set down before the ornate hotel entrance. Just off the lobby was a pretty, richly furnished parlor where they decided to wait while they were being

announced.

“Let’s hope she isn’t in,” suggested the irrepressible Louise. “Then we’d still have time to see ‘The Rose-Pink Curtains.’”

Betty sat nearest the door and from her seat she could see a section of the lobby and one of the elevators. The boy who had taken their names came back in a few minutes with the information that Miss Royal and her aunt were out.

“The clerk says they left word at the desk that they expect to be back about half-past seven to-night.”

“All right, that excuses us,” declared Bobby cheerfully, hardly waiting till the boy had left the room. “Come on, girls, we’ll go to the movies. Betty, for mercy’s sake, what are you staring at?”

Betty had risen and was peering through the velvet portieres. She turned and put a finger to her lips, then drew Bobby close to her.

“Look out there in the corridor, over by the desk,” she whispered. “See that man who is shouting at the clerk?”

“I hear him,” admitted Bobby, screwing up her eyes and peeping through the curtains. “What do you suppose he is arguing about?”

“That,” announced Betty, unintentionally dramatic, “is Joseph Peabody!”

The girls had heard about Joseph Peabody, a little from Betty, and more from Bob, who had spoken freely to their father. They knew about his miserly nature and they were acquainted with the fact that he believed Bob had stolen something that did not belong to him. The real story of the unrecorded deed both Bob and Betty had told only to Mr. Littell. It was characteristic of Bobby’s loyal nature that her first thought should be for Betty.

“You don’t suppose he is down here after you, do you?” she whispered, clutching Betty by the elbow in a sudden panic. “Oh, Betty, suppose he wanted to drag you back to Bramble Farm?”

Betty had to laugh, in spite of the anxiety she was feeling.

“He has no authority over me,” she explained. “Besides, he would have no earthly use for me if my board wasn’t paid in advance.” Her face clouded involuntarily as the thought of her missing uncle thus came to her mind. “No,” she went on, “I’m terribly afraid that he is here looking for Bob. You know he threatened to have him arrested that time Bob managed to escape him. I wonder if I can’t get to a ‘phone booth without being seen and telephone to Bob or Mr. Derby.”

Louise rather impatiently pushed her sister aside that she might take a peep at the unconscious Mr. Peabody. As she put her eye to the crack between the curtains she uttered a little shriek that she tried to stifle with her hand.

“Betty!” she cried so shrilly that those in the lobby must have heard her if the harsh call of a siren outside had not sounded opportunely. “Betty, here comes Bob!”

Sure enough, in through the revolving door, neatly dressed and looking every inch the intelligent young junior clerk, came Bob Henderson, his eyes glued to a letter he had taken from his pocket.

Betty would have given even her hope of a letter from Oklahoma to have been able to call a warning. Instead, she had to stand helplessly by and watch the lad walk directly to the desk, where he put a question to the clerk. Instantly Joseph Peabody whirled and had the boy by the collar.

“Got you at last, you young imp!” he chortled gleefully. “This time I don’t calculate to let go of you till I land you where you’re going —behind the bars. That is, unless you hand over what you’ve got of mine!”

Several people turned to stare curiously, and Betty sympathized acutely with the crimson-faced Bob, who was protesting hotly that he had nothing belonging to Peabody.

“You stay here,” she ordered Louise and Bobby. “There’s no need of you mixing in this. I’m going to see if I can help Bob.”

She sped across the hall to the desk, followed by her two faithful shadows, who were determined to stand loyally by.

“Well, I swan, if it isn’t Betty!” ejaculated the farmer when he caught sight of

her.

CHAPTER XXIV

BOB IS CLEARED

“Betty, you stay out of this,” commanded Bob sternly. “If there’s going to be a scene, two actors will be a-plenty. You go away and take the girls with you.”

The clerk who had been regarding them curiously over his ledger now took a hand.

“If this argument is likely to be prolonged,” he suggested sarcastically, “I’d advise you either to go up to your room, Mr. Peabody, or into that card room there. That’s deserted in the day time.”

“Yes, come on in here,” said Betty, anxious to get away from the gaze of the other guests. She led the way into the card room which opened off the lobby and was preferable to making a public journey in the elevator. “Close the door, Louise.”

Mr. Peabody kept his hold on Bob’s collar and from time to time he shook him vigorously, whether with the idea of shaking the stubbornness out of him or merely to indicate that he held the whip hand, Betty was undecided.

“You can let go of Bob,” she said heatedly, as soon as they were in the room with the door shut. “He isn’t going to run away.”

“I’ll see that he doesn’t,” was the grim reply. “You hand over that deed, young man, or I’ll call a policeman in two minutes.”

“I tell you I haven’t got it!” protested Bob desperately. “I never saw the thing. What would I be doing with a paper of yours? I haven’t got it, and that’s all there is to it.”

“Of course he hasn’t!” For the life of her Betty could not keep still, though perhaps caution dictated that she hold her tongue. “I know he hasn’t that deed, Mr. Peabody. And having him arrested won’t give you what he hasn’t got.”

“How do you know he hasn’t got it?” demanded the farmer. “Deeds don’t walk

off and hide themselves, young lady. Bob happens to know why I want that deed. And if he doesn't produce it, and that mighty quick, he'll find himself where they can shake the truth out of him with no fooling."

Bobby sprang to her feet from the leather chair where she had curled up to listen to the proceedings.

"I'll telephone my father," she cried. "He'll help Bob to sue you for false arrest. If you have some one arrested and it is found he didn't do what you said he did, he can sue you for damages. I've heard my father say so. Don't you care, Bob, Daddy will find a way to beat this horrid old man."

An unpleasant smile spread over the mean, shriveled face.

"Is that so?" queried Joseph Peabody. "Well, I don't know who you are, Miss, but you need a lesson on how to keep a civil tongue in your head. All the fine friends Mister Bob has picked up in Washington won't stand by him long when they find out he's a poorhouse rat and a runaway at that. There'll be some explaining for you to do before the almshouse authorities are satisfied, young man."

Betty's anger flamed as the familiar odious phrase fell from the farmer's lips, and added to her anger was the crystallized fear that had been haunting her for weeks. She did not know whether Bob could really be returned to the poorhouse or whether it was another trick of Peabody's, but she feared the worst and dreaded it.

"You try to return Bob to the poorhouse!" she cried, her cheeks blazing, her hands clenched. She took a step toward Peabody and he fell back, dragging Bob with him so that a chair stood between them and the furious girl. "You try to return Bob to the poorhouse, and I'll tell every one what I know about that deed," flared Betty. "I know all about the Warren lots and the kind of sale you forced through. You—you—" to her distress and amazement, Betty burst into tears.

"Don't cry, dear," whispered Bobby, putting her arm around her. "Daddy won't let them do anything to Bob. You see if he does."

Joseph Peabody was apparently impervious to verbal assaults and tears.

“Once more I ask you,” he shook Bob violently, “are you going to hand over that paper? Yes, or no?”

“I tell you I haven’t got it,” said Bob doggedly. “Shaking my teeth out won’t help me get a paper I never saw in my life. As for having me arrested, you keep up this racket much longer and the hotel authorities will send for the police on their own responsibility.”

Peabody picked up his hat.

“All right, you come along with me,” he said sourly. “You won’t go before a soft-headed police recorder this time, either. You’ll find out what it means to face a real judge.”

He was marching Bob toward the door when a sharp rap sounded. Louise, nearest the door, had the presence of mind to open it. A bellboy stood there with a telegram on a tray.

“Telegram for Mr. Joseph Peabody,” he announced impassively, his alert eyes darting about the room from which such angry voices had been coming for the last quarter of an hour.

“All right—give it here.” The farmer snatched the yellow envelope and shut the door in the boy’s face without making a motion to tip him.

His back against the door, to prevent Bob’s escape, Joseph Peabody slit the envelope and read the message. The others saw his jaw drop and a slow, painful flush creep over his face and neck.

“I’m called back to Bramble Farm right away,” he mumbled, refusing to meet their gaze. “Being hurried, and having so much to tend to, I’m willing to drop the matter of having you arrested, Bob. But let this be a lesson to you, to hoe a straight row.”

Bob stared at the man stupidly, frankly bewildered. But Betty’s quick wit solved the sudden change of front. She had seen how quickly Peabody folded up the telegram when he had read it.

“Isn’t that a message from Mrs. Peabody?” she demanded crisply. “And doesn’t she say she’s found the deed? Where was it—in one of your coat pockets?”

The farmer was taken by surprise, and the truth was shocked out of him.

“She’s found it under the seat in the old market wagon,” he blurted. “I recollect I put it there for safekeeping, meaning to take it over to the deposit box the next day. Well, I’ve wasted more time an’ money in Washington than I like to think of. Got to go home and make up for it.”

Without another word or glance, without the shadow of an apology to Bob, he swung out of the room and strode over to the desk. In a moment they heard his harsh voice demanding the amount of his bill.

Bob looked at Betty, who stared back. Louise and Bobby were equally silent. Then Betty snickered, and the tension was broken. Peal after peal of laughter rang out, and they dropped helplessly into chairs and laughed till they could laugh no longer.

“Oh, dear!” Betty sat up, wiping her eyes. “Did you ever see anything like that? He never said good-by, or admitted that he’d made a mistake, or—or anything! What do you suppose people in the hotel must think of him?”

That reminded Bobby of the girl they had come to see and who was really responsible for their visit to the hotel.

“The first kind thing Ruth Royal ever did for me,” she declared frankly. “I wouldn’t have missed seeing Mr. Peabody for worlds.”

“How did you ever happen to come here, Bob?” asked Betty, who had been wondering about this ever since she had seen Bob walk right into the one man he most wished to avoid.

“I brought a letter from Mr. Derby for one of the guests stopping here,” explained Bob. “That reminds me, I haven’t delivered it yet. Peabody threw me off the track. I’ll turn it in, and then I’ll have to hurry back to the office; they’ll think I’ve been run over for sure.”

He went off, promising again to see them on Saturday, and the girls, feeling too upset to settle down to the quietness of a motion picture house, went out to walk up and down in the sunshine of Pennsylvania Avenue until it was time to meet Mr. Littell and Libbie and Esther.

Of course they had much to tell them, and Mr. Littell in particular was a most appreciative listener. He was genuinely fond of Bob and interested in him, and he got quite purple with wrath when he learned of the indignity he had suffered at the hands of the ill-bred farmer.

“Then he went off and never had the grace to ask the lad’s pardon!” sputtered the builder when Betty reached the end of her recital. “I wish I had him by the collar —just for three minutes. Perhaps I wouldn’t drive a little of the fear of justice into his narrow mind!”

They had lingered over their ice-cream, and although Carter drove at a good speed, they found that unless they hurried they would be late for dinner. It was one of Mrs. Littell’s few unbreakable rules that the girls must change into simple, light frocks for the evening meal, and they went directly upstairs to take off their street clothes,

When they came down dinner had been announced and they went directly to the table. They had so much to tell Mrs. Littell and she was so interested that it was not until they were leaving the table that she remembered what she had meant to ask Betty as soon as the girl came in.

“Betty, darling,” she said comfortably, “you found your letter on the hall table all right, didn’t you?”

“Why, I never thought to look for mail,” returned Betty in surprise. “No, Mrs. Littell, I didn’t stop in the hall. Was there a letter for me?”

Mrs. Littell nodded and swept her family across the hall into the living-room, saying something to her husband in a low voice. Betty hurried to the console table where the mail was always laid on a beaten silver tray. The solitary letter lying there was addressed to her. And the postmark, she saw as she picked it up, was a town in Oklahoma!

CHAPTER XXV

FUTURE PLANS

Betty's first impulse was to run up to her room and close the door. Then she sat down on the edge of the bed and tore open the envelope eagerly. She read the half dozen closely written sheets through twice, thrust them back into the envelope, and ran down to tell the Littells the good news.

"I've heard from Uncle Dick!" she cried radiantly, facing them as they turned at her entrance. Betty's vivid personality often betrayed her mood without a word, and to-night she was vibrant with happiness so that she fairly glowed. "He has just got back to Flame City, where he found the telegram and my letters. And he wants me to come out to him, as he expects to be there for the next few months. He's been on a long prospecting trip, and he can't get East till his company sends out another representative. You may read the letter!"

She thrust it into Mr. Littell's hands and buried her head on Mrs. Littell's broad shoulder.

"I'm so happy!" she choked, while the motherly hands smoothed her hair understandingly.

"It's been so long, and I was afraid he might have died—like my mother. I don't think I could stand it if Uncle Dick should die—he's the only one who belongs to me."

"Why, Betty, child!" Mrs. Littell gathered her into her lap and rocked her gently as though she had been a little child. "You're nervous and unstrung. We ought to have taken better care of you and not let this waiting wear you out so."

"If you're going to cry, Betty, so'll I," promised Bobby, putting an awkward arm around Betty's neck. Bobby was as undemonstrative as a boy and rarely kissed any one. "What in the wide world are we going to do without you?"

Betty sat up and pushed the damp hair from her forehead. The four girls were regarding her dolorously.

“I won’t stay forever,” she assured them. “Uncle Dick doesn’t intend to live out there, you know. The company he represents will likely send him East this very winter.”

“Well, that’s a mighty interesting letter,” commented Mr. Littell, folding up the missive and returning it to Betty. “Though you’re going to leave a hole in this household, Sister, when you set sail. You see, he’s been out of sight and hearing of trains and post-offices for a long time. I’d like to be able to lose myself in the desert or a wilderness for a month or two. Think of having no telephone bell to answer!”

The next morning a letter came to Mr. Littell from Mr. Gordon, thanking him warmly for his kindness to Betty, containing the assurance of the writer’s lasting gratitude, and asking him if he and his wife would oversee her preparations for the journey, help her engage a berth, and start her on her way. A generous check was enclosed, and Mrs. Littell and the girls immediately set about helping Betty do the necessary shopping, while Mr. Littell engaged her reservations on the Western Limited. She had decided to leave the following Wednesday, and when Bob came out to spend the week-end, he immediately announced his intention of going too.

“I figure out Flame City is the nearest station to my aunt’s old place. I have enough money saved now, and there’s no reason why I should stay on here. Hurrah for Oklahoma!”

The preparations went forward merrily after that, and Wednesday found Betty on the Western Limited, bound for Flame City. What happened to her there and her experience in the great oil fields will be told in another volume to be called, “Betty Gordon in the Land of Oil; or, The Farm That Was Worth a Fortune.”

Bobby insisted that they make the week-end at Fairfields a farewell celebration to be remembered, and the six young people managed to get the maximum of enjoyment out of every hour. Bob had been brought out to Saturday luncheon, and as soon as he had heard about the Oklahoma trip and announced his own plans, Louise insisted that Betty was to have a lesson in riding.

“Of course you’ll want to ride out West,” she said. “They all do in pictures. Come on out to the barn, and we’ll get the ponies out.”

A stable boy brought out a gentle, coal-black pony, and Betty mounted him

trustingly.

“Why, it’s lovely!” cried Betty, enjoying the sensation to the full. “He goes like a rocking chair, bless his heart! I’m sure I can learn to ride.”

“Of course you can!” Bobby encouraged her swiftly. “You must try him at a slow canter in a minute. Here comes Esther with the camera.”

A picture of Betty was taken, and then the lesson was resumed. At the close of the afternoon Bobby announced that Betty was in a fair way to become a good horsewoman.

Mr. and Mrs. Littell took them into Washington to the theater that night, and to make up the hours of lost sleep all the young people slept late the next morning.

Instead of going into Washington to church, they all went to the little country church that Mrs. Littell attended and loved, and after the service they spent a quiet, pleasant day about the house and grounds of Fairfields.

That evening the five girls and Bob gathered on the spacious white steps of the house to watch the beautiful Virginia sunset.

“Let’s promise each other,” suggested Betty, her pretty face serious and thoughtful, “to meet five years from now, wherever we may be, and compare notes. We’ll be almost grown up then and know what we’re going to be.”

“No matter how often we meet, or how seldom, five years from to-day we’ll promise to come together,” agreed Bobby. “Here’s my seal.”

She put out her hand and the hands of the six interlocked in a tower.

“To our close friendship,” murmured Betty, as they unclasped.

Then, the sun having set, they went into the glow and welcome of the lighted lamps.

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