

# The Automobile Girls at Palm Beach; Or, Proving Their Mettle Under Southern Skies

Laura Dent Crane

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image

The Girls Sat On the Broad Piazza.

# THE AUTOMOBILE GIRLS AT PALM BEACH

OR

# PROVING THEIR METTLE UNDER SOUTHERN SKIES

By

# LAURA DENT CRANE

Author of The Automobile Girls at Newport, The Automobile  
Girls in the Berkshires, The Automobile Girls Along the  
Hudson, The Automobile Girls at Chicago, etc.

Illustrated

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## Contents

I.	<a href="#">The Land of Dreams</a>	7
II.	<a href="#">A West Indian Squall</a>	21
III.	<a href="#">The Fair Unknown</a>	32
IV.	<a href="#">The Compact</a>	43
V.	<a href="#">The Daughter of Mrs. De Lancey Smythe</a>	51
VI.	<a href="#">The Countess Sophia</a>	64
VII.	<a href="#">Tea in the Cocoanut Grove</a>	75
VIII.	<a href="#">The Warning</a>	87
IX.	<a href="#">A Case of Mistaken Identity</a>	95
X.	<a href="#">The Secret Signals</a>	105
XI.	<a href="#">Wheels Within Wheels</a>	113
XII.	<a href="#">Maud Refuses to Be Rescued</a>	123
XIII.	<a href="#">A Surprise Party</a>	132
XIV.	<a href="#">The Plot Thickens</a>	147
XV.	<a href="#">Caught Napping</a>	154

XVI.	<a href="#">Welcome and Unwelcome Guests</a>	166
XVII.	<a href="#">The Midnight Intruder</a>	179
XVIII.	<a href="#">The Water Fête</a>	189
XIX.	<a href="#">Red Dominos</a>	200
XX.	<a href="#">Conclusion</a>	204

## The Automobile Girls at Palm Beach

# CHAPTER I

## THE LAND OF DREAMS

“I don’t believe anything could be more lovely than this,” exclaimed Mollie Thurston, leaning back in a wicker chair on the piazza of one of the largest hotels at Palm Beach.

“Right you are!” replied her friend, Ruth Stuart, as she gazed across the still blue waters of Lake Worth dotted with pleasure boats. “I can’t decide whether I should like to ride in the automobile, or sail, or just sit in the cocoanut grove and listen to the music. Life seems so easy under a blue sky like this, and there are so many things to do that it is hard to make a choice.”

“What do people usually do at this hour?” Grace Carter asked. “A woman I talked with on the train told me there was a programme of amusements for every hour at Palm Beach.”

“Well, my dear, you have only to gaze about you and see for yourself. It is now high noon,” answered Ruth, consulting her watch.

Grace glanced quickly about her. All along the broad piazza, and under awnings on the lawn, a gay company of men, women and young people were sipping delicious iced fruit drinks in tall, thin glasses.

“It is undoubtedly the witching hour for pineapple lemonades,” said Ruth. “And we must be in the fashion immediately. Papa,” she called to her father, who was immersed in the pages of a New York newspaper several days old, “you are not doing your duty by us. We are getting awfully thirsty.”

Mr. Stuart, clad in white, and looking the picture of comfort, smiled lazily over his paper at his daughter. “Order what you like, my dear. Am I not always at the command of the ‘Automobile Girls’? What do you wish, little lady?” he asked, turning to Barbara Thurston, who had been lost in a day-dream and had heard nothing of the conversation.

“I haven’t any wish,” responded Barbara. “I am too happy to be troubled with wishes.”

“Then suppose I wish for you, Bab?” suggested Ruth. “Go back to your own sweet dreams. I’ll wake you when the wish comes true.”

Presently the four girls were sipping their fruit lemonades like the rest of the world at Palm Beach. On the breeze the sound of music was wafted to them from a morning concert in the distance.

“Where is Aunt Sallie?” Ruth suddenly asked, again interrupting her father’s reading. “This place has bewitched me so that I have forgotten even my beloved aunt. This is the land of dreams, I do believe. We are all spirits from some happy world.”

“Here comes your spirit aunt,” returned Mr. Stuart, smiling. “She has evidently been spirited away by some other friendly spirits.”

The girls laughed as they saw the substantial figure of Miss Sallie Stuart strolling down the piazza. She was walking between two other persons, one a tall, middle-aged man with dark hair slightly tinged with gray, the other a young woman. They were all three talking animatedly.

“Girls, look!” exclaimed Ruth, in suppressed excitement. “Aunt Sallie is with that Maud Warren. You remember we met her at Lenox, Bab, and she tried to ride you down in the famous race. Delightful creature—to keep away from.” Ruth gave a contemptuous sniff, then added. “That nice looking man must be her father.”

“She looks as haughty as ever, and then some more,” said Mollie aggressively.

The girls giggled softly, then straightened their faces for the trio was almost upon them, and it was not safe to indulge in further conversation.

After seeing that his charges were supplied with lemonade, Mr. Stuart had returned to his paper.

“Robert,” broke in Miss Sallie’s dignified voice, “this is Mr. Warren and his daughter Miss Warren. They——”

But at the first word Mr. Stuart had risen and the two men were enthusiastically shaking hands.

“Why, Warren,” exclaimed Mr. Stuart, “I had no idea that you were in this part of the world. The last time I saw you, you were ranching out in Idaho.”

“Quite true,” replied Mr. Warren, smiling, “but that was ten years ago. A great many things have happened since then.” He sighed and looked out over the blue lake. “Mrs. Warren died the next year,” he said slowly. “Maud and I are alone.”

“I am deeply sorry to hear of your great loss,” sympathized Mr. Stuart and his fine face saddened. He too had known that loss.

Turning to Maud who had been exchanging rather distant greetings with the four girls, he said pleasantly. “So this is Maud. She was a little girl in short dresses when last I saw her. How these children do grow up.”

Maud smiled frigidly and for the fraction of a second allowed her hand to touch that of Mr. Stuart. “One must grow up some time, you know,” she murmured.

“I should like to stay eighteen forever,” exclaimed Ruth, with enthusiasm.

“Would you indeed?” remarked Maud Warren, raising her eyebrows. “How odd!”

There was a brief silence. The four girls stared straight ahead and tried to control their desire to laugh. During their stay at Lenox the year before the circumstances of which having been fully told in the “AUTOMOBILE GIRLS IN THE BERKSHIRES,” they had not been impressed with Maud Warren, on account of her disagreeable and overbearing manner. But the blasé air that she now affected, was in their candid eyes extremely ridiculous, and her remark to Ruth had filled them all with unseemly mirth.

Maud Warren, however, serenely unconscious of what was passing through their minds, sank into a wicker chair, and deliberately turning her back upon the “Automobile Girls,” began a conversation with Miss Sallie.

The “Automobile Girls” dated their organization back to almost two years before, when Barbara Thurston had bravely stopped a runaway team of horses driven by Ruth Stuart, a rich western girl, summering in Kingsbridge, the home town of the Thurstons.

A warm friendship had sprung up between Ruth Stuart, Barbara and Mollie Thurston, that resulted in a journey to Newport in Ruth’s red motor car, familiarly known as Mr. A. Bubble. Grace Carter, a Kingsbridge girl, had been asked to complete the quartette of adventurous damsels, while Miss Sallie Stuart, Ruth’s aunt had gone along as chaperon.

After a series of remarkable events their trip ended with the capture of a society “cracksman,” known to the police as the “Boy Raffles.” The “Automobile Girls” then returned to Kingsbridge, where several weeks later, Mr. A. Bubble once more bore them away to the heart of the Berkshires. There they spent a delightful month, in a little log cabin, roughing it. In “THE AUTOMOBILE GIRLS IN THE BERKSHIRES,” the story of the little Indian “ghost” that haunted “Lost Man’s Trail,” and who afterwards turned out to be an Indian princess is charmingly related.

After a winter of hard study, the “Automobile Girls” were again reunited, and in “THE AUTOMOBILE GIRLS ALONG THE HUDSON,” their journey through the beautiful Sleepy Hollow Country is narrated. The eventful weeks spent in the ancestral home of Major Ten Eyck, an old friend of Miss Sallie Stuart’s, ending with their brave fight to save the beautiful old house from destruction by forest fires, made the “Automobile Girls” stand out as true heroines.

The best work since their initial adventure, however, had been done in Chicago, and the record of it, set down in “THE AUTOMOBILE GIRLS AT CHICAGO,” was not yet three months old. While on a holiday visit to Ruth, at her Chicago home, they had been the guests of the Presbys, relatives of the Stuarts, at their country place “Treasureholme.” Owing to imprudent speculation in wheat, both Mr. Stuart and Mr. Presby had become heavily involved and were facing financial ruin. Through the efforts of Barbara Thurston, aided by the other “Automobile Girls” the rich treasure, buried by one of the ancestors, was discovered in time to save the Presby estate.

Before leaving Chicago, Mr. Stuart had promised his daughter and her friends a sojourn at Palm Beach during the month of March. Now the “Automobile Girls” had actually arrived in the “Land of Flowers” eager for any pleasure that sunny Florida might yield them.

The four young girls were unusually quiet as they sat idly looking out over the water. Maud Warren’s arrival had cast a chill over them.

It had been an enchanted land, Barbara reflected rather resentfully, now the enchantment was broken.

Ruth sat covertly taking stock of Miss Warren’s elaborate white lace gown and wondering why young girls ever insisted on aping so called “society” fashions. While Mollie and Grace speculated as to how long a call the Warrens were going to make.



Maud, totally oblivious that she had been weighed in the balance by four stern young judges, and found wanting, languidly conversed with Miss Stuart, in her most grown-up manner.

“Have you met the De Lancey Smythes, Miss Stuart?” she drawled. “They are too utterly charming. Mrs. De Lancey Smythe belongs to an old, old Southern family. She is a widow, with one daughter, Marian, a most delightful young woman. It was only through them that I was persuaded to come here.”

“Indeed,” replied Miss Sallie. “We arrived yesterday. Therefore we have met no one, as yet.”

“Of course not,” agreed Maud. “You really must meet them!”

“I should be pleased to meet any friends of yours, Miss Warren,” replied Miss Stuart courteously.

“By the way, Stuart,” said Mr. Warren, “what do you say to a sail in my launch, this afternoon? I should like to entertain some one besides the De Lancey Smythes. They are too fine for me. I am just a plain blunt man, and can’t stand too many extra frills. Maud, see to it that you don’t invite them. I absolutely refuse to be bothered with them, to-day.”

Maud flushed hotly at her father’s contemptuous allusion to the De Lancey Smythes. But restraining her feelings she turned to Miss Stuart with a forced attempt at graciousness.

“Won’t you come for a sail? It will be awfully good of you.”

“We should be delighted, I am sure,” replied Mr. Stuart, looking gravely at Maud. He then turned a compassionate gaze toward his friend, Mr. Warren. “That is, I mean we shall go with you, provided my sister has made no other plans.”

“Are you sure your launch won’t pitch, Mr. Warren?” inquired Miss Stuart.

“I am perfectly certain, Miss Stuart,” replied the millionaire. “The lake is like a mill pond to-day. There is not a ripple on it.”

While they had been making their plans for the afternoon, a man had been leaning idly against the railing of the piazza. He now strolled quietly away, without having appeared to notice any one of them, or to have overheard any of their conversation.

But Barbara had observed him. She had an unquenchable curiosity concerning faces. And this man appeared indefinitely interesting.

Was it the foreign cut of his dark suit, conspicuous among the crowds of white ones worn by most of the men at Palm Beach? Or was it his strong, clean-shaven face with its rather heavy bull-dog jaw, its square chin, and keen gray eyes, a little too narrow for Bab's taste? Bab did not know, then. But she took in the man's whole expression, and the adverse opinion she silently formed, at that time, she never had occasion to change.

As the party was about to separate for luncheon two women appeared in a nearby doorway and stood looking up and down the piazza.

"Oh, there are dear Marian and her mother!" cried Maud, hurrying over to greet her friends.

"Dear Mrs. De Lancey Smythe," exclaimed Maud, with a defiant look toward her father, "I do so want you to go out with us in our launch this afternoon. Won't you let me introduce some new friends to you, who are going to sail with us?"

Mr. Warren turned red. A look of disappointment, verging on anger crept into his good-natured brown eyes as his daughter deliberately defied him.

The De Lancey Smythes glanced toward the Stuart party, with bored indifference.

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe made some low-voiced remark to Maud who nodded her head slightly. Whereupon mother and daughter moved toward Miss Stuart with an air of haughty condescension.

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe might have been anywhere from thirty-five to forty-five. She was tall, well-proportioned and a decided brunette. At a glance one would have decided her to be very handsome, but close observers would have noted a hard expression about the eyes and mouth that completely destroyed the effect of beauty. As for her daughter, Marian, she was a small, slender insignificant young woman who seemed entirely overshadowed by her mother's personality.

Both mother and daughter were dressed perhaps a shade too elaborately for good taste, and there was something about them that immediately aroused a sense of vague disapproval in the minds of the Stuart party.

“Maud is always so thoughtful of her friends,” murmured Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, turning to Miss Sallie with well simulated appreciation. “She knows how fond we are of sailing.”

Miss Sallie looked sharply at the speaker. The De Lancey Smythes were evidently unaware of Mr. Warren’s animosity toward them. She was about to frame some polite excuse for not going on the launch, hoping to thus nip in the bud the proposed sail, when suddenly meeting Mr. Warren’s eyes, she saw an expression of entreaty in them that made her hesitate.

“I hope you and your ‘Automobile Girls’ will not disappoint me,” he said pleadingly.

“Thank you,” responded Miss Stuart. “We shall be pleased to go.”

With a formal bow to Mrs. De Lancey Smythe and her daughter, Miss Sallie marshaled her little force and left the piazza.

“Very charming people,” remarked Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, to Maud Warren, after they had disappeared. But there was an unpleasant light in her eyes, and a certain tightening of her lips that showed resentment at the manner of her reception by the Stuart party.

“We shall be obliged to play our cards very carefully,” she warned Marian, when in the privacy of their own apartment. “That Miss Stuart seems already inclined to be hostile. As for those girls——”

“I think they’re the nicest looking girls I’ve seen for a long time. Ever so much nicer than Maud Warren,” exclaimed Marian.

“Hold your tongue,” commanded her mother angrily. “Don’t let me hear any more remarks of that kind, or you’ll have cause to regret them.”

Marian relapsed into sulky silence. She knew her mother only too well. Nevertheless she made up her mind to try honestly to make a good impression upon the first girls with whom she had ever wished to be friends.

Mr. Stuart and Mr. Warren did not at once follow their respective charges in to luncheon, but sat down on a wide settee in one corner of the piazza for a long talk. One topic of conversation followed another, until at last Mr. Warren lowered his voice and said:

“Stuart, I am going to ask a favor of you because I need your help more than I

can say. You see," he went on, his face flushing painfully with embarrassment, "I have tried to give my daughter the proper sort of care. I have certainly spared no money in the effort. But what can money, alone, do for a motherless girl?" His voice choked a little. "Perhaps I should have married again, if only on Maud's account. But I tell you, Bob, I couldn't. My wife's memory is still too dear to me. No other woman has ever interested me." He paused a moment, then looked away, while Mr. Stuart patted his shoulder sympathetically.

"And now," went on poor Mr. Warren, shaking his head sadly, "my girl has fallen in with a lot of society people who are doing her more harm than good—for instance, these people you have just seen are among the number. You wonder, perhaps, why I don't like the De Lancey Smythes. No one can deny that they make a good appearance but there's something about the mother that I distrust. She's not genuine, and although she tries to conceal it she's not well-bred. Maud won't believe it, and can't be made to see it. But I can. Now I believe, if she goes about with your four nice, wholesome girls and a fine woman like Miss Stuart, she'll open her eyes a trifle. And I want to ask you, old man, to stand by me and help me out. Ask your girls to help me save my girl from her own foolishness and the influence of just such people as these De Lancey Smythes. Will you help me Stuart, for 'auld lang syne'?"

"Why of course I will, Tom," replied good-natured Mr. Stuart warmly, grasping Mr. Warren's hand. "I'll tell my sister, Sallie, too. She'll know just what to do with Maud."

"But you understand, Bob, we shall be obliged to go at this business tactfully," protested poor Mr. Warren. "I am afraid my daughter is a difficult proposition at times, poor child. But she'll come through all right. She is only nineteen. There's a lot of time yet."

"Oh, Sallie will manage. Trust Maud to her, my friend. And now, let's go in to luncheon," returned Mr. Stuart.

At luncheon, Mr. Stuart repeated his conversation with Mr. Warren to Miss Sallie and the "Automobile Girls."

"I am afraid Maud will be exceedingly difficult to manage," Miss Sallie demurred. "She is a law unto herself. As for those De Lancey Smythes, I shall endeavor to find out something about their social position." Miss Sallie looked about her with the air of a duchess. "But, since you have given your promise to your friend, we will do what we can for Maud."

The girls also promised their aid. And so, for the time being, the matter was settled.

## CHAPTER II

### A WEST INDIAN SQUALL

By half past two that afternoon Mr. Warren's launch with its party of pleasure seekers was well under way.

The "Automobile Girls" had gathered in one end, and were enthusiastically commenting on the beauty of the scenery. Miss Sallie had been conscientiously trying to cultivate Maud Warren, and rather than antagonize her in the beginning had exerted herself to be agreeable to the De Lancey Smythes. Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, however, had other views afoot than the cultivation of Miss Sallie, and had immediately engaged in conversation with Mr. Stuart. Hardly had the launch put out from shore, before she beckoned him to one side of the little deck, and complacently kept him there until Ruth, far from pleased with this turn of affairs, called to her father to join them. But Mrs. De Lancey Smythe proved equal to the occasion, for rising gracefully, she calmly strolled by Mr. Stuart's side to the end of the launch where the four girls were seated. Here they were joined by Miss Sallie, who had been watching the manœuvres of the other woman with well-veiled contempt, and the conversation became general.

"Do you know many people here, Mrs. Smythe?" asked Miss Sallie, turning to the other woman.

"Only a few," replied Mrs. De Lancey Smythe indifferently. "Most of the people I know have been abroad all winter. Many of my dearest friends are among the peerage. Two people I know well, arrived to-day, however. The young Count de Sonde and his friend, Monsieur Duval."

She pronounced the two names with a faultless accent that was not lost upon the practised ears of Ruth, who had spoken French fluently since she was a child and had had a French nursery governess for years. Whatever were her shortcomings, Mrs. De Lancey Smythe could at least speak French.

"A real count!" exclaimed Mollie. "How interesting!"

"Oh, we know lots of titled people," Marian interposed. "There were two countesses and a marquis at our hotel in Newport last summer."

“Isn’t all this lovely?” cried Barbara. She was not interested in counts and titles. She was keenly alive to the beauty of the scenery about them. “I can’t decide which out-blues the other, the lake or the sky.”

“But aren’t there a great many clouds in the sky?” questioned Ruth. “See how they have piled up over there? Do you suppose, by any chance, that we shall have rain? We were told that it never rained down here. It simply isn’t tolerated.”

The launch was now running far out from the shore, which was lined with pretty villas, set here and there in the midst of cocoanut palms and oleander trees. Following the boat’s path of rippling waves came another launch much smaller than Mr. Warren’s. It was manned by two men who had apparently not observed them. The men were deep in earnest conversation.

“Oh, Marian, there is the Count de Sonde with his friend!” exclaimed her mother. “How fortunate that we should run across them, just now.”

“Which one is the count?” asked Maud Warren. She had taken very little interest in anything before. “I hope he is not the older man.”

“No; he is the slender, dark-haired one,” returned Mrs. Smythe. “He is dressed in white.”

In the meantime Mr. Stuart had changed his seat. He had come to Palm Beach to enjoy his four “Automobile Girls.” No fascinating widow should swerve him from his original plans. Like most hard-working successful men he loved a holiday like a schoolboy and resented deeply any interference with his pleasure.

“Are my girls having a good time?” he queried, smiling into four charming faces.

“Yes, indeed!” exclaimed four voices in chorus.

“We thought the scenery beautiful in the Berkshires and along the Hudson river, Mr. Stuart. But this is the most beautiful of all!” cried Mollie, clasping her small hands ecstatically.

“Do you suppose people ever really work here?” inquired Grace. “It is like fairy land. Everything happens by magic.”

“You are right, Grace. This is a land of pleasure,” returned Mr. Stuart. “The only people who work are the employés in the hotels and the servants in the cottages.”

“Palm Beach is dedicated to pleasure,” explained Ruth, “because it was by accident that it came to be here at all. So it can just as well be spared for an earthly paradise.”

“Why is Palm Beach an accident?” queried Mollie.

“Years ago this was just a wild, desolate coast,” Ruth went on. “Even now the wilderness is only a mile away. There was a wreck out there, somewhere, on the other side of the peninsula,” she pointed toward the ocean. “A ship was loaded with coconuts, which were washed ashore. By and by the coconuts sprouted and grew into tall palm trees. So this barren shore was transformed into one of the most beautiful palm groves in the world.”

Mr. Stuart pinched his daughter’s cheek. “You’ve been stealing a march on us, Mistress Ruth,” he said. “You have been reading a guide book.”

Just then a shadow clouded the brilliant sunshine. The engineer of the launch glanced up uneasily.

“You don’t think it is going to rain, do you?” asked Mr. Warren.

“It would be a very unusual thing if it did, sir,” replied the man, without committing himself.

A fresh wind had come up, bearing with it the fragrance of many flowers. It seemed to have blown over miles of lily beds and orange groves. Barbara closed her eyes as she breathed in the warm, scented air. “How easy to forget all responsibilities, in an enchanted place like this!” she thought. “How easy just to drift along.”

“Papa, do tell the man to turn back,” said Maud in a voice that broke unpleasantly into Bab’s reflections. “It’s getting a little chilly. And besides, we must have tea this afternoon in the coconut grove.”

“Very well, my dear,” replied her father, turning to give his order to the engineer.

The launch swung around. Immediately the whole party spied another boat bobbing helplessly on the water. One of the men in it was leaning over examining the machinery of the frail craft. The other one, in white, stood at the side of the boat, scanning the water.

No other launches were in sight. The many pleasure boats which had dotted the lake with flecks of white, only a few minutes before, had now put in to shore. A



black cloud had spread itself over the whole sky, casting a dark and ominous shadow over the lake.

As all the world knows—at least the part of the world which lives on pleasure waters—a strict etiquette prevails among these small boats. One boat always helps another in distress.

The engineer of Mr. Warren's launch did not wait for orders. He turned at once toward the drifting craft.

"Is your engine broken?" he asked, as the boats touched sides.

The young man in white was the Count de Sonde himself. He looked decidedly relieved at the appearance of the rescuers. He removed his Panama hat with a flourish and bowed low to the women. The other man answered the boatman.

"We are quite helpless, you see," the count ejaculated, shrugging his shoulders and raising his eyebrows at the same time. "My friend can do nothing."

In the meantime the friend had arisen from the engine. He was examining the boatload of people with guarded interest.

"How do you do, Count? How are you, Monsieur Duval?" called Mrs. De Lancey Smythe.

It was not a time for conventional introductions. The boatman made a line fast from the small craft to the larger one. He meant to tow the smaller launch toward home.

But Mrs. De Lancey Smythe persisted. Mr. Warren and his friends must meet the Count de Sonde and Monsieur Duval.

Suddenly the heavens were shaken by a terrific clap of thunder.

Mrs. Smythe gave a little scream. "I am always frightened during a storm," she averred. "Mr. Stuart, would it be too much to ask you to assist me into the cabin?"

Miss Sallie glanced rather contemptuously at the other woman, and wondered if her fright were real. Mr. Stuart rose and courteously assisted Mrs. De Lancey Smythe into the tiny cabin, just as a driving sheet of rain bore down upon them.

The "Automobile Girls" crouched in the centre of the boat. Maud and Marian followed Mrs. Smythe.

“Make for the nearest boathouse!” called Mr. Warren to his engineer. “We can’t get back to the hotel in such a storm as this.”

The storm now burst in all its West Indian fury. The waters were churned into foam. The wind whistled and roared. The two small boats tossed about on the water like chips.

“We are just in time!” exclaimed Mr. Warren, as they at last reached the boathouse. “In another five minutes I believe we should have been swamped.” He helped the women from the boat to the pier.

“What an escape!” gasped Mrs. Smythe. “Marian, my darling, are you all right?”

“Perfectly, Mama,” replied her daughter rather scornfully. It was plain to the four “Automobile Girls” that Marian did not entirely approve of her mother’s display of fear, and the tone in which she had answered told its own story.

The little company sought the shelter of the boathouse. The two foreigners went with them. In one of the men, Bab recognized the stranger she had noticed that morning on the hotel piazza. Mrs. De Lancey Smythe introduced him as Monsieur Duval.

“We were very lucky to have met you, sir,” Mr. Duval said to Mr. Stuart. Bab noticed that he spoke very good English, with only a slight foreign accent. “I am afraid our boat would have sunk if you had not come to our rescue.”

Mr. Stuart bowed politely, but coldly. He was wondering if his girls and Miss Sallie would have bad colds from their wetting. They were standing apart from the others, laughing at their plight.

The young Count de Sonde had joined Marian and her mother, as soon as he entered the boathouse, but Maud was with them. It was upon Maud that the count immediately bestowed his attention. He smiled upon her, until Maud’s foolish head began to flutter. Just think of capturing the attentions of a real count so quickly! Mr. Warren saw his daughter’s delight and frowned slightly. Maud must not get any foolish ideas about foreigners in her head. He would put an end to that nonsense. He was about to stride over and take charge of affairs when a man servant in plain livery appeared on the path near the boathouse door. He had come from the pretty villa, which was only a hundred yards back from the boathouse, set in a thick grove of palms. The man carried a large bundle of wraps and umbrellas. He paused respectfully when he reached the steps leading to the pavilion.

“My lady would be glad if you would seek shelter from the storm in her house,” he said in broken English to Mr. Warren.

It was great fun to scamper through the pouring rain to the pretty villa. The foreign coats and capes kept everyone dry. Now that they were on land Mr. Warren’s boat party had begun to regard their adventure somewhat lightly.

Once on the porch of the villa they were ushered into a large, low-ceilinged room at one end of which a fire of pine knots was burning brightly. The room was empty. The newcomers clustered about the blaze to dry their soaked shoes.

The room held very little furniture. Yet it appeared to Bab as one of the most beautiful rooms she had ever seen. A grand piano stood at one end, and a few graceful wicker chairs were scattered about the apartment. The room had an indescribable look of elegance. Was it the bare highly polished floor, with only the Persian rug to break its shining surface? Or was it the enormous bunch of daffodils in a cut glass bowl on the table that lent the place its charm? Bab did not know. On the mantelpiece between two tall brass candle-sticks stood a beautiful marble bust. Barbara afterwards learned that it was known as “The Head of an Unknown Lady.”

A handsome leather writing-case lay open on the table. It displayed on the inner side a large crest picked out in dull gold. The firelight shone on the gold outlines and threw them into dull relief.

Bab saw the Frenchman, Monsieur Duval, walk over to this table. He examined the crest intently for a moment, then turned away.

At this instant two women came in through the open door. The one, who was quite old, supported herself with a gold-headed mahogany cane. The other was young and very beautiful.

The older woman was rather terrifying in aspect. She had a hooked nose and her bright, beady little eyes regarded the company with a look of amused tolerance.

The younger woman came forward to meet her unknown guests without the slightest embarrassment or affectation. The “Automobile Girls” held their breath. Surely she was the most exquisite creature they had ever beheld.

## CHAPTER III

### THE FAIR UNKNOWN

“I am afraid you must be very cold and wet,” the young woman said, in a clear sweet voice, with an accent that the girls had never heard before. She was graceful with an elegance of manner that to imaginative Bab seemed almost regal.

Mr. Stuart went forward. “It is most kind and hospitable of you to take us in like this,” he declared. “We would certainly have been very uncomfortable if we had stayed in the boathouse for such a length of time. We are deeply grateful to you.”

“Do sit down,” the young woman answered. “And won’t you have some tea? It may warm you.” She pressed an electric bell in the wall. A man servant appeared, and she gave him her orders in German.

The “Automobile Girls” clustered together in the window seat. Their unknown hostess sank into a low chair near them. Miss Sallie and Mrs. De Lancey Smythe were left to the mercy of the old lady with the beaked nose. Maud and the count withdrew to one corner of the room, where they chatted softly, the latter bent on displaying all his powers of fascination.

“Are these your four daughters?” asked the young mistress of the villa, turning to Mr. Stuart, after a friendly glance at the “Automobile Girls.”

“No,” Mr. Stuart replied, laughing and shaking his head. “I am sorry to say I can boast of only one daughter. The three other girls are her friends. But they are all my girls. At least I call them my ‘Automobile Girls’!”

“Ah,” replied the young woman apparently puzzled. “How is it that you call them the ‘Automobile Girls’? Do young girls run motor cars in your country? Their independence is quite wonderful, I think.”

“Ruth is our chauffeur,” explained Bab, who was looking closely at the beautiful face of her hostess. The latter’s dark brown hair was arranged in a braid and wound about her head like a coronet but it broke into little soft curls around her face. She had a small straight nose and the curve of her red lips was perfect. The

contour of her face was oval and her large dark eyes were touched with an undefinable sadness. She was tall and slender, and she wore a plain, white woolen frock that emphasized the lines of her graceful figure. The simplicity of her costume was not marred by a single ornament. Even her long, slender fingers were bare of rings.

She turned to pretty Mollie, taking one of her small hands in her own cool fingers. "Do these little hands also run a motor car?" the hostess asked.

Mollie looked long into the beautiful face. Somehow its hidden sadness touched her. Mollie's blue eyes filled with tears. She felt strangely timid.

"Why, you must not be afraid of me, dear one," said the young woman. She gazed into Mollie's blue eyes appealingly, and softly pressed her hand. "I'm a girl like yourself, only I am much older. But I love younger girls very dearly. You must let me be your friend." To the amazement of the other girls this exquisite stranger bent over and kissed Mollie on the lips.

"I should be very happy to have you for my friend," returned Mollie, a smile quivering through her tears. "And I wasn't the least bit frightened. I think perhaps it was the storm that made me so silly. Bab sometimes calls me a cry baby."

"Which one of you is Bab? And what a pretty name that is!" exclaimed the young hostess.

Barbara stepped forward with a friendly smile. Mr. Stuart then presented Grace and Ruth.

But still their new friend did not reveal her identity.

She was a foreigner. There was no doubt of that. She had spoken in German to her servant. Perhaps she was German? She confessed that this was her first visit to America. The climate of New York had driven her south. Yet she did not mention her name or her country.

Presently the man servant returned to the room carrying a tea service. He was followed by a comely German maid, who carried a tray laden with buttered toast and a large dish of German cookies.

The man lit the candles and a lamp covered with a yellow shade.

A soft, mellow glow pervaded the beautiful room. There was a pleasant silence

and all eyes were turned to their lovely young hostess, whose slender white hands busied themselves with the tea things.

“A friendly cup of tea on a day like this, makes the whole world kin,” she said, smiling brightly at her guests. “It banishes sad thoughts and one grows cheerful, even though the weather behaves itself so badly.”

“We have a proverb,” laughed Ruth, “that says ‘it’s an ill wind that blows no one good.’ We should really thank the weather for misbehaving.”

“Ah, that is broad flattery,” cried their hostess with a silvery laugh. “But oh so charming.”

“Do you not find it dull staying at an out-of-the-way place like this?” broke in Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, looking about her with a patronizing air. “I am quite sure I have never seen you at the Beach.”

The “Automobile Girls” exchanged lightning glances. Mrs. Smythe’s abrupt remark jarred upon them, and simultaneously it occurred to them that she was distinctly underbred.

Marian’s face flushed, and she bit her lip. “I think this quiet place must be enchanting,” she said almost defiantly. “I hate hotels.”

“Really, Marian,” said her mother coldly. “Your opinion has not been solicited.”

“They’re going to quarrel,” thought Barbara. “How disagreeable that woman is. She is so snippy, and calculating and deceitful. I rather like Marian, though.”

But their hostess averted any domestic altercation by saying sweetly. “I am indeed a stranger, here, but I came for rest and quiet, therefore I have little desire to frequent the Beach or its hotels.”

“Quite true,” responded Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, and hastily turning her attention to the imposing looking old woman with the gold headed cane she said, “You are German, I presume.”

“Why German?” replied the old lady, observing her questioner with a dangerous glitter in her small black eyes.

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe showed signs of confusion.

“I thought you were Germans because you spoke German to your servant,” she said, trying to look haughty and thus carry off what promised to be an unpleasant

situation.

“Ah, yes,” returned her antagonist. “But does it follow that one is of the same country as one’s servants? We have also employed both French and English maids.”

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe did not deem it wise to continue the conversation. She therefore turned her attention to Mr. Duval who had been listening to the conversation with a curious smile on his clever face.

Miss Sallie was delighted with the strange old woman. Her abruptness was amusing. Miss Stuart began discussing a number of current topics with her in an impersonal, well-bred manner, neither woman showing the slightest curiosity about the other’s personal affairs.

“Count de Sonde!” called Mrs. De Lancey Smythe suddenly.

There was an immediate lull in the conversation.

The young mistress of the villa stared at the “Automobile Girls.” Her face turned pale. She leaned back in her chair. “Count de Sonde!” she whispered to herself.

Mollie was at her new friend’s side in an instant. “I am afraid you are ill,” she suggested. “Can I do anything for you?”

“No, no, dear child,” replied the other. “It was only a momentary faintness. But did I not hear some one call the Count de Sonde? Is he here?”

“Oh, yes,” returned Mollie politely. “He is that young man in white, who is now talking with Mrs. De Lancey Smythe.”

Her hostess turned quickly. She looked a long time at the young count. “Who is the other man near him?” she next asked.

Mollie was again her informant. “He is a Mr. Duval,” she explained. “He and the Count de Sonde are at the same hotel together.”

At this moment, Maud Warren, who had noted her father’s displeased look, decided to join the “Automobile Girls,” who were grouped around their hostess.

“Do you know,” she said with an air of triumph, “the Count de Sonde has invited Papa and me and the De Lancey Smythes to visit him at his chateau in France next summer?”

The tea-cup of their hostess crashed to the floor. It broke into small pieces.

“Don’t trouble to pick up the pieces,” she protested to Mr. Stuart. “Johann will do it. I am very careless. So you expect to visit France next summer?” she continued, turning her attention to Maud.

“Yes, Papa and I shall go,” Maud replied. “It would be quite novel to visit a chateau.”

“Delightful. But where is the chateau of the De Sonde family?” inquired the other young woman.

Maud hesitated. “I am not sure that I know,” she replied. “I believe the count said it was in Brittany. The count’s family is one of the oldest in France.”

“I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting the count,” suggested Maud’s hostess. “Perhaps you will present him to me.”

In a few moments the young count was leaning gracefully against the mantelpiece. He was talking with the beautiful stranger, whose name was still withheld from her visitors. A little later Monsieur Duval joined them.

“Oh, yes, I hasten to assure you, it is quite, quite old,” the count explained. He was talking of his family in Brittany.

“How far back does your family go?” went on his unknown questioner.

The count cleared his throat and choked over his fresh cup of tea.

“My friend’s family goes back to the eleventh century,” answered Duval quietly. The count was still coughing violently.

“And you are the last of your line?” continued his hostess. She was addressing the count. “It is a pity for such an illustrious race to die out. I suppose you will marry?”

She looked at the young man with such grave sweetness that he smiled uneasily and shifted his gaze.

“I hope to marry some day, Mademoiselle,” he mumbled.

“You have some very old families in Germany also, have you not?” inquired Monsieur Duval, looking searchingly at the young woman.



Did she pause a moment before she answered? Bab and Ruth both thought so.

“In what European country are there not old families, Monsieur?” she replied courteously. “In Italy the old families trace their lineage to the gods of mythology. But I am interested in a young country like this America.”

“Then you should go to Chicago, if you wish to see a really American city,” cried Ruth. “Of course, Aunt Sallie and Father and I think our Chicago is greater than New York, because it is our home.”

“De Lancey Hall, in Virginia, is my family home,” drawled Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, with a little insolent air of pride. “The De Lanceys were a titled French family before they came to this country.”

“How very interesting!” exclaimed the youthful hostess, in an enigmatic tone. “Do people drop their titles in this great free country of yours? It is much better, I think. Titles mean but little anywhere.” She ended her words with a little, serious frown.

“The best heritage that I can lay claim to is that of being an American,” exclaimed Ruth, with enthusiasm. “America for the Americans! Three cheers for the red, white and blue!”

“You are a true patriot. Is it not so?” laughed the hostess, patting Ruth’s shoulder. “Your great free country is so wonderful. Its liberty is boundless.” She sighed, and for a moment seemed wrapped in thought. Then turning to Mr. Stuart and Mr. Warren asked if they would have more tea.

“No thank you,” replied Mr. Stuart. “In fact I believe we had better begin to think about getting back to our hotel. The rain has stopped, and we need trespass upon your hospitality no further.”

“It has been a pleasure to meet you and your ‘Automobile Girls,’” the young woman replied. Then she added very softly so that Mr. Stuart and Mollie who stood with her hand clasped in that of the stranger, alone, heard: “Won’t you bring them to see me in the near future?”

“Oh how lovely!” breathed Mollie.

“We shall be very happy, indeed to come,” Mr. Stuart replied.

“I thank you for your charming hospitality, Mademoiselle,” broke in the suave tones of Mr. Duval, who with the count at his heels had stepped unnoticed to the

young woman's side. "Am I presumptuous in venturing to ask if it is your pleasure that we should know to whom we are indebted?"

"Ah to be sure. I have been what you call, very stupid," laughed the unknown. "Pray pardon me." Gliding over to the side of the stern old woman, she took her hand. "Permit me to present my very dear friend, Madame de Villiers. I am the Countess Sophia von Stolberg."

## CHAPTER IV

### THE COMPACT

“Girls!” exclaimed Ruth, who lay curled up on the foot of her bed in a pale blue silk kimono. “I feel like offering a libation to the Storm King to-night for sending us that squall.”

“Why?” inquired Grace, who was not gifted with an Oriental imagination.

“Because, if there had been no storm, there would have been no Countess Sophia,” replied her friend.

“She is hard to understand, but she is so beautiful, so gentle and so noble,” observed Barbara.

“And she kissed me!” cried Mollie.

“As, yes, Mollie darling, she had a fearful crush on you,” laughed Ruth. “We are already green with jealousy. It’s those golden baby curls of yours that do the business, I suppose. First, it was the lovely Mrs. Cartwright you won from us at Newport. Now your cerulean eyes have hypnotized the Countess Sophia. What shall we do to her, girls?”

“Destroy her beauty!” cried Barbara. “Cut off her curls and give her two black eyes.”

The three girls pounced on Mollie. There was a real tom-boy romp which ended in a burst of joyous laughter. For Miss Sallie’s familiar rap-tap was heard on the door. Her voice was raised in mild protest:

“Children, remember that this is a hotel.”

The girls subsided.

“Do you suppose it would be good form to call on the countess to-morrow, when we met her only this afternoon?” asked Ruth, as soon as she had regained her breath.

“It would be rather rushing things,” answered Barbara.

“If you will be good, and promise not to lay violent hands on me again, I will tell you something,” Mollie volunteered.

“We promise,” cried three voices in unison.

“The countess is going to ask us to luncheon to-morrow. She whispered it to me just before we left her villa this afternoon.”

“Oh, joy!” exclaimed Ruth. “Do you mean that she intends to invite the entire party—the De Lancey Smythes and all that aggregation?”

“No,” Mollie declared, answering Ruth’s previous question. “The countess intends to invite only Miss Sallie, Mr. Stuart and the ‘Automobile Girls.’”

“But what are we to do about Maud Warren?” queried Ruth. “Father has promised Mr. Warren we would help him out with Maud. Here we are already trying to shake her off. If we are going to see a great deal of the countess, how shall we manage? I am sure the stern old dowager would never endure Maud’s grown up manner for a moment. And Maud won’t give up those De Lancey Smythes.”

“I think it would be a good idea to take the Countess Sophia into our confidence, if we have an opportunity,” suggested Barbara. “It would not be a betrayal of trust. Because what we wish to accomplish is to persuade Maud Warren to see the difference between really well-bred people like the countess and those who pretend to be. I think the Smythes are pretenders, the mother at least. She seems to be continually on the alert. I watched her yesterday, and that high and mighty air that she assumes is a cloak to hide her real character. It seems to me that she and that Duval man have some sort of secret understanding. I think——” Barbara paused.

“Well, Sherlock, what do you think?” queried Ruth impertinently. “And when you unearth her family skeleton may I go along and play Doctor Watson?”

“How ridiculous you are, Ruth,” returned Barbara, laughing. “I suppose I deserve to be teased. I’m always suspecting people’s motives. But really I do believe that that Mrs. Smythe has a hurtful influence over Maud. Mr. Warren doesn’t like to have Maud with her, either. You heard the way he spoke this morning.”

“Yes,” exclaimed Ruth. “We also heard Miss Maud defy him. She is dreadfully spoiled, and we shall be obliged to handle her very carefully. If she even

suspects we are trying to reform her, she will shun our beneficial society as she would the plague.”

“I believe I could bear that misfortune,” sighed Mollie.

But Barbara was serious. “I am truly sorry for Maud Warren,” she declared. “I think she is just like a blind person. She can’t see anything that is good and true. She thinks of nothing but money, titles and sham society. I don’t see how we can do her any good.”

“Well, her father thinks we can,” Grace added. “He told me on our way back from the launch party, that he hoped we would be friends with Maud, for she needed the companionship of sensible girls. He said that he hoped she would take more interest in outdoor sports, and drop some of the newfangled society ideas she has adopted.”

“I’ll tell you a secret,” said Barbara slowly. “I think that Maud was impressed with the Count de Sonde, or rather his title.”

“And the count seemed to be equally impressed with Maud,” interposed Ruth. “I believe he is one of those foreigners with no money, and plenty of title that one reads about in the Sunday papers.”

“Some of them don’t have even the title,” said Mollie with a worldly air that contrasted oddly with her baby face. “They are just waiters who pretend that they are real counts.”

“Hear, hear,” cried Ruth, “Mollie the worldly wise is holding forth!”

“Well, you needn’t make fun of me, Ruth,” said Mollie stoutly. “It’s all true. I read about one last week who married a rich American girl. She fell in love with his title. After she had married him she found out that his name was Jean, something or other, that he had been a waiter, and was wanted by the police for forgery. Just think girls how dreadfully she must have felt!”

“I should say so,” averred Grace, who always championed Mollie’s cause.

“What’s your opinion of the Count de Sonde, Barbara?” asked Ruth.

“He didn’t impress me favorably,” replied Bab. “He’s too artificial, and too conceited. He reminds me of a comic opera Frenchman. He looks as though he were ready to run about on his toes and shrug his shoulders at the slightest pretext.”

“That exactly describes him,” Ruth agreed. “I imagine him trilling a silly French song:

“‘Bonjour, mesdames! bonjour, messieurs!  
Je suis le Comte de Sonde!’”

Ruth bowed low, first to Mollie and then to Grace. She shrugged her dainty shoulders in a perfect imitation of the count.

“But what about Monsieur Duval?” queried Mollie.

“He’s the backbone of the little count,” said Barbara. “He’s the brains and strength of the company. If there is any little game to be played at Palm Beach—look out for Mr. Duval!”

“But do you suppose they really have a game to play?” persisted Ruth.

Bab shook her head. “I don’t know. I suppose I am only joking,” she answered. “But did you notice how often Mr. Duval came to the count’s rescue? He helped him out of a number of tight places. Of course it is ridiculous to suppose those men have any scheme afoot. They are certainly not thieves, like Harry Townsend at Newport. I wonder what they are after?”

“Oh, nothing, Bab. You are too mysterious,” protested Mollie. “I thought we were talking about Maud Warren and how we could best make friends with her.”

“Girls, let’s enter into a solemn compact,” Ruth suggested, lowering her voice to a whisper in order to persuade the other girls to listen.

“What kind of compact, child?” Bab demanded.

“A compact to do our best for Maud Warren,” said conscientious Ruth. “I tell you, girls, it won’t be easy, for Maud isn’t our kind. And you know how we like to keep together and don’t care much for any outside girl. I know we shall have to make a good many sacrifices. But Maud must not run around with the Smythes and that little French count all the time. Let’s make a compact to do our best for Maud. Come, join hands.”

The four girls clasped hands. They could not foresee into what difficulties this compact would lead them.

Tap! tap! Miss Sallie knocked again at the door.

“Go to bed at once; it is very late,” she ordered.

Ruth dreamed that night that the four girls were sitting in a circle with the Countess Sophia von Stolberg. They had hold of one another's hands. They were repeating their vow about Maud. Suddenly they were interrupted. Monsieur Duval appeared in their midst. The Countess Sophia saw the Frenchman. She gave a cry of terror and fainted.

Ruth awakened with a start. The night was still. The moon shone brightly through the open windows and the air was filled with the perfume of magnolia blossoms.

"I wonder what the Countess Sophia's history is?" thought Ruth sleepily, as she dropped into slumber once more.

At her villa, looking across the moonlit lake, the beautiful young countess was at that moment writing a letter. It was a long letter, penned in close fine handwriting. When she had finished she slipped the letter into an envelope, which she addressed carefully to "M. Le Comte Frederic de Sonde."

## CHAPTER V

### THE DAUGHTER OF MRS. DE LANCEY SMYTHE

Breakfast was hardly over next morning before a note on thin foreign paper was handed to Miss Sallie Stuart. She read it aloud: it asked for the pleasure of their company at luncheon. It was signed "Sophia von Stolberg." The messenger would wait for the answer. Mr. Stuart was included in the invitation.

"There's only one answer to that note," laughed Mr. Stuart, scanning the four eager faces of the "Automobile Girls." "Shall I translate your expressions into a single word? It is 'yes,' my hearties."

"Did you think they would fail to accept?" teased Miss Sallie. "Look at the foolish young things! They have all fallen in love with the countess at first sight, and can hardly wait for one o'clock to arrive. But I will send our acceptance at once, so as not to keep the man waiting." Miss Stuart hurried off to the writing room of the hotel.

So the girls were alone when they were joined on the piazza by Mrs. De Lancey Smythe and Marian.

"Good morning, my dears," said Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, with an attempt at affability. "Isn't it delightful after the storm?"

"Very," answered Ruth, rather shortly.

"Have you seen dear Maud and her father this morning?" pursued Mrs. Smythe, ignoring Ruth's lack of cordiality.

"No," replied Ruth. "Have you?"

"I saw them a few minutes ago, and they were engaged in a family discussion," replied the older woman. "Such discussions are most disagreeable to me. Marian and I never have them. For some stupid reason, Mr. Warren is opposed to his daughter's receiving attentions from the Count de Sonde. I have assured him that I know the count well. He belongs to an old and illustrious family. But tell me, what is your opinion of the Countess Sophia von Stolberg? Do you think she is an impostor?"



“An impostor!” exclaimed Ruth indignantly. “I think she is simply perfect. I never met any one in my life who impressed me so much.”

“Beware, my dear, that your feelings do not run away with you,” warned Mrs. De Lancey Smythe with asperity. “I have heard rumors, since I saw you last night. There are suspicious circumstances connected with this countess. She may very possibly be an impostor.”

“Who told you such a dreadful falsehood?” demanded Ruth. She was almost choking with anger. But Barbara had joined her. Bab’s firm fingers on Ruth’s arm warned her to be careful.

“The man who told me is in a position to know the truth. He is a clever man of the world, a foreigner himself,” replied Mrs. Smythe triumphantly.

“I am afraid I cannot credit his story,” replied Ruth, with more composure. “I cannot forget that we accepted the countess’s hospitality yesterday and we are to have the pleasure of accepting more of it to-day. My father and Aunt Sallie, and we four girls, are to have luncheon with the Countess von Stolberg and Madame de Villiers.”

Ruth drew Barbara’s arm through hers. They moved away from Mrs. De Lancey Smythe.

But Mrs. De Lancey Smythe had said her say and left a sting, and she smiled maliciously as the two girls walked away.

“I can’t endure that woman, Barbara,” exclaimed Ruth. “I’ll lose my head completely if she attacks our beautiful countess again.”

“She is too disagreeable to notice,” answered Bab vehemently. “Here comes Maud Warren. Shall we ask her to take a walk with us along the Beach?”

“I suppose so,” assented Ruth, whose enthusiasm had somewhat cooled over night. “I don’t want her. But we ought to be polite.”

The two girls greeted Maud Warren cordially. There was a discontented line across that young woman’s brow, and an angry look in her pale blue eyes.

“I am looking for the count,” she declared defiantly.

The girls instinctively knew that Maud was disobeying her father. Mr. Warren had just finished lecturing Maud and had commanded that she cut the count’s

acquaintance.

“I saw the count a few minutes ago. He was starting off with his friend for a walk,” explained Bab gently. “Won’t you take a stroll on the beach with us, Maud? It is such a perfect morning.”

“Oh, do come, Maud,” begged Ruth, with a charming, cordial smile. Ruth’s sweet nature was again asserting itself.

“Yes, do,” cried Mollie and Grace, who had just joined the little group of girls.

Maud’s face softened. “You are awfully nice,” she said. Maud was a little taken aback by so much friendliness. She had been spoiled all her life, and had never had real friends among young girls. People had thought her disagreeable and overbearing, and she had held herself aloof, displaying a degree of hauteur that admitted of no friendship.

“Let’s get our hats and go immediately. It will soon be time to go in bathing,” suggested Bab. Barbara never missed a swim if she could help it.

“All right, old water dog,” Ruth agreed. “Meet us on the piazza looking toward the ocean, Maud. We will be back in ten minutes.”

The girls were back on the piazza at the appointed time. Maud was there. But with her were Marian De Lancey Smythe, and the Count de Sonde.

“What a nuisance!” exclaimed Ruth under her breath. But there was nothing to be done; therefore the girls decided to accept this undesired addition to their number with the best possible grace.

The entire party started down the avenue of palms toward the ocean.

The “Automobile Girls” were thrilled with the beauty of the great stretch of blue water. Marian De Lancey Smythe, too, had a soul stirring within her. It had been choked by the false principles and ostentations that her mother had taught her. But Marian was not a stupid girl. Her wits had been sharpened by years of managing and deceit. She had the sense to see the difference between herself and the four sweet, unaffected “Automobile Girls,” and she knew the difference was in their favor.

Under her fashionable exterior a really simple heart beat in Marian’s bosom, and she was filled with a wild desire to shake off her mother’s despotic rule, and for once let her real self come to the surface. As she strolled moodily along beside

Barbara she reflected bitterly that while others had been given all, she had received nothing.

She contrasted the hand to mouth existence that she and her mother led with the full, cheerful life of the “Automobile Girls,” and a wave of shame swept over her at the deceptions and subterfuges that were second nature to her mother, which she felt reasonably certain that no really honest person would practise. Her life was a sham and a mockery, and behind it was the ever present fear that her mother would some day overstep all bounds, and do something to bring the crushing weight of the law down upon them. There were so many things that Marian did not understand. Her mother never said more about her affairs than was absolutely necessary. She only knew that they were always poor, always struggling to appear to be that which they were not. She had been commanded to dissemble, to lie, to do without a murmur, whatever her mother asked of her, and her better self sometimes rose in a revolt against her mother, that was almost hatred.

As she walked gloomily along wrapped in her own bitter reflections, she sighed deeply. Bab who was walking with her glanced quickly at Marian, then with one of her swift impulses, she put out her hand and clasped that of the other girl.

“Are you unhappy, Marian?” she asked.

“No,” replied Marian. But her emotions got the better of her and she choked back her sobs with an angry gulp. Then feeling the pressure of Bab’s sympathetic hand she said brokenly, “I mean, yes. At least, I don’t know exactly what is the matter with me. I think I am homesick—homesick for the things I have never had, and never expect to have.”

“I’m sorry,” said Bab, still holding Marian’s hand, yet looking away, so she should not see Marian’s rebellious tears. “But why do you think you won’t have the things you want? If you keep on wishing for a thing the wish is sure to come true some day.”

Marian’s set face softened at these words. “Do you really think that?” she asked. “Do you suppose that things will ever be any different for me? Oh, if you only knew how I hate all this miserable pretense.”

“Why, Marian!” exclaimed Bab. “What is the matter? I had no idea you were so unhappy.”

“Of course you hadn’t,” replied Marian. “Because I never dare let any one know

my real feelings. I never have hated my life as I do since I have known you girls. You are just girls. That's the beauty of it, and you have folks who love you and want you to stay girls and not ape grown up people all the time. I'd like to wear my hair in one braid, and run and romp and have a good time generally. Look at me. I look as though I were twenty-two at least, and I'm only seventeen. I have to wear my hair on top of my head and pretend to be something remarkable when I want to be just a plain every day girl. It's intolerable. I won't stand it any longer. I don't see why I was ever born."

"Poor Marian," soothed Bab. "Don't feel so badly. It will all come right some day. Let me be your friend. I believe I understand just how you feel. Perhaps your mother may——"

"Don't speak of my mother!" ejaculated the girl passionately. "Sometimes I hate her. Do you know, Barbara, I often wonder if she is really my mother. Away back in my mind there is the memory of another face. I don't know whether I have only dreamed it, or where it came from, but I like to think of that sweet face as belonging to my mother."

Bab looked at Marian in a rather startled way. What a strange girl she was, to be sure. Suppose Mrs. De Lancey Smythe were not her mother. Suppose that Marian had been stolen when a baby. Bab's active brain immediately began to spin a web of circumstances about Marian Smythe.

"Marian," she began. But she never finished for just then a piercing cry rang out.

Nursemaids with children began running along the sands. Another nurse had run out into the water. She was wildly waving her arms and pointing to a small object well out on the waves. Barbara saw it for just an instant. Then it disappeared. She and Marian both recognized what it was. A child's curly head had risen to the surface of the water, and then had sunk out of sight.

Quick as a flash Barbara kicked off her white canvas pumps and threw hat and linen coat on the ground.

Extending her hands before her, she ran out into the water. Marian ran blindly after her. The Count de Sonde was the only man near that part of the beach. He was behaving in a most remarkable manner. Entirely forgetful of the blood of scores of noble ancestors that ran in his veins, he had taken to his heels and his small figure was seen flying up the beach away from the water.

However, Bab was not thinking of aid. She made straight for the little head,

which rose for the second time above the waves.

When Barbara reached the spot where she had last seen the child's head she dived beneath the surface of the water.

Marian thought that Barbara, too, had lost her life. She began wringing her hands and calling for help. In her excitement she had waded to her neck in the water and was clinging to the life rope. She did not know how to swim, but she had a wild idea that she ought to follow in Barbara's lead, and now she clung to the rope and anxiously watched Barbara's movements. Bab in the meantime, had dived into deep water and was groping blindly for the little figure. At last she seized the child by the arm and with lungs bursting rose to the top of the water, when suddenly she was struck a fearful and unlooked for blow. She had not reckoned with the life line and with the little fellow in her arms had come in violent contact with it. She reeled and would have gone under but a hand grasped her firmly by the arm and pulled her from under the treacherous rope. She had just sense enough to hand the child over to Marian Smythe and seize the rope herself. Then she filled her exhausted lungs with the fresh air.

On the shore Grace and Mollie were running up and down the sands imploring some one to save Bab. Ruth wished to rush out into the water. But she knew she could not reach the two exhausted girls.

As for the Count de Sonde, he was nowhere to be seen, while Maud Warren stood on the shore helplessly wringing her hands.

In a short time the beach was crowded with people. Marian and Bab had brought the little boy in to his nurse. The hotel physician soon took the nurse and the baby both away, and the crowd followed them.

Bab flung herself down in the warm sand. Mollie, Ruth and Grace hung over her anxiously.

"I'll just rest here a moment," Bab said faintly. "I want to get my breath. But do see to Marian. She is a brave girl. She saved my life. I struck against the life rope, and would have gone under with the little boy had she not caught my arm and held me up."

"You dear, dear girl," said Mollie with a half sob. "How splendid of you!"

Then the three girls surrounded Marian and hugged her until they were almost as wet as she was.

“I didn’t do anything remarkable,” she averred, almost shyly. “I went into the water after Barbara before I realized what I was doing. I just had to catch hold of her arm, because I saw that she was going under. You girls are perfectly sweet to me and I am happier to-day than I’ve ever been before.”

“Marian,” called the cold tones of her mother. “Go up to the hotel at once and change your clothing. Your appearance is disgraceful.”

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe stalked majestically over to the little group, frowning her displeasure. “Whatever possessed you and Miss Thurston to rush madly into the water after a child you never saw before?” she said to Marian, whose happy face had darkened at her mother’s first word. “Really, Marian, dear, you are at times past understanding.”

“Mrs. Smythe,” said Barbara coldly. “We could never have been so heartless as to stand on the shore and wait for some one else to rescue that little child. I felt it my duty to make some effort and I am sure that Marian did.”

“Really, Miss Thurston,” retorted Mrs. Smythe, “I addressed my remark to Marian.”

“Yes,” said Bab, her eyes flashing, “but you included me in it, therefore I felt justified in answering it.”

For a moment there was a tense silence. Bab stood looking composedly into the angry eyes of Mrs. De Lancey Smythe. Then Ruth said, with superb indifference. “Oh, come on, girls, don’t waste your whole morning, here. Bab, you’ll catch cold. Hurry right up to the hotel with Marian. Good-bye, Marian, we’ll see you later.”

Utterly ignoring Mrs. Smythe, Ruth turned on her heel and accompanied by Grace and Mollie continued the stroll along the beach.

“My I’d hate to meet Mrs. De Lancey Smythe alone on a dark night,” remarked Mollie, with a giggle. “Didn’t she look ready to scratch Bab’s eyes out, though?”

“She found her match in Mistress Barbara,” observed Grace. “She can’t intimidate our Bab.”

Bab hurried along the beach toward the hotel full of sympathy for the luckless Marian, and vowing within herself to be a true friend to the girl who had been cheated of her girlhood.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE COUNTESS SOPHIA

To be at luncheon with a real countess? What bliss!

Not one of the "Automobile Girls" doubted, for an instant, the genuineness of the Countess Sophia von Stolberg. Mrs. De Lancey Smythe's calumnies carried no weight with the "Automobile Girls."

To-day the countess was more gentle, more beautiful than she had seemed at first. And there was less formality in her manner.

Mollie, who sat at her left at the luncheon table, quite lost the feeling of awe that had taken possession of her the afternoon before.

Opposite the countess, at the other end of the table, sat the formidable Madame de Villiers, the old lady with the hooked nose and the bird-like eyes. She, too, seemed to feel more amiable, for she watched her young guests with an amused smile.

"Do you know what I believe Madame de Villiers was thinking all the time we were at luncheon?" Ruth asked her friends, when they were discussing their visit the following day. "The amused look on her face seemed to say: 'This is just another of the countess's pranks, asking these strangers to luncheon. But if they amuse her—why not!'"

Madame de Villiers, however, found Miss Sallie Stuart much to her liking. Perhaps this was because Miss Sallie was not in the least afraid of her, nor inclined to shrink from her, as so many people did.

The story of the morning's adventure had been told. The countess leaned admiringly over the great bunch of yellow daffodils in the centre of the table and smiled at Bab. Barbara's brown curls were still damp from their recent wetting. "Were there no men on that part of the beach when the baby was drowning? Why did you have to risk your life in that way?" the countess asked.

"There were no men near," Ruth replied. "You see, it was very early in the morning. Only the nurse girls and children were abroad."

“There was one man present!” exclaimed Mollie, with a spark of anger in her usually gentle blue eyes. “But he was a coward and ran away.”

“The Count de Sonde! Oh, yes,” continued Ruth, “I had forgotten him.”

The countess look startled.

“The Count de Sonde!” she repeated in a puzzled fashion. “He refused to help? He ran away?” An expression of incredulity crossed her face.

“He most certainly did run,” Mollie declared firmly. “I almost fell on my knees to beg him to save Bab. But he did not even take time to refuse me. He simply ran away, so as to live to fight another day, I suppose.”

“The Count de Sonde!” the young countess returned. “Ah, yes, he is the young Frenchman who was here yesterday. Then he is not a friend of yours?”

“Certainly not, Countess Sophia,” explained Mr. Stuart. “The young man is only a chance acquaintance, whom my friend Mr. Warren rescued from a difficulty yesterday.”

“I, also, am but a chance acquaintance,” smiled the young countess.

“Only you were the rescuer, and he was the rescued!” exclaimed Mollie quickly, looking fondly at her pretty hostess, who pressed her hand under the table.

“We are not in the least interested in the count,” Ruth remarked bluntly. “We are civil to him because we are trying to help some one.”

The countess looked puzzled.

Mr. Stuart laughed. “My dear Countess,” he explained, “the ‘Automobile Girls’ are not exactly Knights of the Round Table, but they have a kind of league of their own. I think they have formed a sort of Helping Hand Society. They have a pretty good theory that there is no reason why boys should enjoy all the adventures and thrilling experiences. If there is anything to be done, why, do it! Isn’t that the motto, girls? I think the countess would be amazed if she knew what you have been through in the way of adventure. Now, they have undertaken to look after a misguided maiden. And I think they are rather piling on the horrors in her case.”

“Now, Father, you’ve no right to tease,” protested Ruth. “You are the very person who made us promise to stand by Maud Warren through thick and thin.”



“So I did,” agreed Mr. Stuart. “But I had no romantic notions that Maud was to be protected from the Count de Sonde. I only consented to have you persuade Maud from certain undesirable associates by showing her how much more desirable you are. Now, I plainly see the object of your protective association has changed.”

“Now, Father, you are teasing,” exclaimed his daughter.

“How can you accuse me of any such thing?” replied Mr. Stuart, his eyes twinkling.

“He always teases,” Ruth explained to the countess and Madame de Villiers. “It’s second nature to him. He can’t help it. But putting aside all jesting, I am going to speak very plainly about several things. I am sorry to be obliged to backbite, but really and truly we don’t like Mrs. De Lancey Smythe. She is the most disagreeable person we know, and we are going to try gradually to wean Maud Warren from her. Maud thinks that she is wonderful and a great society leader, but I think if one made careful inquiry into the matter, one would find her name among those missing from the social world.”

“Ruth, my dear,” expostulated Miss Stuart. “You are entirely too impetuous!”

“Do allow her to go on, Miss Stuart,” begged Madame de Villiers. “She is one after my own heart. It is refreshing to find some one who is not afraid to speak plainly.”

“Well,” continued Ruth, highly elated at receiving the approbation of the stern old woman. “We are going to checkmate Mrs. D. L. S. at her own game. She is trying to throw Maud in line with her own schemes. Enter the ‘Automobile Girls.’ Exit the enemy. The first battle was fought on the beach this morning, and the situation was strongly defended to the last word by General Barbara Thurston.”

“What do you mean, Ruth?” interrupted her father gravely.

Then Ruth launched forth with the account of Mrs. De Lancey Smythe’s rudeness to Bab and Bab’s reply. “Marian is all right,” concluded Ruth, “but her mother is an entirely different proposition.”

“So it would seem,” murmured the countess thoughtfully. “But suppose the count is really an eligible person, and has fallen in love, in earnest with Miss Warren, and suppose that Miss Warren truly loves him, what then? Would Mr.

Warren still be opposed to the marriage?”

“I don’t know,” replied Ruth doubtfully. “But you see Maud is a girl, and Mr. Warren feels that she is too young to know her own mind. He is afraid that the count’s title has dazzled her, and he does not like foreigners. He thinks we may be able to disabuse Maud of some of her sentimental ideas. Last night we four girls organized a secret society for the suppression of fortune hunters, and we thought perhaps you might help us——”

“Ruth, my dear child!” protested Miss Sallie greatly shocked.

But old Madame de Villiers’ eyes gleamed with amusement.

“Indeed, I shall be most happy to become a member of your secret society,” rejoined the countess. “How exciting! It must be a real secret society, if we are to be serious. Let me see? We should arrange signals and plan a campaign. If I am right, Miss Maud Warren needs to be treated very delicately and carefully, or she is likely to rebel. Is this not so?”

“That is just what we agreed last night,” Ruth confessed.

“But how are we going to prove that Count de Sonde is a fortune-hunter?” argued Mollie. “For all we know, he may be immensely rich as well as illustrious.”

“Oh, we shall have to prove that the count is not really in love with Mademoiselle Warren,” answered the countess, pinching Mollie’s cheek. She was entering into their little game with a curious zest.

“Or you might prove that he is not a count,” interposed Madame de Villiers, with an inscrutable expression on her grim old face.

“Do you believe that he is an impostor, Madame de Villiers?” inquired Miss Sallie.

For a brief instant the countess’s eyes met those of Madame de Villiers.

The old lady shrugged her shoulders and lifted her eyebrows in answer to Miss Sallie’s question: “The world is so full of impostors, and Europe so full of counts,” she said.

The countess blushed hotly. There was an awkward silence.

Miss Sallie was sorry she had spoken. But why should such an idle question

cause annoyance? The young count was surely a stranger to her two hostesses. There was nothing to indicate that the young man was in earnest about Maud Warren. He had simply paid her casual attentions for the past few days.

“Shall you and I become members of this secret society, Madame de Villiers?” inquired Miss Stuart, to divert the conversation. “I suppose we had better be content with the posts of confidential agents. Because I assure you there is no limit to what this society may do.”

“And I should prefer to be scout, guardsman, or messenger,” agreed Mr. Stuart. “I, too, shrink from being an active member of such a vigorous organization.”

“Then let us leave these faithless people behind, girls,” proposed the young countess. “Let us run away to the old boathouse and plan our campaign. We are not sure that we may safely confide to you our secret signals, our hand clasps and our code,” she protested to the older people.

Madame de Villiers now led the way into the drawing room.

But the young countess ran lightly out of the house, followed by her four girl guests. “We’ll arrange our secrets while our elders take their coffee on the balcony,” she suggested.

When the countess and the “Automobile Girls” had disappeared, Madame de Villiers smiled a little apologetically at Miss Stuart and her brother. “The countess is only a girl herself,” she explained. “Of course, she is several years older than your girls. Yet, in many ways, she is still simply a child.”

“She is very beautiful and charming,” replied Miss Sallie cordially. “You see how she has fascinated our girls.”

“So she does everyone,” replied Madame de Villiers, shaking her head somewhat sadly.

In the meantime the five conspirators were absorbed in devising their signals. They were only joking, of course. Yet, somehow, the young countess entered so seriously into their make-believe that the girls almost forgot they were not in earnest. One thing they conscientiously agreed upon—Maud Warren was to be constantly invited to share their pleasures with, or without, her objectionable friends.

“Must the Count de Sonde be permitted always to come along with us and

Maud?” Grace queried. She had been taking little part in the conversation, for she had been industriously writing down a list of signals for their new organization.

“We must have him, if Maud won’t come without him,” replied Ruth. “Maud must be won over to our side by flattering attentions. Suppose we start out being friends with her, by having another luncheon at our hotel. Will you come, Countess?”

The countess shook her head gently. “I am sorry,” she replied a little soberly. “I —” she hesitated a moment. “I fear you will think me rude. But I have made it a rule never to appear at the hotels. I will do anything else. Suppose we give a picnic? Is not that what you call it in English?”

“A picnic would be delightful,” agreed Ruth politely. But she could not help wondering why the countess was not willing “to appear,” as she expressed it, at the hotels.

“The signals are ready!” cried Grace. “There are two handshakes. The one which denotes danger is like this: Press the forefinger of one hand into the palm of the other person’s hand when you shake hands.”

“That is very clever!” exclaimed the countess. She clasped Mollie’s little hand. “Now, Mademoiselle Mollie, when you feel my finger press your palm like this, you will know that I am greatly in need of your help.”

“A white ribbon bow worn on the left shoulder, means that a secret meeting must be called at once!” Grace declaimed.

“And a blue ribbon bow, worn instead of a white one, proclaims: ‘I have important information to communicate,’” added the Countess Sophia. “But I should have a special signal by which to summon you. Let me see. I must be able to signal you from a distance. If I fasten a red flag to one of these posts in the day time you must know that I want to see you very much.”

“But what about a night signal?” asked Grace, who was taking the signals very seriously.

The countess laughed. “If ever you should happen to see a bright light shining in the tower of my villa, come to me at once. I shall be in great danger. Now, is not that exciting?” she cried, clasping her hands and smiling at the little company.

At this moment there came a sound of oars dipping in the water. A boat glided from under the pavilion, which was built out over the water. The boat must have been hugging the shore until it reached the boathouse. Then it made for the open water. In the boat was one man. And immediately the countess and the four "Automobile Girls" recognized him. He was the Frenchman, Monsier Duval!

"I wonder if he has been eavesdropping?" asked Ruth indignantly.

"Oh well, he has heard nothing but make-believe," the countess replied lightly, as she led her guests back to the villa.

## CHAPTER VII

### TEA IN THE COCOANUT GROVE

Their beloved red automobile, companion in so many adventures and faithful friend in time of need, did not accompany the "Automobile Girls" to Palm Beach. But Mr. Stuart engaged another larger motor car with a chauffeur to run it, as soon as he arrived at the famous southern resort. He preferred Ruth to have a chauffeur at her command in case she needed him.

There was room in the new automobile for ten persons, and Mr. Stuart, Miss Sallie, the four "Automobile Girls," the Countess Sophia and Madame de Villiers seated themselves in its cavernous depths. Then the car spun out along the famous Shell Road, lined on each side with the tall, delicate yucca plants. A fragrant southern breeze fanned the faces of the happy party. The sunlight was dazzling, the sky a deep blue. All about were masses of tropical vegetation that glittered in the sunshine.

"This place is truly heavenly," exclaimed the Countess Sophia von Stolberg. She leaned back in the automobile and closed her eyes. "How could one help being happy, surrounded by all this beauty? I am indeed very happy to-day. Are you not happy, Cousine?" she murmured, taking Madame de Villiers's hand and looking at her with a tender, loving expression. The older woman's stern face softened.

"Very happy, my dear," she declared. "This is not a place to remember one's troubles."

The countess's face clouded at the word "troubles." She began to say something in German, but checked herself. She was far too well-bred to speak any language but English before her new friends.

"Yes; this is a small sized heaven," agreed Bab. "A kind of oasis in a desert, for over there are the Everglades."

"And what are the Everglades?" inquired the countess.

"The guide-book says they are trackless jungle," explained Bab. "They are full

of wild animals; wild cats, and panthers, and deer. They have poisonous snakes in them, too. Very few white men ever venture in the Everglades, but the Indians have trails through them. They often kill deer in the jungle and sell them at the hotel.”

“It would not be pleasant to be lost in such a place,” suggested Mollie. She was thinking of her own experience when she was lost in the forest in the Berkshire Hills.

“And it would not be easy to find you in the Everglades either, little sister,” rejoined Bab. “So please beware! Never go into the Everglades alone.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” laughed Mollie. “Being lost once was enough for me.”

“If you ever do disappear, Mademoiselle Mollie, the secret society will never rest until it finds you. We must be very faithful to each other, dear fellow members?” laughed the countess.

“I am sure we agree to that,” declared Ruth.

Walking along the road ahead of them, Barbara espied two figures.

“Do you know,” she demanded, “I believe those two people just in front of us are Maud Warren and her count.”

It really was Maud loitering along the road accompanied by the count.

“Stop our car, Robert,” ordered Miss Sallie.

Maud explained that her motor car had broken down some distance up the road. She and the count had decided to walk on. They hoped to be picked up by friends.

“Do you mean you were out motoring alone with the Count de Sonde?” inquired Miss Stuart severely.

“Why not?” answered Maud, looking insolently at Miss Sallie.

“Ah it is in this free America that one needs no chaperons,” said Madame de Villiers innocently, but with a gleam of mischief in her eyes.

Maud made no reply. Two angry spots glowed in her cheeks.

The countess now made up her mind to intercede. She did not wish Maud to fly

into a rage.

“I have had a visit from your friends, the ‘Automobile Girls’, Miss Warren,” she said graciously. “Perhaps you will join them when they come to see me again.”

Maud favored the countess with a chilly stare.

Could it be that Mrs. De Lancey Smythe had been whispering tales about the countess in Maud’s ears? And had this stupid girl believed what she had heard? Ruth felt her heart thump with the embarrassment of the situation. What was Maud going to say? Strangely enough Madame de Villiers’ face held the same look of fear that Ruth’s did. Why should Madame de Villiers look frightened instead of angry?

But Maud never uttered the insult her lips were trying to frame. Spoiled and undisciplined child that she was, when she turned her sneering face toward the countess the words suddenly failed her. For the first time Maud felt that money, after all, counted for little. There was something about this plainly dressed woman that suddenly made her feel mean and ashamed. Maud looked deep into the countess’s beautiful eyes, then answered with unaccustomed meekness. “Thank you so much. I should like to come to see you.”

In the meantime naughty Mollie was taking a slight revenge upon the count.

“You are quite athletic, are you not?” she asked him innocently, her baby blue eyes fastened on his.

“I, athletic?” exclaimed the little count in surprise. “Not very, Mademoiselle. Why do you ask?”

“Because you run so well,” Mollie answered, with a far-away look.

“You refer to this morning, I perceive, Mademoiselle,” expostulated the count. “I do not swim; therefore I ran for help. But there was no danger. Your sister was never in deep water. Yet it was a most effective scene. Doubtless the young lady will enjoy being a heroine.”

Mollie flushed. “Barbara would have been in danger if Marian had not helped to pull her and the child out of the water. And, by the way, Marian does not swim either.”

“Ah, Mademoiselle Marian? I saw her later,” laughed the count. “How droll was her appearance and that of your sister also.”



Mollie heartily disgusted with the little count turned her back on him.

“Get into the motor car, both of you,” ordered Miss Sallie firmly.

A few minutes later their automobile reached the entrance to the cocoanut grove.

“Papa, let us stop here and have tea?” asked Ruth.

“A good idea, Ruth,” agreed Mr. Stuart, giving the chauffeur the order.

“I am very sorry,” interrupted the countess. “But I fear I cannot stop this afternoon.”

“Oh, please do, Countess!” urged Ruth and her friends. Even Maud’s voice was heard to join in the general chorus.

The countess hesitated. She looked at Madame de Villiers with questioning eyes. It was evident that the young countess also yearned for the pleasure of drinking tea under the cocoanut trees. Madame de Villiers shrugged her shoulders. She said something softly, so that no one else could hear. The countess dropped her white chiffon veil down over her face.

“After all, I cannot resist your invitation, Mr. Stuart,” the young woman agreed. “But may I ask you not to stay long?”

Presently Mr. Stuart’s party was seated around a large, rustic table in the beautiful cocoanut grove. Hundreds of other people, clad in white and light clothes, were seated at other tables. In the distance a band played. During the intermissions the listeners could hear the twittering and singing of multitudes of birds, which also sojourn for the winter at Palm Beach.

The countess was the object of many glances from the people near her, although she had not lifted the heavy chiffon veil from her face. She was a woman of rarely beautiful presence. There was something regal in the set of her small head on her graceful shoulders. Her gown and hat were extremely plain and she wore no jewels; but an atmosphere surrounded the lovely countess like an aura of sunlight, Ruth thought. She was very gentle and sweet, though there was something about her that suggested she could be equally stern if the situation required it. Ruth hoped never to incur her displeasure.

When tea was served the countess was obliged to throw back her veil.

Madame de Villiers looked at her disapprovingly. Then the old woman cast

hurried glances about her, but was apparently satisfied.

As for the young countess, she took in a deep breath of the warm, soft air laden with the scent of the orange blossoms. She let her eyes wander over the grove and smiled as a burst of music floated across to her.

“I am fascinated, enchanted!” she exclaimed. “Mr. Stuart, I thank you for the pleasure of this afternoon.”

There was always a slight formality in the young countess’s manner which kept people at a distance.

“Do not thank me, Countess,” protested Mr. Stuart. “You and Madame de Villiers are conferring an honor upon us.”

“Madame de Villiers and I are two lonely women,” continued the countess. “We have not seen the beauties of this place, except from our piazza. How exquisite this grove is! Truly, it is like paradise.”

Again the young woman’s gaze swept the tea garden. Suddenly her face turned white. She bit her lips, and sat as if turned to stone. Her eyes were fastened on a group of three men at a nearby table. Madame de Villiers had not noticed them. The men had not yet noticed the Stuart’s guests.

The countess dropped her veil quickly. Ruth and Mollie, sitting on each side of the countess, were the only members of the party who felt that something had happened, and they were wise enough to be absolutely silent. Only the girls’ eyes followed the direction of the countess’s. They, too, saw the three men, one of whom they recognized as Mr. Duval. The other two were strangers, foreign-looking men with waxed mustaches and light hair.

All at once Mollie felt her hand seized convulsively under cover of the table. But the little girl was not prepared for the special mark of confidence that the countess was now to bestow on her. As Mollie held the countess’s hand in her own, she felt a tap, tap in the centre of her palm. Like a flash Mollie remembered. The countess had given her the danger signal they had agreed upon the day before. Mollie looked quickly over at Maud Warren. She presumed the signal indicated that there was something the matter with Maud. But Maud was sitting quietly between Barbara and Grace Carter.

Then what could the countess mean? Could she be jesting? Mollie did not think so. Through the meshes of her white veil the face of the countess looked out very

white and grave.

Mollie's heart was beating fast. What could she say? What must she do? Of one thing she now felt sure. The beautiful Countess Sophia von Stolberg was threatened with trouble. She should have all the aid that the "Automobile Girls" could give.

"I understand," Mollie now whispered back to her in a low voice. "What shall I do?"

"I must leave the tea garden at once," replied the countess quietly. "But I do not wish to be observed. Madame de Villiers must go with me, but I do not wish the party to break up. That would make us conspicuous."

"Ruth and I will go with you. Don't be worried; we will go quietly. Wait, I must speak to her."

"Ruth," Mollie spoke softly to her friend. "The countess wishes to go home without disturbing any one else. Shall we slip out with her, and see her home?"

"Why, of course," answered Ruth politely, although she was somewhat mystified.

They were about to arise quietly from the table when they were interrupted. A waiter handed a note to Mr. Stuart. Mr. Stuart read it. His face turned very red.

Now, if there was one thing in particular that Robert Stuart loathed it was an anonymous letter. The message he had just received was not signed, and it read:

"Beware of the countess. She is an impostor."

Mr. Stuart crushed the paper in his hand.

"Mr. Stuart," said the low voice of the countess, just at this moment, "forgive my leaving so soon. But I must go at once. Mollie and Ruth are coming with me." As the countess rose from her chair she glanced hastily at the three men at the table near them. These men had also risen. But they were not looking at the countess.

The young woman started hurriedly toward the gate. Madame de Villiers quickly followed her. So did Ruth, Mollie and Mr. Stuart.

"Please wait here until we come back for you," Ruth said to her aunt.

Monsieur Duval had now crossed the space intervening between the two tables. He had seated himself next to Miss Sallie. The other two foreigners were moving toward the gate.

Ruth hurried on. She gave her order to the chauffeur. The man was soon cranking up the machine. The four women had taken their seats in the motor car. At this moment one of the strangers approached Mr. Stuart. The other took off his hat and bowed low to the countess. He spoke to her in German, but her reply was given in English. It was very plain. "I do not know you," she said.

The man spoke again. This time his manner was insolent. Madame de Villiers's face grew dark with rage.

"Hurry!" called Ruth to her chauffeur. Mr. Stuart sprang into the automobile.

The machine sped on leaving the two strangers standing alone in the road.

"Do not worry, Cousine," the countess murmured in the course of their ride. "The man who spoke to me made a mistake. You will frighten our friends if you are so angry."

Madame de Villiers said nothing. But there was fire in her small shining black eyes. Her beaked nose looked as though it might peck at the next offender.

Mr. Stuart and the two girls left the countess and her companion at their villa. The two women were now composed. Indeed, the countess made Ruth and Mollie promise that the "Automobile Girls" would come to see her again the next day.

Mollie and Ruth could not help puzzling over the countess as they rode back to the cocoanut grove. Mr. Stuart kept his own counsel.

"I am certain there is some mystery about the countess," Ruth avowed. "But, whatever the mystery is, the 'Automobile Girls' are on her side!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE WARNING

In the meantime Mr. Duval was making himself exceedingly entertaining to Miss Sallie, Grace and Barbara in the tea garden. Maud and the Count de Sonde had withdrawn to a seat near the music, and were engrossed in a tête-à-tête.

Mr. Duval had traveled widely. He told his little audience about Chinese and Japanese tea gardens. He told tales of many lands and gave accounts of numerous adventures in which he had participated.

Barbara and Grace listened fascinated. They hardly knew how the time passed. At last Mr. Stuart came back with Ruth and Mollie. Mr. Warren and Mrs. De Lancey Smythe had joined them, without Marian. Mr. Warren was looking for Maud. But Bab wondered how poor Marian had weathered the storm that must have broken when Mrs. De Lancey Smythe returned to the hotel that morning.

“Where is Marian?” Ruth asked the widow abruptly, looking her straight in the eyes.

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe’s eyes dropped before Ruth’s clear gaze. She twirled her parasol, looked annoyed then said frigidly: “Marian has a headache this afternoon.”

“I trust the wetting she got this morning had nothing to do with it.”

“Marian is an impulsive and reckless girl,” snapped her mother. “She is entirely too fond of disregarding all conventions.”

“Has any one seen my daughter?” Mr. Warren’s deep voice was now heard above the hum of conversation. Mrs. De Lancey Smythe joined him and together they strolled over toward Maud and the count. Mrs. De Lancey Smythe seized this opportunity to say a few words in favor of the Count de Sonde, for it was evident that Mr. Warren had taken a violent dislike to the young man. Had some one persuaded the widow to make this appeal, or was she genuinely attracted by the young French nobleman?

Mr. Stuart found himself agreeably surprised by Monsieur Duval. When the sun

began to sink, and the tea drinkers prepared to return to their hotel, Mr. Duval occupied a seat in the Stuart automobile. Moreover, when he said good-bye on the hotel veranda, he carried with him two invitations. One was to dine with the Stuart party that very evening, the other, to go with them the next day on a picnic.

No sooner was Bab out of the automobile than she determined to run up to Marian's room. She knew the widow had not yet returned. Bab found the number of Marian's room from the hotel clerk. Then she got in the elevator and went up to the top floor of the hotel.

She knocked at a door in the middle of a long narrow passage, and a faint voice said: "Come in."

Bab entered a small bed room situated under the eaves of the hotel roof. There were three trunks in the tiny chamber which overlooked a court yard. The room was very close and hot. Marian was on the bed. She had cried herself to sleep. At Bab's knock she opened her heavy eyes.

"Why, Barbara!" she exclaimed. "It is awfully good of you to come up to see me, but Mama would have three fits if she knew you had seen this room. I am glad you have come, because I have something special to tell you. I——" Poor Marian hesitated and stopped.

Barbara looked at her with questioning eyes.

"I am afraid it is dreadfully disloyal of me to say another word." Marian pressed her hands to her temples. "And I haven't anything really definite to tell you. But, oh Barbara, I have a suspicion that something may happen soon! Will you remember that I had nothing to do with it, and that I mean to prevent it if I can?"

Barbara, completely mystified, hardly knew what to reply.

"Do you mean to warn me, Marian?" she asked her new friend. "Do you mean that something is going to happen that may concern us?"

"No; not exactly," Marian answered. Then she made an impetuous movement. "Please don't question me," she begged. "There is a reason why I dare not answer your questions. Forget what I have said, if you can. But for goodness' sake, don't mention to Mama that I have talked with you. I sometimes wonder what will become of us. Things can't go on much longer. There is sure to be a grand crash. But please go, now, Barbara, Mama might come in and she would

be very angry to find you here. I will see you to-night.”

Barbara did not meet Mrs. De Lancey Smythe as she left Marian’s room, but she did run across her in the evening. The widow was hurrying through a side corridor in the hotel. She was wrapped in a long dark cloak, and appeared to be trying to leave the hotel by stealth. Bab drew back into one end of the corridor until the widow had disappeared, then she walked slowly out on the piazza. Marian’s warning was ringing in her ears. What was it that Marian had feared might happen, and why did her mother leave the hotel in that stealthy mysterious manner?

On the piazza Bab found her own friends enjoying the beauty of the night. Maud and the Count de Sonde were talking just outside the group.

“Do you know what I heard to-day?” remarked Mr. Stuart. “I understand that there is a swindler abroad at Palm Beach. A woman at that.”

“You don’t mean it,” exclaimed Miss Sallie. “How dreadful!”

“It seems,” continued Mr. Stuart, “that the detectives have been on the watch for her for some time, but so far she has been too clever for them. However, they have traced her to the Beach, but among the hundreds of tourists they have lost their clue. They do not despair of finding her yet, and a strict watch is being kept. She may be apprehended at any moment.”

“Well, let’s hope she doesn’t attempt to swindle us,” commented Ruth. “By the way where is Monsieur Duval? He disappeared mysteriously the moment dinner was over.”

“He had an engagement, and begged to be excused,” replied Mr. Stuart. “He said he would return in a little while.”

“Speaking of angels,” remarked Mollie, “here he comes now.”

“Yes, and he’s towing along our pet aversion Mrs. D. L. Smythe,” said Grace.

Bab looked toward the approaching pair.

Monsier Duval and Mrs. De Lancey Smythe not yet aware that they were under the observation of the Stuart party, were deeply engaged in conversation.

Barbara, watching closely, saw the Frenchman glance up, then he quickly dropped his eyes, and an expression of cautious cunning flitted over his face. His

lips moved, the widow gave a half frightened look, then her expression of absorption changed to one of languid indifference. As the two neared the steps, from their demeanor, one would have concluded them to be mere acquaintances.

What was the meaning of it all? Barbara wondered. And what secret understanding was there between those two people? Bab's observant eye noted that Monsieur Duval carried over one arm the heavy cloak in which she had seen the widow wrapped a short time before. Had Mrs. De Lancey Smythe gone to meet the Frenchman, and, if so why did she not do so openly? Suppose Mrs. De Lancey Smythe were an impostor, with a game to play. Suppose Mr. Duval were—Barbara sighed impatiently. She was letting her imagination run riot. She resolved to dismiss the whole tiresome business from her mind, and enjoy herself.

At that moment Maud Warren came languidly forward, the little count at her heels. "Miss Stuart," she announced, "I have persuaded Papa to let me give a masked ball before we go back to New York. There are a number of smart people here at Palm Beach, and I want the count to see one of our American balls. We shall wear our masks until midnight, and then have a cotillon afterwards."

"That will be delightful, Maud!" replied Ruth. "And that reminds me. Father and I have never arranged about our picnic to-morrow. Don't you think it would be fun to motor over to the big ostrich farm and have our luncheon there under the trees?"

"Very delightful," agreed Maud. "Don't you think so, Count?"

"I shall be charmed," replied the little count, with an exaggerated bow.

"But we shan't," whispered Mollie, naughtily to Barbara, under cover of general conversation.

"In order to cure, we must endure," returned Bab in an undertone. Whereupon the sisters both chuckled softly.

At this juncture Marian appeared at the end of the piazza, and came slowly toward the group. Her eyes still showed traces of tears, and she looked ill and wretched.

Mr. Stuart greeted Marian kindly, and immediately invited her to Ruth's picnic. And the invitation, of course, had to include Marian's mother. "I am sorry you



have been ill,” he said courteously, interrupting his conversation with Mr. Duval.

Monsieur Duval’s eyes rested curiously on Marian. His look searched her face. “Perhaps the climate of Palm Beach does not agree with your health,” he suggested. “You do not like it here?”

“It is not a question of what I like or dislike, Mr. Duval,” said Marian curtly.

“But what do you prefer?” persisted the Frenchman with a shade of interest in his manner.

“To mind my own affairs,” returned Marian coldly, turning her back on Monsieur Duval.

## CHAPTER IX

### A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Early the next afternoon the picnickers sallied forth in two automobiles, going first to the villa for the Countess Sophia and Madame de Villiers, then the two cars sped along the country road in the direction of the ostrich farm. Marian, Mollie, Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, Miss Stuart, Barbara, Maud and the Count de Sonde were in the foremost car, while the remainder of the party occupied the car first rented by Mr. Stuart, with Ruth as chauffeur.

“Why don’t you start a song?” called Ruth over her shoulder. “Grace, sing something. Sing ‘My Old Kentucky Home.’”

Grace sang the plaintive old melody in her sweet, high soprano voice.

The Countess Sophia was enchanted. “What a charming song!” she declared. “What an exquisite melody. I have not heard it before. Is it not one of your old southern songs?”

“Won’t you sing, Countess?” begged Mr. Stuart.

The countess shook her head and smiled. “I do not care to sing alone,” she avowed. “But I am sure Monsieur Duval has the throat of a singer. Will you not sing a song of your country, Monsieur?”

“If you will sing a song of your land in return,” answered the Frenchman quickly. Could it be that he, too, was curious to discover to a certainty the Countess Sophia von Stolberg’s nationality?

The countess dropped her eyes under Mr. Duval’s steady gaze.

“I do not sing without an accompaniment, Monsieur,” she said briefly.

Madame de Villiers looked annoyed. Grace and Ruth wondered why the countess should be so secretive. She spoke French, German and English almost equally well. On her library table Ruth had discovered a number of Italian books.

Monsieur Duval did not press his request. The Frenchman had very polished

manners. Instead in a full baritone voice he sang the “Marseillaise.” His audience was profoundly stirred. “You are a patriot, Mr. Duval,” Mr. Stuart remarked.

Monsieur Duval’s expression changed. But he said nothing. It was impossible to translate his peculiar look.

“Do sing for us, Countess,” begged Grace later. “I know you have a wonderful voice.”

“Remember, you are to give us a song of your country,” Mr. Duval persisted.

The countess made no reply to him. But in a voice clear as a bell she sang:

“Thou art like unto a flower.”

“But that is an English song,” expostulated Mr. Duval when the countess had finished.

“Yes, but it was written first by a German poet: *Du bist wie eine blume*,” sang the countess, this time in German. “Shall I try it in French and Italian for you? The little song has been translated into every tongue.”

It was evident to her listeners that the Countess Sophia von Stolberg was proficient in half a dozen languages.

Grace thought she caught a glimpse of concealed amusement on Madame de Villiers’s face. But the stately old woman said nothing.

The motor party had now arrived at the ostrich farm. Mollie, the countess and Bab ran on ahead. Ruth slipped her arm through Maud Warren’s. The count joined them, but Ruth did not withdraw her arm. Maud did not seem to mind Ruth’s “playing gooseberry.” Maud was really becoming fond of the “Automobile Girls.” It was plain, however, that the Count de Sonde had eyes only for Maud.

The Count de Sonde, who wore high heeled shoes to make him look taller, walked with the two girls. He talked constantly, using his hands and shoulders to emphasize his remarks.

“You see, Mademoiselle Maud,” he explained. “My parents died when I was a mere infant. Most of my life I have spent in Paris. I do not often go to the Chateau de Sonde. But I love dearly the home of my ancestors.”

“How much land have you around your castle, Count?” asked Ruth.

The count looked annoyed at the question. “It is a very large estate,” he answered vaguely.

But Ruth was determined to secure definite information. “Is your chateau on a hill or in a valley?” she next inquired.

The count shrugged his shoulders. “It is on the side of a mountain, overlooking a valley,” he declared.

The picnic party had now arrived in front of the cages containing the ostriches. The great birds were strolling about in fine disdain.

But Ruth’s mind dwelt on the Chateau de Sonde. She was frankly curious about it. “Have you ever visited the Count de Sonde at his chateau, Mr. Duval?” inquired Ruth, who happened to be standing next the Frenchman.

image

#### The Count Walked With the Two Girls.

“A number of times, Miss Stuart,” answered Monsieur Duval. “The count and I are old friends.”

“Is it built on a mountain or in a valley?” queried Ruth. She did not know herself exactly why she repeated her question.

“The Chateau de Sonde nestles in the heart of a valley,” was Monsieur Duval’s prompt answer.

He caught Ruth’s eyes fixed on him with an expression of wonder. But it was Ruth, not Monsieur Duval, who blushed furiously. The man’s eyes were gray and inscrutable. “Why do you ask, Mademoiselle?” he inquired.

“I don’t know,” Ruth answered lamely. The man frightened her. He seemed so brilliant, so traveled, so strong, so dangerous. And yet, he had just told Ruth a lie. Why should he pretend he had visited at the Chateau de Sonde?

“Come, everybody; it is time for luncheon,” called Mr. Stuart an hour later, when his guests had finished their survey of the ostrich cages.

The “Automobile Girls” opened their immense lunch basket, which the chauffeur had set under the trees. The Countess Sophia insisted on helping the

girls. She was all radiant smiles and gayety. She hummed a song to herself full of delicious, bird-like trills, in a voice that had been wonderfully trained. In every way the countess showed what pleasure she felt in the picnic. So much so that she was easily the central figure of the party.

Finally the entire company seated themselves in a circle on the ground, Maud Warren and her father with flushed faces. They had evidently been having a private altercation about the Count de Sonde. The count however looked serenely unconscious of the fact.

A sense of tranquility and cheerfulness soon stole over every one. The day was enchanting. The chicken and nut sandwiches and other eatables tasted unusually good, and the party did full justice to the tempting luncheon the Stuarts had provided.

All the guests laughed and talked at the same time. Suddenly the countess began to sing again in a low voice: "Knowest thou the land?" from "Mignon."

The others listened with delight.

Down the avenue a vehicle was heard approaching. There was a cloud of dust enveloping it. It was impossible for the picnic party to distinguish the occupants of the carriage. The countess's back was turned toward the equipage. She did not look around. Mollie and Ruth were glad that she did not turn, for they recognized the two foreigners who had frightened the young Countess Sophia in the tea garden the afternoon before.

The men drove up to a palm tree near the spot where Mr. Stuart's guests were eating. They hitched their horse. Then they walked deliberately over to the picnickers. Without a word one of the men reached down. He touched the Countess Sophia von Stolberg on the arm.

Undoubtedly he was German. His face looked threatening and his manner was insulting. His companion waited near him. The Countess Sophia shuddered as the stranger touched her. She trembled and turned pale like a frightened child.

"Madame," said the German, "you are wanted by the police. We have been sent to arrest you."

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe gave a hysterical laugh of triumph.

But the young countess quickly recovered her self-control.

“You have made a mistake,” she returned quietly, to the man, whose hand still rested on her arm. “What have I done to be arrested? You have no right to annoy me.”

“You are the notorious swindler wanted by the police of two continents,” accused the German. “I am here to take you back to France where you are wanted.”

Madame de Villiers now arose. She lifted her great mahogany cane, her face dark with anger.

“You will regret this day’s work,” she announced. “Be gone!”

But she had hardly finished her speech, before Mr. Stuart was on his feet. He seized the intruder by the collar, and before the man could more than raise his hand from the Countess Sophia’s arm, he was hurled several feet away, landing in a heap on the ground.

“You foreign idiot,” cried Mr. Stuart, forgetting his women guests in his anger. “How dare you come here and create a disturbance among my friends. You are without a warrant or a policeman. The Countess Sophia von Stolberg is our friend. You shall pay dearly for your insolence. Leave this place without a second’s delay or I shall lay violent hands on you.”

The two strangers did not dare defy Mr. Stuart. Mr. Warren had also risen and hurried to his friend’s aid and the two Americans looked thoroughly capable of enforcing their commands.

The foreigners went back to their carriage. After a slight delay they drove off, still muttering veiled threats.

When they had disappeared down the avenue, Countess Sophia gave Mr. Stuart her hand.

“I thank you, Monsieur,” she said. “Madame de Villiers and I are alone. It is good to have a protector. I do not know why those men attempted to arrest me without a warrant. I assure you they had not just cause. I believe they were sent by an enemy.”

“Perhaps, Countess,” replied Mr. Stuart, “those two men think you are some one else. I know there is a notorious swindler at large at Palm Beach. It is probably a case of mistaken identity.”

The Countess Sophia made no answer. Barbara, who was watching her closely, saw a look of unmistakable fear leap into her dark eyes at the mention of the word "swindler." Bab glanced quickly about her and encountered the eyes of Monsieur Duval. In them was an expression of cruel triumph that made Bab feel certain that he was in some way responsible for the late unpleasant scene.

## CHAPTER X

### THE SECRET SIGNALS

Ruth was stretched out on a steamer rug on the warm sands, lazily looking out over the blue waters.

Barbara was disporting herself in the waves like a water sprite who had dared to show herself among mortals. Many of the bathers stopped to watch with admiration the figure of the young girl plunging gracefully through the waves.

But Ruth was not watching Barbara. She was thinking deeply.

Why had the Countess Sophia von Stolberg refused to prosecute the two foreigners who had deliberately insulted her?

Immediately after their return from the picnic Mr. Stuart had written the young countess a note. He suggested that he have the two strangers put out of their hotel, even driven away from Palm Beach. But the countess's reply had been polite, but firm. No; she did not wish to prosecute her annoyers. The men had simply made a mistake. There would be less notoriety if she let the matter drop.

Mr. Stuart was not satisfied. He assured the countess that he and Mr. Warren had sufficient influence to have the two men sent away without the least publicity attending their dismissal. Still the decision of the countess remained unchanged. She graciously thanked Mr. Stuart for his kindness, but she really preferred to let the whole matter drop.

There was nothing more to be said.

Ruth now observed these same two men. They were seated not far from her, watching Barbara with stolid admiration. So far as Ruth knew they had not repeated their attempt to arrest the countess. But they had not confessed their error, nor offered to apologize either to Mr. Stuart or to the countess.

The story that there was a notorious woman swindler at large at Palm Beach was now common gossip.

"It is absurd to suspect the countess," Ruth thought as she reviewed the recent



disagreeable incident. "If the scandal goes any further I shall side with her, no matter what may be the consequences." Ruth ended her reverie by making this last statement aloud. But she was sorry a second later.

A voice spoke at her elbow. "Do you think, Mademoiselle Ruth," it inquired, "that suspicion of a certain person will reach a point where you will be required to take sides?"

Ruth started. She had been in a brown study, and was embarrassed and annoyed at having been caught speaking aloud.

The voice belonged to Monsieur Duval. He had come dripping from his swim in the ocean, and had laid himself in the sand directly behind Ruth without her noticing him.

"To what suspicion do you refer, Mr. Duval?" Ruth asked haughtily. She knew this clever Frenchman could read her mind like an open book. But she did not intend to confess that her remark had referred to the young countess.

Monsieur Duval smiled. "I am afraid I listened at the door of your thoughts," he said. "I think I can guess with whom you intend to take sides. But I promise not to betray your secret. I am sorry I overheard your last remark. Yet I do not see why you think the Countess Sophia may be accused of being this notorious woman criminal. It is true she allows herself to be persecuted without reason. She will not appear at this, or any other hotel, and keeps herself as much in seclusion as possible. Also she will not tell us the country of her birth, nor does she refer to any friends, but——" Monsieur Duval stopped.

Ruth was indignant at the array of evidence that this Monsieur Duval was able to present against the young countess. She flushed guiltily, but wisely refrained from answering the Frenchman.

Mr. Duval was obliged to continue the conversation.

"Do you wish to help your friend?" he asked Ruth quietly.

"Of course," Ruth replied warmly.

The Frenchman leaned over. "Then watch everything, but say nothing. And, above all things, do not have a too accurate memory."

Ruth was about to make an angry retort, when Mr. Duval skilfully changed the subject of their conversation. He praised Bab's wonderful diving. It reminded

him of Neapolitan boys he had seen diving for pennies. Mr. Duval next told Ruth of a walking trip he had once made through southern Italy. She listened very much against her will to the entertaining Frenchman and it was with distinct relief that she saw Miss Sallie approaching them, dressed in an imported lavender linen and carrying a parasol and a book.

Maud and her count appeared from the opposite direction. They also came forward to join Ruth and Monsieur Duval. Bab ran up the beach, shaking the drops of water from her blue bathing suit, her wet curls sparkling in the sun.

Mr. Duval did not wish to remain with so large a party. His words had been for Ruth's ears alone. As Miss Stuart approached he bowed ironically to Ruth and strolled away.

"How glad I am that we are not in the cold, sleet and blizzards of Chicago, child," Miss Stuart remarked, bringing Ruth back to earth again. "The Countess Sophia was right in saying our American climate in the north is unbearable in the winter time. I never felt so well in my life as I do in this delightful place."

"Aunt Sallie," asked Ruth thoughtfully, ignoring the weather, and going back to the idea that was uppermost in her mind. "Do you think the Countess Sophia could be in need of money?"

"How can I tell, child?" replied Miss Sallie. "The countess dresses plainly, but her gowns are in excellent taste. They are made by a modiste in Vienna, who, I happen to know, is one of the most expensive in Europe. On the other hand Madame de Villiers and the countess live very quietly. They keep only two servants. But the countess has the air of a woman of wealth and culture."

"Are we going to dine with the countess to-morrow night?" asked Ruth impetuously.

"Certainly, child," Miss Sallie replied, her serenity undisturbed. "It is true your father may not have returned from his fishing trip, but there is no reason why we should not go without him."

Ruth closed her eyes. Could it be possible that they might be invited to eat food paid for by money gained dishonestly? Surely Monsieur Duval could not have spoken the truth!

"Here comes that Mrs. De Lancey Smythe," remarked Miss Sallie with sudden energy. "I do wish that woman would keep away from us."

“Aunt Sallie,” said Ruth, “what do you dislike most about Mrs. De Lancey Smythe?”

“Don’t ask me, my dear,” returned Miss Stuart rather impatiently. “Everything I should say. I must confess that the very sight of her irritates me.”

“There is something peculiar about her, at any rate,” said Ruth, “I have seen her face grow hard as rock and look positively wicked when she thought no one was noticing her. Marian is afraid of her, too.”

“Nonsense, Ruth,” replied Miss Sallie severely. “You and Barbara let your imaginations have too free rein. I don’t approve of the woman and dislike her intensely, but I am not going to make her out an ogre.”

“She is, though,” persisted Ruth. “That’s why you don’t like her, only you don’t know it yourself. Some day you’ll see I am right. Oh, here come Mollie and Grace. What’s new, chilluns?” and springing to her feet Ruth called to Bab then hurried toward the approaching girls.

Mollie and Grace had been out in a boat all morning with some new friends they had made at the hotel. As Ruth walked toward them she noticed that Mollie’s cheeks were very red, and that she wore a look of suppressed excitement. Grace seemed almost equally agitated. Before she could reach them, however, she was hailed by a crowd of young people who were strolling on the beach, and she and Bab were obliged to stop and hold conversation.

Mollie felt that it was imperative to summon Bab and Ruth. How could she manage without being observed? A sudden thought came to her. Putting her hand back to her curls she hastily untied the ribbon that bound them. The ribbon was blue. In an instant Mollie twisted it into a bow knot and pinned it on her left shoulder. Would Barbara and Ruth remember what the secret signal meant?

Mollie need not have wondered. Hastily separating themselves from the crowd of talkers Bab and Ruth sped up the beach to join Mollie and Grace.

“What is it, Mollie?” cried Bab out of breath. “I remember the blue ribbon. It was to signify: ‘I have important news to communicate!’ What has happened?”

“As we passed the countess’s villa on the launch, this morning,” Mollie whispered mysteriously, “we saw a red flag tied to one of the posts of her pavilion. The countess wishes to see us on important business!”

## CHAPTER XI

### WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

“Shall we go to the countess at once, Ruth?” asked Barbara.

Ruth hesitated. “The chauffeur has gone away for the day,” she replied. “And we have no one to take us by boat to the villa.”

Mollie’s blue eyes filled with tears. She had feared that Ruth suspected their lovely countess. Now she was sure of it. How absurd for Ruth to suggest they could not use the automobile because her chauffeur was away. The “Automobile Girls” had traveled for days at a time, with Ruth as her own chauffeur, while the trip to the countess’s villa represented only a few miles.

“How can you be so cruel, Ruth?” Mollie cried. “You just don’t want to go to the countess’s aid because you have listened to tales about her from that horrid Mrs. Smythe.”

“I haven’t listened to Mrs. Smythe, Mollie,” Ruth answered soothingly. “But I have been thinking. You can’t deny that there is a good deal of mystery surrounding the Countess Sophia. There are many things that it seems to me she might explain. I don’t wish to be hateful, and of course I can drive our car over to the countess’s, though I have never taken out such a big car alone before. Come; let’s get ready.”

Barbara hesitated. “Mollie,” she protested, “I don’t think it is right for us to make Ruth take us to see the countess, if she would rather not go.”

Mollie bit her lips. “Ruth Stuart,” she said, “you talk about the countess explaining things. What have you ever asked her to explain? If there is anything you want to know about her, ask her to tell you. It is not fair to keep silent, and still not to trust her.”

Ruth had a sudden conviction that she would as soon approach the Queen of England to inquire into her private affairs as to ask questions of the Countess Sophia von Stolberg.

“Well, Mollie, I will say this much,” Ruth conceded. “I never doubt our countess

when I am with her. She is so beautiful and sweet that I forget to be suspicious. But, when I am away from her, I have just wondered a little, that's all! Now, don't be cross, Barbara, but come with me. I am going to get out the automobile. Grace, will you and Mollie explain to Aunt Sallie where we are going?"

"I'll tell you what, Ruth," Bab suggested. "Let us make up our minds not to suspect the countess because of any gossip we hear. There seems to be a great deal of talking going on, but nobody makes any definite charges. The countess has been delightful to us. I am afraid I am on her side as much as Mollie. The countess, right or wrong, but still the countess!"

"Loyal Bab!" cried Ruth, patting Barbara's hand. "See, I cast all my suspicions away!" Ruth waved her other hand. "The cause of the countess is my cause also. I shall fight for her, through thick and thin." Ruth looked as though she meant what she said.

The "Automobile Girls" were soon on their way to the countess's pretty villa. Mollie still held herself apart from the other three girls. She felt that no one of them had risen to the defence of her adored countess with the ardor she expected.

Ruth was running the car slowly. It was only a few miles to the villa. Ruth was a cautious chauffeur, and was not in the habit of managing so large an automobile.

As her car moved quietly and steadily toward its destination, another small automobile dashed past it. Ruth glanced about quickly. The man who drove the small car was exceeding the speed limit. He was alone. He wore a long dust coat with the collar turned up to his ears; he had a cap pulled low over his face, and he wore an immense pair of green goggles. But Ruth's quick eyes recognized him. Her three companions paid little attention to the man.

"Bab," said Ruth, at almost the same instant that the small car swept by them, "it is Monsieur Duval who is driving that car!"

"Well," replied Bab, "what of it? I did not know Mr. Duval was a motorist. But I am not surprised, for he seems to know almost everything."

"Bab, I think he is on his way to see the Countess Sophia von Stolberg," Ruth announced with conviction.

"He does not know the countess, does he?" Grace inquired. "I think he was introduced to her only through us."

“I don’t know what Monsieur Duval knows and what he doesn’t know,” explained Ruth. “But I should like to find out. Anyhow, I am going to beat him to the countess’s house. If she has something important to tell us, Monsieur Duval shall not keep us from hearing it.”

Ruth put on full speed and started her car in pursuit of the flying automobile in front of her. In a few seconds she drew near the automobile. The little car was on the right side of the road and making its best speed. Ruth sounded her horn. She swerved her great car to the left in order to pass the smaller one.

Bab uttered a cry of terror. Mollie and Grace both screamed. Ruth’s face turned white, but she had no time to scream.

The small motor car just in front of her immense automobile turned like a flash. It swept across the road immediately in the path of Ruth’s on-coming car, and not more than a few paces ahead of her.

It was either a mad piece of foolishness on the part of the chauffeur, or a magnificent dare. At the moment Ruth did not stop to wonder whether the man ahead of her had deliberately risked his life and theirs in order to accomplish some purpose. All her ability as a driver was needed to meet the situation.

Ruth’s hands never left the steering wheel of her car. In less than a half second, she put on the full stop brake. With a terrific wrench her great automobile settled back. It stopped just one foot this side of the car that had crossed their path.

Ruth was white with anger. She saw, a moment later, that the driver ahead of her had accomplished his design. For no sooner had Ruth’s car stopped, than the other motorist forged ahead. Ruth resumed the chase, but she was obliged to be careful. She dared not risk the lives of her friends by driving too close to the other car. The man ahead might repeat his trick. Ruth could not be sure that she could always stop her motor in so brief a space of time and distance.

So the smaller of the two automobiles arrived first at the countess’s villa.

The Countess Sophia von Stolberg evidently expecting a visit from the “Automobile Girls,” sat at her piano in her drawing-room, playing one of Chopin’s nocturnes. At the sound of the automobile outside on the avenue the countess left her music and ran out on her veranda to meet her young visitors. But instead of the four girls a heavy, well-built man in a long dust coat and goggles approached the countess. The countess did not recognize him at once. A suave voice soon enlightened her. “Madame,” it said. “I have come to see you on

an important matter of business. I must see you alone.”

“What business can you have with me, Monsieur Duval?” asked the young countess coldly. But her voice trembled slightly.

“I bring you news of a friend,” declared Mr. Duval quietly.

“I have no friends whom you could know, Monsieur,” answered the Countess Sophia.

“No?” her visitor replied, shrugging his shoulders and speaking in a light bantering tone. “Shall I inform you, then, and your young friends, whom I now see approaching?”

Ruth’s motor car was now in plain sight. The four girls rushed forward to join the countess.

At the same moment the tap-tap of a stick was heard inside the house. Madame de Villiers appeared, followed by Johann with a tray of lemonade.

The countess spoke quickly. “No, no, you must say nothing to me, now. I cannot listen to you. Please go away.”

Bab noticed that the countess was trembling when she took her hand.

Monsieur Duval bowed courteously to Ruth. “Mademoiselle,” he declared, “I owe you an apology. I fear I am but a poor chauffeur. My car swerved in front of yours on the road. It was unpardonable. I offer you many thanks for your skill. You saved us from a bad smash-up.”

Ruth colored. Hot words rose to her lips. But she feared to say too much. She looked at Mr. Duval gravely. “I think, Mr. Duval,” she remarked, as suavely as the Frenchman could have spoken, “it will be wise for you not to run a motor car unless you learn how to handle it better. You are right. We were exposed to great danger from your carelessness.”

Madame de Villiers now gazed sternly at Monsieur Duval. “Have I the pleasure of your acquaintance?” she inquired coldly, turning her lorgnette on the Frenchman.

Monsieur Duval lost some of his self-assurance in the presence of this beak-nosed old lady. “I met you at Mr. Stuart’s picnic, Madame,” he explained. “Good-bye, ladies.” Monsieur Duval bowed low. Then he turned to the countess.

“I will deliver my news to you, Countess Sophia, whenever you are pleased to hear it.” A moment later the Frenchman disappeared. But on his way back to his hotel he smiled. “If life were not a lottery it would be too stupid to endure. Yet this is the first time in my career that a group of young girls have tried to beat me at my own game.”

When the Frenchman had finally gone the countess turned to Mollie, and kissed her. Then she looked affectionately at Bab, Grace and Ruth.

“You saw my signal, didn’t you?” she asked, smiling. “What an energetic society to come to me in such a hurry! I really have something to tell you. It is something serious. Yet I must ask you to trust me, if I tell you only part of a story. I cannot tell you all. As it is much too beautiful to stay indoors, suppose we go to my pavilion down by the water.”

On the way to the boathouse, Ruth stopped to embrace Mollie. “Mollie, darling, forgive me!” she whispered. “I promise you never to doubt our lovely countess again. She is perfect.”

When the Countess Sophia and the four “Automobile Girls” were safely in the boathouse, the young hostess sighed. “I am sorry to talk about disagreeable things to-day,” she murmured. “You cannot understand what a pleasure it is to me to know four such charming young girls. I have had so few companions in my life. Indeed I have been lonely, always.”

The “Automobile Girls” were silent. They hardly knew what to reply.

“I must try to tell you why I sent for you,” the countess went on. “I want to warn you——”

“About the Count de Sonde?” cried Mollie, who had never gotten over her first prejudice.

“Yes,” replied the countess slowly. “I think I promised to help you save your girl friend Maud Warren. I am afraid she and the count are more interested in each other than you girls imagine.” The countess faltered and looked fearfully about her. “You must not let Miss Warren marry the Count de Sonde,” she murmured. “You must stop such a wedding at all hazards. The Count de Sonde is——”

“Is what?” asked Barbara.

The countess shook her head. Again she blushed painfully. “I cannot tell you



now,” explained the countess. “But I know this. If Miss Warren marries the Count de Sonde she will regret it all her life.”

“But how can we prevent Maud’s marrying the count if she wishes to do so?” queried practical Bab. “Unless you can tell us something definite against the count, we cannot go to Mr. Warren or Maud. Mr. Warren has already forbidden Maud to have anything to do with the Count de Sonde, but Maud continually disobeys her father.”

“I am sorry,” said the young countess hesitatingly. “I wish I dared tell you more. But I can explain nothing. Only I warn you to be careful.”

“Need we to fear the Frenchman, Monsieur Duval?” Ruth asked thoughtfully.

The countess was silent for a moment. Then she said slowly, “You must fear him most of all!”

## CHAPTER XII

### MAUD REFUSES TO BE RESCUED

When the "Automobile Girls" chaperoned by Miss Sallie, descended to the hotel ball room that evening, where a hop was in progress, the orchestra was playing the "Blue Danube" and Maud and the Count de Sonde were waltzing together. The spectators seated along the wall smiled in spite of themselves for the count's style of dancing was far from graceful. His idea of waltzing consisted in whirling his partner round and round, and as Maud was at least four inches taller than the count and very thin, the effect was indescribably ridiculous.

"How absurd the count looks!" Bab exclaimed to Ruth. "Just look at those high heels and that strutting walk! Do you suppose Maud Warren can really care for him?"

"No; I don't think she cares for him at all," Ruth returned. "It is the lure of his title that has fascinated Maud. The title, 'Count de Sonde' is like music in her ears."

"Do you think Mr. Warren would disinherit Maud, if she married the count?" asked Bab.

Ruth shook her head. "Mr. Warren gave Maud half a million dollars in her own name a year ago," Ruth explained. "So, you see, she is an heiress already. Besides, Mr. Warren would never forsake Maud. He simply adores her. I think he went off on that fishing trip with father just to keep from seeing Maud carry on. He thinks Aunt Sallie may be able to influence her while he is gone. But do look at Miss Sarah Stuart, Bab!"

Miss Sallie swept down the ball-room floor in a handsome black satin and jet evening gown, with Mrs. De Lancey Smythe in her wake.

There was the fire of battle in Miss Stuart's eye. On the widow's cheeks burned two flaming signals of wrath.

"Maud Warren was left in my care by her father, Mrs. Smythe," declared Miss Sallie. "In Mr. Warren's absence I forbid Maud's going about unchaperoned with

the Count de Sonde.”

“Miss Warren is not a child, Miss Stuart,” replied Mrs. De Lancey Smythe angrily. “If she chooses to go about with the count I hardly see how you can prevent it. The Count de Sonde is a noble, trustworthy young man.”

“Miss Warren shall not go with him against my wishes,” replied Miss Stuart quietly, “and I fail to see how the matter can possibly interest you.”

Mrs. De Lancey Smythe’s voice trembled with rage. “You appear to be excessively strict with Miss Warren, Miss Stuart,” she returned, “yet you allow your niece and her friends to associate, every day, with a woman who is entirely unknown to you, a woman about whom this entire hotel is talking.”

“Whom do you mean?” Miss Sallie demanded. She was exceedingly angry.

“Mean?” Mrs. De Lancey Smythe laughed mockingly. “I mean this so called Countess Sophia von Stolberg. She is no more a countess than I am. She is a fugitive and a swindler. She will be arrested as soon as there is sufficient evidence against her.”

The “Automobile Girls” had moved up close to Miss Sallie. They waited to hear what she would say in regard to the countess.

“I do not believe the countess to be an impostor. She is our friend,” replied Miss Stuart. “I think we need have no further conversation. Miss Warren will do as I request.” Without answering the other woman moved away with flashing eyes and set lips, leaving Miss Sallie in triumphant possession of the situation.

In a few moments Maud Warren came over to where Miss Sallie and the “Automobile Girls” were still standing.

“Maud, won’t you come up to our room to-night after the dance?” Ruth urged. “We thought it would be jolly to make some fudge in a chafing dish.”

“Can you cook?” laughed Maud. “How funny! It is awfully good of you to ask me to join you, but I have another engagement for this evening.”

“Maud,” said Miss Sallie firmly, “your father left you in my charge. I cannot permit you to keep an engagement with the Count de Sonde.”

Maud was speechless with astonishment. No one had ever forbidden her to do anything in her life. Her father had always tried persuasion and argument. Ruth’s

eyes twinkled as she saw the effect Miss Sallie's firmness had upon Maud. Greatly to her surprise Maud Warren answered quite meekly: "Very well, Miss Stuart. I will not see him if you do not wish it."

The "Automobile Girls" breathed a sigh of relief. They had feared another battle between Miss Sallie and Maud.

"This is jolly!" exclaimed Maud Warren, an hour later. The five girls were in Ruth's sitting-room. They were eating delicious squares of warm chocolate fudge.

"I am glad you are enjoying yourself," replied Ruth. "We would be glad to see you often, but you always seem to be busy."

Maud tried to look unconscious. "It's the count's fault. The poor fellow has a dreadful crush on me," she sighed.

"Do you care for him?" asked Barbara bluntly.

Maud simpered. "I really don't know," she replied. "I think the Count de Sonde has a beautiful soul. He tells me I have a remarkable mind—such sympathy, such understanding!"

Ruth choked over a piece of fudge. The other girls seemed to regard her accident as a tremendous joke. Maud was entirely unconscious that she had anything to do with their merriment.

"Then you really like the count very much!" exclaimed Mollie, opening her pretty blue eyes so wide that Maud was amused.

"You dear little innocent thing!" returned Miss Warren. "Of course I think the count a very interesting man. I don't deny he has taken my fancy. But as for being in love with him—well, that is another thing."

"Do you really know anything about the count, Maud?" asked Ruth. "Your father doesn't approve of him, and don't you think he knows best?"

"Oh, father never approves of any of my friends," complained Maud Warren impatiently. "But Mrs. De Lancey Smythe is on my side. She likes the count."

"But do you know much about Mrs. De Lancey Smythe?" Ruth went on.

Maud was nettled. "Mrs. De Lancey Smythe is a Virginian, and belongs to an old southern family," she returned.

The “Automobile Girls” looked uncomfortable. It was Ruth who finally spoke.

“I hope you won’t be angry, Maud. It is only because we like you that I am going to tell you something you ought to know. Some one told me to warn you to be careful.”

“Careful about what?” cried Maud, though her flushed face betrayed the answer she expected.

“The Count de Sonde,” replied Ruth.

“But what have you heard against him?” demanded Maud indignantly.

It was Ruth’s turn to flush. What had she heard? If only the countess had been a little less vague in her accusations against the count.

“I am afraid I don’t know anything very definite to tell you,” Ruth confessed, in an embarrassed tone. “Yet we have heard rumors about the count. Foreign noblemen are often fortune-hunters, you know.”

“My dear Ruth, the Count de Sonde is not in need of money,” protested Maud. “He is very wealthy. Only the other day he showed me a letter from his lawyer. It spoke of two hundred thousand francs. It is true the letter was written in French. But the count translated it for me. And then, of course, I know a little French myself.”

“Oh, well,” sighed Ruth, “perhaps we have no right to suspect him. But, Maud, I beg of you to go slowly. You may be mistaken in the count. Think how you would regret it if you were to marry him and find afterwards that he had deceived you.”

“Marry the count!” Maud’s tones expressed great astonishment, then she gave a satisfied laugh. “Don’t worry about my affairs. The count is a real nobleman,” she declared.

A knock sounded at the door, and a bellboy handed Ruth a note. It was addressed to Miss Warren. Ruth gave it to her. Maud opened it. A gratified smile overspread her face, then turning to the “Automobile Girls” she said: “Will you please excuse me, girls, I want to go up to my room for a little while. I will be back in a few minutes.”

The girls ate their fudge in silence for a time. Maud did not return.

“I wonder if Maud is coming back?” remarked Barbara, after a little. “Somehow, I am sorry for Maud. It must be dangerous to be so rich and so silly at the same time.”

“I am afraid Maud is hopeless,” Ruth contended. “I don’t believe it is going to do the slightest good for us to warn her against the count. I wonder if we could manage to save her in any other way?”

Miss Sallie came into the room. “Where is Maud Warren?” she demanded immediately.

The “Automobile Girls” could only explain Maud had gone to her room.

Miss Sallie rang the bell, and sent a maid to inquire for Maud.

The answer came back a few moments later. “Miss Warren had left the hotel for the evening with several friends.”

Miss Stuart said nothing. But the “Automobile Girls” knew Miss Sallie would never forgive Maud Warren for her disobedience.

The four girls were almost ready to say good night, when another light tap sounded at their door.

The girls lowered their voices. Perhaps Maud had lost heart, and had returned to them after all.

Barbara went to the door. It was Marian De Lancey Smythe who had knocked. She wished to speak with Bab for a moment.

Five minutes later Barbara returned to her friends, looking considerably mystified.

“Now, Barbara Thurston, what did Marian Smythe have to say to you?” demanded Mollie. “It is not fair, your having secrets with her from the rest of us.”

“Oh, Marian asked me if we were going to the countess’s to dinner to-morrow night,” Bab replied.

“What a strange question!” exclaimed Grace Carter. “I don’t see why she should care where we go to dinner.”

“Perhaps she had some plan or other on hand herself that she wanted us to take

part in,” suggested Mollie.

Bab was silent.

“By the way,” exclaimed Ruth, “did you know I received a letter to-day from darling Olive Prescott? She and Jack have arrived in Paris, and have set up housekeeping in the dearest little flat in the Rue de Varennes. They live on the top floor, and Jack has the front room for his studio. Of course Olive declares Jack is the best husband in the world. He is painting Olive’s portrait for the Paris Salon, and working desperately hard so as to have it finished by April. Come, let’s go to bed.”

Just as Barbara was dropping off to sleep Ruth gave her a little shake.

“Tell me Barbara Thurston, what Marian De Lancey Smythe said to you in the hall!”

“I told you, child,” murmured Bab hesitatingly.

“Honor bright, did you tell us everything, Bab Thurston?”

“No-o-o, not everything,” admitted Bab. “This is exactly what Marian said: ‘Barbara are you going to dine with the countess to-morrow night?’ ‘Yes,’ I replied. Then she said: ‘You had better not go. But if you do go, come home early, and don’t ask me the reason, why.’”

“We’ll go, sure as fate!” exclaimed Ruth. “No matter what Marian says.”

## CHAPTER XIII

### A SURPRISE PARTY

It had been a long day of uninterrupted pleasure for the “Automobile Girls”—one of those sparkling, brilliant days that seem to belong peculiarly to Florida in the early spring.

All morning the girls had cruised around the lake in a launch. Later in the day they had bathed in the salt water of the Atlantic. After luncheon they had played several sets of tennis; and, later Miss Sallie had taken them to the cocoanut grove to drink lemonade and listen to the music.

Miss Sallie had not spoken either to Maud Warren or to Mrs. De Lancey Smythe since the evening before. The two women had carefully avoided Miss Stuart. Once inside the cocoanut grove Bab’s sharp eyes soon discovered Maud, Mrs. Smythe and Marian seated at a table concealed by an enormous cluster of palms. They were deep in conversation. Mrs. Smythe was pouring wholesale flattery into Maud’s ears to which the foolish girl was listening eagerly.

Marian espied Barbara and came over to greet Miss Sallie and the “Automobile Girls.” She knew nothing of her mother’s difficulty with Miss Sallie.

“Marian,” whispered Bab, as her new friend sat down next to her, “why did you wish to know whether we were going to the countess’s to dinner to-night?”

“Why do you ask?” said Marian, looking a little frightened.

“Why it sounded to me as though you must have a reason for what you said,” argued Bab. “Were you trying to warn me about anything? Or, is it simply that you do not like the countess?”

“I think the countess is very fascinating,” was Marian’s only reply.

“Won’t you even tell me why you told us to come home early if we did go?” persisted Barbara.

Marian gave a forced laugh. “Oh, I was only giving you a little good advice about sitting up late. But just the same, I’m a very wise person and you had



better take my advice.”

“What are you two girls whispering about?” asked Ruth gayly. “Never have secrets from your little friends. It hurts their feelings, dreadfully.”

“We aren’t having secrets,” responded Barbara. “That is not exactly. I’m only trying to persuade Marian to tell me something. But she’s a regular Sphinx.”

“Which would you rather be, a Sphinx or a chatterbox?” inquired Marian. “And if you would, why would you, and if thus, why, therefore and whereupon?”

“Fine!” exclaimed Ruth. “I never dreamed you could reel off nonsense like that, Marian.”

Marian laughed then rising said, “I suppose I shall have to go back to Mama. I only came over for a minute.” Her eyes again met Barbara’s, and she shook her head slightly, then nodding good-bye to the girls she crossed over to where her mother was still conversing with Maud.

“Why did she shake her head at you, Bab?”

“She says again that we must come home early from the villa, to-night, but she won’t tell me why,” replied Bab. “She evidently knows something that we don’t. She was even more mysterious to-day than she was last night. Do you think we had better go?”

“Go! Of course we will,” cried Ruth. “I don’t believe Marian has anything very serious on her mind.”

“Really, children,” interposed Miss Sallie in an annoyed tone, “if you begin to conjure up mystery over so simple a matter as a dinner invitation I shall feel obliged to keep you all at home. One would think I was chaperoning a party of young sleuths, instead of four normal girls out for a holiday.”

This remark was received with discreet silence, on the part of the four girls, and whatever their thoughts on Marian’s warning were they sternly repressed uttering them aloud during the remainder of the time spent in the grove.

At eight o’clock that night Miss Sallie and the “Automobile Girls” were seated about the countess’s table with only their hostess and her chaperon. There were no other guests at dinner.

“How delightful not to be bored by stupid men!” exclaimed the countess, smiling at her circle of guests. “And what a charming picture the young girls make, Madame de Villiers, do they not? There is not a black coat in our midst to mar the effect of our pretty light frocks. Let me see, Miss Stuart wears violet, dear Madame, gray. And the ‘Automobile Girls’ might represent the four seasons. Ruth, you may be Spring, in your pale green silk frock; little Mollie will have to play Summer in her corn colored gown; Bab’s scarlet frock makes me think of October; and Grace is our Snow Maiden in her white frock.”

The countess wore a beautiful gown of white messaline. Her exquisite face was radiant with child-like pleasure. During the dinner the room rang with her gay laughter. She had never seemed so young, so gracious, and so innocent as she appeared to the “Automobile Girls” that night.

At each plate the countess herself had placed a small bunch of freesias, whose delicate perfume filled the room.

“They are my favorite flowers,” the hostess explained gently, “because they remind me of my beloved Italy.”

At the close of dinner a bowl of bon-bons was passed around the table. There was a good deal of noise and confusion. The girls popped the crackers, drew out the mottoes and read them, and decorated themselves with the fancy paper caps. They were too absorbed in their own pleasure to think, or hear, or see, anything that might have been taking place outside the dining-room. Madame de Villiers, a military cap on her gray hair, looked as fierce and terrifying as a seasoned warrior.

Dinner over, the countess led the way into her drawing-room, where the laughter and gayety continued. Madame de Villiers played brilliantly on the piano. The young people danced until they were exhausted. Suddenly the young countess caught her train up over her arm, and ran out into the centre of the floor. At a nod from her, Madame de Villiers began to play the wild, passionate music of the Russian Mazurka. Then the countess danced. Again and again she went through the intricate and dramatic figures. Her audience was spellbound. No one noted the flight of time.

Finally Bab whispered to Ruth: “Don’t you think we had better go upstairs for our wraps? It is growing late.” The two girls slipped quietly away without a word.

Ascending the stairs to the countess's sleeping room they gathered their arms full of evening coats and scarfs. On a little balcony just outside the window of the sleeping room crouched the figure of a man. His keen eyes watched Bab and Ruth intently as they made ready to leave the room and join their friends downstairs, entirely unconscious of the figure hiding so near to them.

On the first landing of the stairs, Bab stopped. Ruth was ahead.

"Go on, Ruth," Barbara called down to her. "I have left my handkerchief on the dressing table. I will be with you in a minute."

Bab ran quickly back to the room she had just left. Her soft satin slippers made no sound on the floor. It was almost impossible to hear her approach.

Bab paused at the half-open door of the bedchamber in horrified surprise. Inside the room that she and Ruth had just left a man bent over the countess's desk. Her Russian leather writing-case was wide open. The man was running through her papers with a practised hand.

Bab could have turned and run downstairs again. The intruder would never have heard her. But, although Barbara shook with fear for a moment, she placed her wraps softly on the floor and stepped noiselessly back into the room. The man was still unaware of her presence. Bab's eyes roved about the room in search of a weapon. Her hand resting for an instant on the dressing table, came in touch with something metallic and cold. It was a silver shoe horn, but Barbara gripped it eagerly, then she fastened her gaze upon the intruder. He was an old man with a shock of gray hair and a thick beard, that partially concealed the outline of his face. His lips were drawn back until his teeth showed and in his bent attitude he reminded Bab of a gigantic ape. Under the concentration of her gaze the strange apparition looked up and saw her as she stood unflinching, watching with alert eyes his slightest movement. Without uttering a sound the man began to move slowly toward her, his fierce eyes never for a moment leaving her face.

"What are you doing here?" Bab demanded bravely. "You are a thief!"

Instead of running away from him the girl started toward the man. As she did so she raised the shoe horn and pointed it at him. Had the light in the room not been turned low he must have discovered the trick. As it was the faint light, glinting on the polished metal gave it the appearance of a revolver. The ape-like figure began backing slowly toward the balcony. At the window he paused, as if debating whether he dared take the chance of leaping upon her. Bab settled the

question for him by making a threatening move with the supposed weapon. The thief whirled, sprang out on the balcony and dropped to the ground.

Barbara ran to the window. She saw that he had disappeared, then the room began to whirl about her. She thought she was going to faint, for she felt her strength rapidly leaving her.

With a great effort she threw off the weakness that was overcoming her and looked out across the lawn.

During the early part of the evening a large motor boat cruiser, after having put her owner ashore at Palm Beach had dropped down and come to anchor for the night hard by the boathouse belonging to the villa occupied by Countess Sophia. Lights were twinkling from the port holes of the boat and her anchor light swayed listlessly at the stern. There were no other signs of life aboard the boat on the bow of which one at close range might have made out the word "Restless" in raised gold letters.

Barbara wondered if their terrible visitor had come from the boat lying there quietly on the moonlit waters.

Just then the buzz of excited voices was borne to her ears. She heard the Countess Sophia's clear tones, then an excited little scream, mingled with the deep voice of Madame de Villiers raised in angry expostulation.

Still gripping her shoe horn Bab raced down the stairs, and parted the portières that hung between the drawing room and hall.

What she saw was like the tableau from a melodrama. Crowded close to the piano stood the Countess Sophia, while directly in front of her stood Madame de Villiers, thoroughly enraged and brandishing her gold-headed cane at two men who seemed about to seize the young countess. Clustered in a frightened group at one side of the room stood Miss Stuart, Mollie and Grace. Ruth was nowhere to be seen.

One of the men made a sudden stealthy move toward the countess.

"Stand back," commanded Madame de Villiers.

Just then Ruth's clear tones were heard outside the villa. "They're in that room! Oh, hurry please!"

There was a sound of running feet and into the room darted two young men clad

in white yachting clothes, and wearing officers' caps.

"We're just in time," called one of the newcomers. "This is something in our line of sport. Stand aside, girls. We'll soon have these fellows on the run."

With this he grasped one of the men by the collar and dragging him to the open hall door, picked him up and threw him off the veranda onto the drive where he landed with a thud. A moment later his companion had disposed of the other offender in like manner.

"Watch them, Joe," ordered the taller of the two yachtsmen. "If they try to enter the house again, call me. I guess we can give them all they're looking for. I'm going inside to see if there are any more rascals who need attention."

"Oh you brave boys!" exclaimed Madame de Villiers as the young man entered the drawing-room where the women were huddled together talking excitedly.

"I think the credit belongs to the young woman who had the presence of mind to go for help," smiled the youth, bowing to Ruth.

"I had to do something!" exclaimed Ruth. "I saw your boat early in the evening, and when those two men came in here and began threatening the countess I felt that the only thing to do was to see if some one on the yacht would help us."

"Did you see the other man?" asked Barbara anxiously. "He was old and white-haired and looked exactly like an ape. He was upstairs on the balcony, while I was in the countess's room getting our wraps. Then I forgot my handkerchief. When I went back for it he was in the room. I frightened him away with a shoe horn. He thought it was a revolver. He dropped to the ground from the balcony and ran towards the yacht. I thought perhaps he belonged on the boat."

"Not with us," declared the yachtsman. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Captain Tom Halstead and my friend out there on the veranda, is Joseph Dawson, engineer of the motor yacht 'Restless' which lies at anchor just off the shore. We belong to the 'Motor Boat Club' boys, but I doubt if you have ever heard of us before."

Although Tom Halstead and Joe Dawson were strangers to the "Automobile Girls" they are well known to the majority of our readers. Born and brought up on the Maine coast the ocean was their play ground from early boyhood and their fondness for the sea led them to later perfect themselves in the handling of motor boats. These two youths with a number of other sturdy young men

comprised the famous club of young yacht skippers and engineers, organized by a Boston broker and headed by Halstead as fleet captain, with Dawson as fleet engineer.

The reason for the appearance of the yacht "Restless" at this particular place and time is set forth in "THE MOTOR BOAT CLUB IN FLORIDA," the fifth volume of the "MOTOR BOAT CLUB SERIES." That the two young men had responded instantly to Ruth's call for help was in itself the best proof of the manliness and courage of the "Motor Boat" boys.

The countess who in the meantime had recovered from the first shock of the recent disturbance now presented Miss Stuart, Madame de Villiers and the "Automobile Girls" to Tom Halstead. A moment later Joe Dawson entered the room, and more introductions followed.

"Well, they've gone," declared Dawson. "They picked themselves up very slowly and painfully and fairly slunk down the drive. I don't imagine they will trouble you again to-night. However we'd better appoint ourselves as special watchmen about the grounds until morning. I do not wish to seem inquisitive but was the motive of these rascals common robbery?"

"The men did not wish money," replied the countess slowly. "They wished to steal a certain paper I have in my possession in order to destroy it. That is why the old man was searching my writing case. But he did not find the paper, for I carry it about my person. Forgive me for being so mysterious, and believe that my reason for secrecy is one of grave importance."

"There is nothing to forgive, Madam," replied Captain Halstead courteously. "We are only too glad to have been of service to you and beg that you will continue to accept our services at least until to-morrow. Then I would advise you to procure a special officer to remain at the villa in case you should be annoyed further by these villains."

"Thank you," exclaimed the countess, with evident agitation. "I hardly think we shall be troubled again. I do not wish an officer to come here."

"We must return to the hotel, Countess," said Miss Stuart. "It is growing late and my brother will become uneasy about us."

This time the women were assisted with their cloaks by the "Motor Boat" boys and no startling interruption occurred. Ruth ran down the drive a little ahead of the party to where her automobile stood. Then she uttered a sudden cry of

dismay. All four tires had been cut.

“Oh the rascals!” she exclaimed. “How dared they do such a contemptible thing? We’ll have to go back to the villa and telephone for another car. Father will be so worried!”

An indignant babble of feminine voices ensued broken by the deeper tones of the two young men as the party turned to go back to the villa.

Just then a familiar sound was borne to their ears. It was the chug! chug! of a rapidly approaching automobile. A moment later the car rolled up the drive. “It’s Father!” Ruth exclaimed. “Oh, I’m so glad.”

“What seems to be the trouble, Sallie?” queried Mr. Stuart, springing from the car. “It’s after midnight. I grew worried when you didn’t return to the hotel at eleven, so decided I had better come out after you. I rather think we exceeded the speed limit too,” he laughed, turning to the chauffeur.

Then Ruth burst forth with an excited account of the night’s adventure. Mr. Stuart looked grave. “I shall send you an officer in the morning, Countess,” he said.

“These are the two young men who came so gallantly to our rescue, Mr. Stuart,” said the countess, turning to the “Motor Boat” boys who stood modestly in the background.

Mr. Stuart shook hands with both young men, thanking them for their prompt response to the call for help. “We should be pleased to have you dine with us to-morrow evening,” he said.

“Thank you,” responded the young captain, “but we shall weigh anchor in the morning.”

After bidding farewell to the two young men and good night to Madame de Villiers and the Countess Sophia, the “Automobile Girls” and Miss Sallie stepped into the car in which Mr. Stuart had driven to the villa.

“I’ll send a man out to put that other car in shape to-morrow,” he said to Ruth as they sped down the drive. “But, hereafter when this valiant band, known as the ‘Automobile Girls’ pays a visit to the Countess Sophia I shall insist upon accompanying them whether or not I am invited.”

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE PLOT THICKENS

Maud Warren apologized to Miss Sallie. Mr. Warren had been greatly displeased when he heard of his daughter's disobedience, and had reprimanded her in such severe terms, that she anxiously endeavored to conciliate Miss Stuart at the earliest opportunity. Miss Sallie, however received her effusive apology very coldly, and it was some time before Maud felt in the least comfortable in her society.

One evening soon after the eventful dinner with the countess, the "Automobile Girls" started out for a moonlight stroll accompanied by Miss Stuart, Mr. Stuart, Mr. Warren and Maud. Just as they were leaving the hotel Marian Smythe appeared on the veranda and was asked to join them.

"Where have you been keeping yourself, Marian?" asked Ruth.

Marian flushed.

"I've been very busy," she said hastily. Then as if anxious to change the subject: "Have you been to the countess's villa lately?"

"No," replied Ruth quickly. "Not since the dinner there. Have you heard anything about her?"

"No," answered Marian shortly, and relapsed into moody silence.

As they strolled leisurely along Barbara who had been walking ahead with Miss Stuart, dropped behind with Marian.

"I want to ask you something, Marian," she began.

"Little girls should never ask questions," said Marian lightly, but Barbara felt that her apparent unconcern was forced.

"Have you heard about what happened at the villa the night we dined there?" persisted Bab.

"I have heard something about it," admitted Marian, in a low voice. "It was an



attempt to rob the countess, was it not?"

"You could hardly call it robbery," replied Barbara. "The men took nothing. But they acted in a very mysterious manner, and there was one perfectly hideous old man who was a real burglar for I caught him going through the things in the countess's sleeping room, when I went up stairs after our wraps. I drove him from the room."

"How did you ever do it, Bab?" asked Marian. There was an expression of absolute terror in her eyes.

"You'll laugh when I tell you," replied Bab. "I drove him away with a shoe horn."

"A shoe horn?" repeated Marian questioningly. "I don't understand."

"He thought from the way I held it that I had a revolver in my hand," explained Barbara. "You see it was silver and as the light in the room was turned low it looked like polished steel. At any rate it answered the purpose."

"You are very brave, Bab," said Marian admiringly. "Considering the man with whom you had to deal you showed wonderful courage."

"What do you mean, Marian, by 'the man with whom I had to deal'? Who is that frightful old man?" asked Barbara, looking searchingly at the other girl. "Why did you warn us not to dine with the countess? Did you know what was to happen? You must tell me, Marian, for I must know. If the countess or any of us is in danger it is your duty to tell me. Can't you trust me with your secret, Marian?"

Marian shook her head. Her lip quivered, and her eyes filled with tears.

Barbara waited patiently for her to regain her self-control.

"Bab," she said in a choked voice. "I can't answer your questions. I dare not. I am a miserable victim of circumstances, and all I can say is that your danger is in being friendly with the countess. She has an enemy who will stop at nothing to gain his own end, and he will crush you, too, if you stand in his way."

"Tell me, Marian," said Bab eagerly. "Do you know anything about the countess?"

"Very little," was the reply, "and that little I may not tell. But this I promise you,

that no matter what may be the consequences to myself, I will warn you in time should any special danger threaten you girls or her. That is, if I have the slightest opportunity to do so.”

Marian stretched out her hand and Bab clasped it. “Thank you, dear Marian,” she said. “I know you will keep your word.”

After an hour’s stroll the party repaired to the hotel veranda, where ices and cakes were served to them. Every one, with the exception of Maud Warren, was in high good humor. Even Marian emerged from the gloom that had enveloped her earlier in the evening, laughing and talking merrily with the “Automobile Girls.” Maud, however was in a distinctly rebellious state of mind. During their walk they had encountered the Count de Sonde and Monsieur Duval, and although Mr. Stuart and Mr. Warren had exchanged polite civilities with the two Frenchmen, they had not invited them to join the party. While Maud, still smarting inwardly from her father’s recent sharp censure, had not dared to brave Mr. Warren’s certain anger by doing so. Her only means of retaliation lay in sulking, and this she did in the most approved fashion, refusing to take part in the conversation, and answering in monosyllables when addressed. Ruth and Barbara vainly tried to charm away her sulks by paying her special attention, but she merely curled her lip scornfully, and left the veranda soon after on plea of headache. Mr. Warren sighed heavily as he looked after her retreating figure, but made no comment. Yet his friends knew instinctively what was passing in his mind, and the “Automobile Girls” solemnly vowed each in her own heart to watch over Maud and save her if possible from the schemes of fortune-hunting nobility.

“Is there anything more perfect than this Florida moonlight!” asked Ruth, during a lull in the conversation, as she leaned back in her chair and gazed with half closed eyes at the silvery tropical world before her. “Positively, I could sit out here all night!”

“It looks as though we were in a fair way to do so,” replied her father, glancing at his watch. “Half-past eleven. Time all children were in bed.”

“Really, Robert, I had no idea it was so late,” said Miss Sallie, stifling a yawn. “I believe I am sleepy. Come, girls, it is time for us to retire.”

“Oh, Aunt Sallie!” exclaimed Ruth. “How can you be so cruel?”

“I must be cruel to be kind,” quoted Miss Stuart. “If I allow you to moon out

here until unseasonable hours, you will never get started on your picnic to-morrow, at seasonable ones.”

“She speaks the truth,” said Ruth dramatically, “I will arise and hie me to the hay, for come what may, I swear that I will picnic with the rosy morn.”

“I thought you were going to picnic with us,” said Grace flippantly.

“So I am,” replied Ruth calmly. “That statement was mere poetical license.”

“First find your poet,” said Bab slyly.

Whereupon there was a chorus of giggles at Ruth’s expense, in which she good-naturedly joined.

“I’m really more tired than I thought I was,” she yawned, a few moments later as she sat curled up in a big chair in the room adjoining Miss Stuart’s which she and Barbara occupied.

“I’m tired and sleepy, too,” responded Barbara. “It’s almost midnight. We’ll never get up early to-morrow morning. Oh, dear!” she exclaimed a second later, “I’ve left my pink scarf down on the veranda. It’s hanging over the back of the chair I sat in. I’ll go down this minute and get it, before any one has had time to see it or take it away.”

Suiting the action to the word Bab hurried out of the room, and along the corridor. She did not stop for an elevator but ran lightly down the two flights of stairs and out to the veranda. It was but the work of a moment to secure her scarf, which hung over the back of the chair, just as she had left it. The veranda was deserted except for a group of three people who stood at the far end in the shadow. Their backs were toward Bab and they were talking earnestly in low voices. Barbara stood petrified with astonishment, scarcely able to believe the evidence of her own eyes, for the group consisted of Monsieur Duval, Mrs. De Lancey Smythe and—enveloped in the pale blue broadcloth cloak Bab had often seen her wear was the Countess Sophia.

## CHAPTER XV

### CAUGHT NAPPING

The following morning Barbara awoke with the feeling of one who has experienced a disagreeable dream. Was it a trick of her imagination, or had she really seen their beautiful young countess deep in conversation with Monsieur Duval and Mrs. De Lancey Smythe? True Bab had not seen her face, but her height, and carriage—the blue cloak—were unmistakable.

On her return to their room Bab had not mentioned her unpleasant discovery to Ruth. She could not bear to voice any actual charge against the Countess Sophia. “Perhaps it will all be explained yet,” she told herself, and with a wisdom far beyond her years, she resolved to be silent, at least for the present, about what she had seen.

When the launch which Mr. Stuart had chartered, with its freight of picnickers, had put out from shore and headed for the villa, where they were to pick up the countess and Madame de Villiers, Barbara had loyally decided to let not even the evidence of her own eyes sway her into condemning the countess unheard.

On their arrival at the villa they found the countess and Madame de Villiers ready and waiting for them, and the sailing party was soon comfortably seated in the roomy launch. Madame de Villiers occupied a wicker chair opposite Miss Sallie, while the young countess and the “Automobile Girls” had stretched a steamer rug over the roof of the small cabin, and lay upon it in picturesque attitudes under their sunshades.

There was a churning of the propeller, a shrill toot from the whistle, and the launch glided out over the water as smoothly as a canoe rides down stream.

“We’re off!” cried Mr. Stuart joyously.

“I believe you are just a great boy still, Robert,” smiled Miss Sallie indulgently.

The day’s excursion had been arranged by Mr. Stuart. He was an enthusiastic fisherman, and on his return from the fishing expedition with Mr. Warren he at once began to plan a similar excursion for the “Automobile Girls,” extending his

invitation to the countess and Madame de Villiers.

It was an ideal day for a picnic. The sun shone brilliantly down on Palm Beach, making it look like an enchanted land. The bathers were out in full force. A little farther up the beach countless flower-trimmed hats and many-hued parasols made gorgeous blots of color along the white sands. Overhead the sky was an intense blue, and the water reflected the blueness in its depths.

“You can never understand how happy this makes me,” declared the countess, bestowing an enchanting smile upon the little company. “Mr. Stuart, we thank you for the many pleasures you have given Cousine and me. Someday I hope I may be able to do something for you.”

“Wait until the picnic is over before you thank me, Countess,” replied her host. “The fishing may bore you, especially if the fish don’t bite.”

“Ah, well,” laughed the countess, “I could fish patiently all day, under a sky like this without complaining, if I were to catch nothing but a minnow.”

Mr. Stuart’s fishing party had made an early start. They were to land some miles up the coast, where those who were not of a mind to fish could make themselves comfortable on shore.

The journey was not a short one. It was well past eleven o’clock when they landed on a hard shell beach, broken here and there by patches of marsh grass.

“You are especially privileged to be allowed to set foot on these shores,” Mr. Stuart assured his guests, as he handed them out of the launch. “The location of this place has been kept a secret; otherwise it would be overrun with tourists and excursionists.”

“Is it so beautiful?” Ruth inquired.

“Wait until you see it!” was Mr. Stuart’s reply.

The beach sloped upward so as to form a wall that completely hid the land behind it from view.

Ruth and Barbara ran on ahead.

“Oh, Father,” cried Ruth excitedly. “This is a surprise!”

The two girls were looking down into a beautiful little dell. It was like a tiny oasis, with a sand wall on one side of it, and a mass of palmettoes, oak trees and

cocoanut palms encircling it on the other three sides. The ground was carpeted thickly with violets. Yellow jasmine and elder flowers gleamed through the foliage. The branches of the oak trees were draped with gray Spanish moss, which made quite a sombre background for the gay tropical scene.

“This is to be your drawing-room and dining-room, Madame,” declared Mr. Stuart, as he helped Madame de Villiers over the sandy hillock. “You may do whatever you like here. You may pull the violets, or walk on them. There are no park rules.”

“Was there ever such a place in the world!” exclaimed Countess Sophia. “I shall not leave it until we sail for home. The most wonderful of sea trout could not lure me from this enchanting spot.”

“We shall stay here, too,” agreed Mollie and Grace. “I would rather gather violets than catch gold fish,” Mollie assured Mr. Stuart.

The wicker chairs were brought from the launch, so that Madame de Villiers and Aunt Sallie could be comfortable in their sylvan retreat. Ruth and Barbara went off with Mr. Stuart on the quest for fish, while the young countess, Mollie and Grace gathered wild flowers and made wreaths of the sweet-smelling yellow jasmine.

Grace ran with her crown of wild jasmine and placed it on Miss Sallie’s soft white hair. The countess placed her wreath on Madame de Villiers’s head.

“Oh, happy day, Oh, day so dear!”

sang Countess Sophia as she stuck one of the beautiful yellow flowers into her dark hair and danced with Mollie over the sands.

It was a happy day indeed—one that the little party would never forget! Mysteries and unanswered questions were banished. Even Bab forgot for the time being all disquieting thoughts. The lovely young countess, with her eyes full of an appealing tenderness, had driven away all ugly suspicion.

Several hours later the fishing party returned.

“See what we’ve got!” Ruth exclaimed proudly, as she ran up the sand hill flourishing a string of speckled sea trout.

“Miss am sho a lucky fisherman,” agreed the old colored man in whose boat Mr. Stuart and the two girls had been fishing.

“But where are your fish, Barbara?” Grace inquired.

Mr. Stuart laughed. “Bab is the unluckiest fisherman that ever threw out a line,” he explained. “Shall I tell them, Bab?”

Barbara flushed. “Oh, go ahead,” she consented.

“Well,” Mr. Stuart continued, “Miss Barbara Thurston caught a tarpon a yard long this morning.”

“Where is it?” cried the waiting audience.

“Back in the sea, whence it came, and it nearly took Mistress Bab along with it,” Mr. Stuart answered. “When Barbara caught her tarpon, she began reeling in her line as fast as she could. But the tarpon was too heavy for it, and the line broke. Then Bab prepared to dive into the ocean after her fish.”

“I was so excited I forgot I did not have on my bathing suit,” Bab explained. “I thought, if I could just dive down into the water, I could catch my tarpon, and then Mr. Stuart could pull us both back into the boat.”

“Reckless, Barbara!” cried Miss Stuart. “What will you do next!”

“Don’t scold, Aunt Sallie,” Ruth begged. “It was too funny, and Father and I caught hold of Bab’s skirts before she jumped. Then old Jim, the colored man, got the fish. So we had a good look at him without Bab’s drowning herself. But when we found that the catch was a tarpon, and not good to eat, Father flung it back in the water.”

While Mr. Stuart and the girls were talking, Jim and the engineer from the launch built a fire. They were soon at work frying the fish for luncheon.

Nobody noticed that a small naphtha launch had been creeping cautiously along the coast. It was sheltered from view by the bank of sand. And it managed to hide itself in a little inlet about a quarter of a mile away from Mr. Stuart’s larger boat.

After a hearty luncheon no one had much to say. The “Automobile Girls” were unusually silent. Finally they confessed to being dreadfully sleepy. There is something in the soft air of Florida that compels drowsiness. Miss Sallie and Madame de Villiers nodded in their chairs. Mr. Stuart, the countess and the four girls stretched themselves on the warm sand. Jim slept under the lea of his small fishing boat, and the engineer of the launch went to sleep on the sand not far

from the water's edge.

For nearly an hour the entire party slumbered. All at once Mr. Stuart awoke with a feeling that something had happened. He rubbed his eyes, then counted the girls and his guests. Miss Sallie was safe under the shadow of her parasol, which had been fixed over her head. Madame de Villiers sat nodding in her chair.

The afternoon shadows had begun to lengthen; a fresh breeze was stirring the leaves of the palm trees. But, except for the occasional call of a mocking bird, not a sound could be heard.

Mr. Stuart waited. Did he not hear a faint noise coming from the direction of his launch. "The engineer has probably gone aboard!" Mr. Stuart thought.

"It is high time we were leaving for home," said he to himself.

But as he stepped to the edge of the embankment he saw his engineer still lying on the ground sleeping soundly.

A small boat like a black speck disappeared around a curve in the shore.

"What on earth does that mean?" cried Mr. Stuart. Leaping over the sandy wall he ran toward his engineer. Mr. Stuart shook him gently. The man opened his eyes drowsily, yawned then raising himself to a sitting position, looked stupidly about.

"A strange boat has just put out from here," said Mr. Stuart quietly. "We had better go out to the launch and see if all is well."

The engineer rose to his feet, and still stupid from his heavy sleep, followed Mr. Stuart to the dinghy. The sound of voices aroused old Jim who clambered to his feet blinking rapidly.

Mr. Stuart and the engineer pushed off toward the launch, each feeling that he was about to come upon something irregular. Their premonitions proved wholly correct. The engine room of the pretty craft was a total wreck. The machinery had been taken apart so deftly, it seemed as though an engineer alone could have accomplished it, while the most important parts of the engine were missing.

"Whose work is this?" ejaculated Mr. Stuart, clenching his fists in impotent rage. Suddenly it dawned upon him what the wrecking of his launch meant. He was on an uninhabited shore with seven women, his engineer, and colored servant, with no prospect of getting away that night.



He felt in his pockets. A pen-knife was his only tool or weapon.

Mr. Stuart rowed back to shore to break the disagreeable news to the members of his party. But the sleepers were awake on his return. They had seen Mr. Stuart row hurriedly out to the launch with the engineer, and surmised instantly that something had happened.

“Oh, dear, oh, dear!” wailed the countess, when Mr. Stuart had explained their plight. “Must I always bring ill-luck to you?”

“Nonsense!” expostulated Mr. Stuart. “How could the wrecking of our engine have any connection with you, Countess?”

Old Jim who still stood blinking and stretching now began to vaguely grasp the situation.

“’Scuse me ladies,” he mumbled. “I spects I’s e ject been nappin’ a little. I ain’t been ’zactly asleep.”

The “Automobile Girls” laughed, in spite of the difficulties which confronted them.

“Oh no, you haven’t been asleep,” Mr. Stuart assured him, “but that nap of yours was a close imitation of the real thing.”

Jim grinned sheepishly and hung his woolly head. “I ’low nothin’ bad ain’t happened, suh.”

“Something bad certainly has happened. In fact about as bad as it well could be, Jim,” declared Mr. Stuart. “Some wretch has tampered with the engine of our launch and left us high and dry on this lonely shore. We must do something and that something quickly. It’s getting late, and we don’t want to spend the night here, lovely as the place is. Where’s the nearest house or village?”

“Lor’, suh,” exclaimed old Jim. “This am a lonesome spot. There ain’t no village no wheres round heah!”

“But where is the nearest house, then?” demanded Mr. Stuart.

The darkey scratched his head reflectively.

“Ole Miss Thorne might take you in, Massa. Her place am about two miles from here. She’s my old missis. I live thar. I ject comes down here and helps fishin’ parties to land and takes them out in my boat in the daytime. Nights I sleeps at

my old missis's place. She comes of a fine family she do. But she's a little teched in the head, suh."

"All right, Jim; show us the way to the house. But how are we to find a horse and wagon? My sister and Madame de Villiers will not care to walk that distance."

"I got an old horse and wagon hitched near here, Massa," Jim returned. "I come over in it this morning."

Mr. Stuart finally installed Miss Sallie, Madame de Villiers, and the young countess in the bottom of Jim's old wagon. He also stored their lunch baskets away under the seats. Food might be precious before they found their way back to their hotel.

Then Jim started his patient old horse, while Mr. Stuart and the "Automobile Girls" followed the wagon which led the way along a narrow road through the heart of the jungle.

But before leaving the deserted shore, Mr. Stuart went back to the launch. He tacked a note on the outside of the cabin. The note explained the accident to their engine. It also stated that Mr. Stuart and his party had gone to seek refuge at the home of a Miss Thorne, two miles back from the shore.

Mr. Stuart did not believe the wrecker would return to the boat. He had accomplished his evil purpose. But Mr. Stuart did hope that another launch might visit the coast either that evening or in the early morning. Therefore he requested that any one who discovered his letter would come to Miss Thorne's home for his party.

## CHAPTER XVI

### WELCOME AND UNWELCOME GUESTS

The sun was just sinking when Mr. Stuart's weary cavalcade stopped in front of a great iron gate. The gate was covered with rust and hung loose on its hinges. It opened into a splendid avenue of cypress trees. As far as the eye could see on each side of the road, ran overgrown hedges of the Rose of Sharon. The bushes were in full bloom and the masses of white blossoms gleamed in the gathering shadows like lines of new fallen snow.

"How beautiful!" exclaimed the four "Automobile Girls" in chorus.

Mr. Stuart looked anxiously up the lonely avenue as his party stumbled along the rough road and peered cautiously into the hedge first on one side then on the other. It would have been easy for an army to hide itself in the cover of the thicket, which hemmed them in on all sides in an impenetrable wall of green.

"I feel extremely uneasy, Robert," declared Miss Sallie, her face pale under the stress of the day's experiences.

Old Madame de Villiers smiled and shrugged her shoulders. "I have no fear for myself," she said. "My husband is a soldier. I have followed him through two great wars. What comes must come. It is all in the day's business. But the countess, she is different. She is in my charge; nothing must happen to her. I assure you, Mr. Stuart, it is of the utmost importance that the Countess Sophia be protected."

Miss Sallie held her head very high. Madame de Villiers was their guest, so Miss Stuart would say nothing. But why should Madame de Villiers think the safety of the Countess Sophia of more importance than that of the four "Automobile Girls?" Miss Sarah Stuart had other ideas. She was equally determined that no harm should overtake any one of her charges.

The narrow avenue finally broadened into a lawn overgrown with flowers and vines. Back of it stood an old house that had once been a fine colonial mansion. The house seemed to frown on the intruders, who had come to destroy its sacred quiet.

“I should think anybody might be ‘teched’ in the head, who lived alone in a queer place like this,” whispered Ruth to Bab, as the two girls stood with their arms about each other, staring ahead of them.

“Will you see Miss Thorne first, Jim, and explain our plight to her?” Mr. Stuart asked the old colored man. “Or do you think it would be better to have me make matters clear?”

“I’ll do the ’splainin’, Massa,” returned old Jim. “My missis will allus listen to me. I done tole you she wasn’t jes’ like other folks.”

“Is your mistress insane, Jim?” inquired Miss Sallie anxiously.

“No-o, ma’am,” returned the old man. “Miss Thorne she ain’t crazy. She’s puffectly quiet, suh, and she’s all right on every subject ’cept one. I hates to tell you what that thing is.”

“Out with it, Jim. What is the lady’s peculiarity?”

“She imagines, suh, that her fambly is still with her, her own ma and pa, and young massa, and her sister Missy Lucy. Missy Rose ain’t never been married.”

“Where is her family, Jim?” Ruth asked.

“They lies yonder in the buryin’ ground, Missy,” replied the old darkey, pointing toward a clearing some distance from the house, where a few white stones gleamed in the twilight.

Miss Sallie shuddered. Grace and Mollie huddled close to her, while Ruth and Bab gave each other’s hands re-assuring pressures.

“Do you look after this Miss Thorne?” Mr. Stuart inquired further.

“Yes, suh; me and my wife Chloe looks after her. Chloe cooks and I works about the place when I’s not down to the beach with my boat. But my missus ain’t so poor. She’s got enough to git along with. I jest likes to earn a little extra.”

By this time Jim had climbed down from his shaky old wagon. He now opened the front door.

“Walk right in,” he said hospitably, making a low bow. “I’ll go find Miss Rose.”

Mr. Stuart’s party entered a wide hall that seemed shrouded in impenetrable gloom. On the walls hung rows of family portraits. The place was inexpressibly

dismal. The “Automobile Girls” kept close to Mr. Stuart. In silence they waited for the appearance of the mistress of the house.

Two candles flickered in the dark hallway. Out of the gloom emerged an old lady, followed by her two servants, who were bearing the lights. She was small and very fragile. She wore a gray silk gown of an old fashioned cut. Her dress was ornamented with a bertha and cuffs of Duchess lace.

The old lady advanced and held out her small hand. “I am pleased to offer you shelter,” she declared to Mr. Stuart. “Jim has explained your predicament to me. We shall be only too happy to have you stay with us for the night.”

At the word “we,” the “Automobile Girls” exchanged frightened glances. Their hostess was alone. But that one word “we” explained the situation. Did she mean that all the ghosts of her past still waited in the house to welcome unexpected visitors?

“It has been many years since we have had guests in our home,” continued Miss Thorne. “But I think we have rooms enough to accommodate you.”

Chloe conducted Miss Sallie, Madame de Villiers, the Countess Sophia and the four “Automobile Girls” into a great parlor. The room was furnished with old fashioned elegance. Candles burned on the high mantel shelves. But the dim lights could not dispel the shadow of desolation that pervaded the great room.

A few minutes later Miss Thorne entered the room. “You must tell me your names,” she inquired sociably. “I wish to run upstairs and tell Mama about you. Poor Mama is an invalid or she would come down to see you.”

Then calling Chloe to her, she said in a loud whisper:

“Notify Miss Lucy and Master Tom at once. Papa can wait. He is busy in the library.”

An uncanny silence followed Miss Thorne’s speech. Every one of the seven women looked unhappy and Mr. Stuart tried vainly to conceal a sense of uneasiness. But Chloe quietly beckoned the party from the room.

“I’ll jes’ show the ladies upstairs,” she explained gently and her mistress made no objection.

Miss Sallie would on no account sleep alone in such a dismal house. She shared a large chamber with Ruth and Bab. The countess asked to spend the night with

Mollie and Grace, and Madame de Villiers, who was afraid of nothing, had a room to herself. Mr. Stuart went up to the third floor.

“Let us talk and laugh and try to be cheerful, girls,” proposed the countess. “This poor old soul is quite harmless, I believe, and she seems very sad. Perhaps we may be able to cheer her a little.”

“All right, my lovely countess,” replied Mollie. “Ghosts or no ghosts, we will do our best. But don’t count on me for much merriment. I’m a dreadful coward.” Mollie looked over her shoulder with a shudder.

The countess and Grace laughed, but quickly their laugh died.

The sound of weird music floated up through the dark hall. Their hostess, Miss Thorne, was playing the tall harp that stood in the parlor.

“Goodness!” cried Miss Sallie, “what will that poor soul do next? I should not be in the least surprised if the entire departed family were given places at supper tonight.” Which was exactly what happened. Four empty chairs were left at the table.

“Miss Thorne,” said Mr. Stuart, when they were all seated, “could you not be persuaded to visit the outer world? It would give my sister and me much pleasure if you would spend a few days with us at Palm Beach.”

A spark of pleasure lit up the hostess’s faded eyes for an instant. Then she shook her head sadly.

“You are most kind, sir, but I am much needed at home. Lucy, my sister, is quite delicate, you see. And Mama is an invalid.”

Miss Sallie touched her brother’s foot under the table, as a signal to keep away from dangerous topics. But what topic was not dangerous?

“How charmingly you play the harp, Miss Thorne,” ventured the countess, when they had somewhat recovered themselves.

“Ah,” exclaimed the poor woman, smiling archly, “you must praise the right person, my dear. It was my sister Lucy who was playing.”

Miss Sallie dropped her fork with a loud clatter, while Mollie slipped her hand into the countess’s and the other three girls linked their feet under the table, girl fashion.

Jim, who, in an old black coat, was waiting on the table, smiled grimly and mumbled to himself.

“But, young ladies,” cried Miss Thorne, “you are not eating.”

As a matter of fact the supper was delicious; biscuits as light as snow flakes, broiled sea trout, potatoes roasted in their jackets and preserves in delicate cut glass bowls. But who could enjoy a banquet under such conditions? The two candles seemed to accentuate the blackness of the shadows which gathered at the edges of the room. The guests tried to laugh and talk, but gradually gloomy silence settled upon them. Miss Thorne appeared to have forgotten where she was and Mr. Stuart observing the uneasiness of the whole party remarked that as they had had a long day it would be well to retire early.

As they were about to rise from the table a sudden exclamation from the countess who sat at the lower end of the table caused all eyes to turn toward her in startled inquiry. She was staring at the open window in fascinated terror, unable for the moment to do anything save point to the opening which was swathed in shadows.

“A horrible old man!” she at last managed to articulate. “I saw him looking in at us!”

“What old man?” demanded Mr. Stuart.

“He was white haired and looked like a great ape,” she gasped.

“Why that’s the man whom I drove out of your room the other night, Countess,” exclaimed Bab. “What can his object be in following you?”

“Come, my man,” commanded Mr. Stuart, turning to the engineer who sat beside him, “and you too, Jim, we’ll search the grounds. I believe that this formidable old man can tell us something about the wrecking of the engine. Let’s get after him at once!”

Old Jim lost no time in procuring lanterns, and a thorough search of the grounds was made. The women meantime remained in the dining room, but now that the first effects of their fright had worn off, they prepared to give their fearsome intruder a warm reception should he again show himself. Madame de Villiers moved her chair to one side of the open window, her heavy cane in both hands, ready for instant use. While Barbara took up her station at the other side grasping firmly the heavy silver teapot that had been in the Thorne family for

generations. Ruth guarded the door at one end, brandishing ferociously a heavy carving knife she had appropriated from a set on the old fashioned side-board, while Mollie, bravely, held the fort, at the other door with the fork. The countess half laughing, half shuddering, clung to a heavy cut glass water bottle, while Miss Sallie had prepared to meet the enemy with a huge bottle of cayenne pepper, which she had taken from the old-fashioned silver castor.

image

### The Countess Pointed Toward the Open Window.

“There is nothing like being prepared,” said Ruth with a hysterical laugh, after ten minutes had passed, and the enemy had not shown himself. “I’m going to get a chair and be comfortable.” Mollie followed suit, and the watchers sat valiantly alert, as the minutes dragged by.

Miss Thorne chattered volubly to and about her family, paying very little attention to her strangely-behaved guests, while Chloe, the old servant, huddled in one corner, her eyes rolling with fright at every sound she heard.

At last the welcome sound of men’s voices was heard and Mr. Stuart, followed by the engineer and old Jim, entered at Mollie’s door.

“What kind of desperado organization is this?” he exclaimed, laughing in spite of himself at the ludicrous appearance this feminine vigilant committee made.

“It’s war to the knife,” cried Ruth.

“And the fork, too, I should say,” laughed her father, “also the teapot, and—what on earth are you cherishing so fondly, Sallie?”

“Cayenne pepper,” responded Miss Sallie, “and I consider myself well armed, at that.”

“I should rather think so,” agreed her brother. “However you are all safe in laying down your arms, for we have searched diligently, and can find no trace of the intruder. He evidently heard the countess and made a quick get away. You must pardon us, Madam, for stirring up your quiet home in this manner,” he said, bowing to Miss Thorne. “I trust we shall meet with no further disagreeable adventures.”

“You have not disturbed either Lucy or me in the least,” declared the demented old woman graciously. “As for Papa and Mama they dearly love to have



visitors.” She smiled sweetly and at once began a one-sided conversation with her departed parents.

“Do take us away from her,” whispered Ruth to her father. “She has been addressing the shades of her family ever since you left us, and it’s getting on our nerves.”

“With your kind permission, Miss Thorne, we shall retire,” said Mr. Stuart, and the seven tired women gladly followed him through the shadowy hall and up the wide stairs, to their respective sleeping rooms.

## CHAPTER XVII

### THE MIDNIGHT INTRUDER

Once in their rooms the drooping spirits of the picnickers revived, somewhat. It was a fine night, the air warm and fragrant. The windows of the sleeping rooms were wide open and the moonlight streamed across the floor, filling the whole place with its soft radiance.

“Oh look!” cried Grace, going over to the open window. “What a darling balcony! I believe the other rooms all open out on it too. Good-bye,” she called to Mollie and the countess, as she stepped nimbly over the sill. “I’m going to make a call.”

Grace had hardly disappeared, before the countess went quickly to the door, closed it, then came back to Mollie, her finger on her lip. Drawing Mollie over to one corner of the room, where they could not be observed from the outside, the countess whispered. “Mademoiselle Mollie, I believe you love me and trust me, even more than do your friends, and because of this I am going to ask you to do me a very great favor.”

Mollie’s blue eyes looked lovingly up into the dark eyes of the countess. So fervent was her feeling of adoration for this fascinating stranger that she was prepared to grant any favor that lay within her power. “I should dearly love to help you in any way I can,” she said earnestly. “You make me very, very happy.”

The countess kissed her.

“Dear child,” she continued, “the thing I am going to ask seems simple enough, but some day you will understand how much it means to me. Wait a moment,” she added almost under her breath. “There is some one whom I hold in such dread that, even in this desolate and far-away place, he or his confederate might be listening.”

She looked about her cautiously, then went to the window and anxiously scanned the balcony. It was quite empty. Her eyes searched the long avenue leading to the grove that looked like a huge black spot in the moonlight. Then she returned to Mollie and said softly, “I am not afraid of ghosts, and neither are you, Mollie, I

am sure, because there are no such things; but this place fills me with foreboding. It is so lonesome, so utterly dismal. What was that? I thought I heard a noise below. Did you hear anything?"

"Perhaps it was Jim closing up for the night," replied Mollie, pressing close to the countess for comfort. "But what was the favor? I will do anything for you."

"This is it," answered the countess, her voice again dropping to a whisper. "Will you, for a few days, carry a paper for me? It is a very dangerous paper, dangerous, that is, because some one else wishes it, but it is a very valuable one to me because I may need it, and if you will keep it safely hidden until I do need it, you will not only be doing me a service but Mademoiselle Warren also."

Mollie looked puzzled. The countess's words were shrouded in mystery.

"Does it concern the Count de Sonde, too?" she asked breathlessly.

"Yes," replied the countess; "it concerns him very intimately. Will you do this for me, little Mollie? I know now that the paper is not safe either in my house or on me. It would be quite safe with you, however. Even my enemy would never think of that, and, if anything should happen to me, you may produce the paper at once. Give it to Mr. Stuart. He will know what should be done."

The countess took from her dress a square, flat chamois bag which fastened with a clasp and evidently contained a document of some sort.

"Fasten it into your dress with this pin," she said, "and keep the pin as a memento of our friendship."

And the pin, as Mollie saw later, was no ordinary affair, but a broad gold band on which was a beautifully enameled coat of arms.

"Is this another secret session?" cried Ruth's voice gayly from the window.

The two conspirators started nervously.

"Come into our room," Ruth continued. "Papa has sent up the luncheon hamper. There are still some sandwiches and fruit left; likewise a box of candy. We were too frightened to have appetites at supper, but I think a little food, now, will cheer us mightily."

"This looks quite like a boarding-school spread," exclaimed Miss Sallie as they gathered around the feast. "But it is really a good idea. I feel that this little

midnight luncheon might help me keep up my courage until I get to sleep.”

“What a jolly little feast,” cried the Countess Sophia. “I am quite beginning to take heart again after that fearful ordeal below. I had a feeling all the time that the chairs were not really empty.”

“Goodness me!” cried Grace, “do change the subject, or we shall be afraid to go to bed at all.”

“And I move that we take to our couches at once,” said Ruth, “while we have the courage to do so. Madame de Villiers, are you not afraid to sleep alone?”

“Not in the least, my dear. I am not afraid of the most courageous ghost that ever walked. I believe I will retire at once. I am very tired.”

Taking one of the candles which stood in a row on the mantel, making a cheerful illumination, the stately old woman bade them good night, and the tapping of her stick resounded through the empty hall.

Soon after Grace, Mollie and the countess stepped through the window, and down the balcony to their room.

“You’d better close your shutters,” called Grace over her shoulder. “We’re going to.”

“And lose all this glorious moonlight?” asked Ruth. “Never. This balcony is too high from the ground for any one to climb up, easily, and besides, old Jim is going to be on guard to-night. Aunt Sallie thinks we had better try to make ourselves comfortable without doing much undressing. Even if we don’t sleep very well to-night, we can make up for it when we get back to the hotel.” With these words Ruth blew out the candles and five minutes later, their shoes and outer clothing removed, she and Barbara and Miss Sallie were fast asleep.

Grace and Mollie, however, struggled vainly with the heavy wooden shutters, but try as they might they could not succeed in closing them tightly. After some subdued laughter and many exclamations they abandoned their task in disgust, and blowing out their candles prepared themselves for sleep.

At midnight Ruth awoke with a start. She had a distinct sensation that some one had been looking into her face. But the room was still flooded with moonlight, and she could see plainly that, except for her sleeping companions, no one was there. She turned over and closed her eyes again, but the sudden waking had

driven sleep away.

Was that a noise?

Ruth held her breath and listened. There was not a sound except the regular breathing of Miss Sallie.

Ruth lay with every nerve strained to catch the lightest footfall. In a moment it came again, very faint but still distinct. Something—some one—moved somewhere.

She sat up in bed and touched Barbara lightly on the cheek.

Barbara opened her eyes slowly then sat up. Ruth pointed to the next room. The two girls listened intently. Again there was the sound, a soft, a very soft footfall on a creaking board.

Cautiously the two girls climbed from the bed and crept over to the door between the two rooms. On a small bed at the far side of the room lay the countess, sleeping soundly. Grace and Mollie also were fast asleep in the other bed. Suddenly Ruth gripped Bab's arm. The eyes of both girls were riveted on the old fashioned dressing table in one corner of the room. Before it stood the same terrible old man that Bab had seen at the villa. He was examining minutely every thing on the dresser. Next he turned his attention to the girls' walking suits which hung over the backs of the chairs. He searched the pockets of the coats, the linings, and even the hems of the skirts.

"He is certainly looking for a paper," Barbara thought, as she watched him make his systematic search, "and he certainly has something to do with the countess's affairs."

Barbara's mind reverted to the group she had seen on the hotel veranda, the night before. What was the explanation of it all? Was the countess really an impostor and why, when she evidently feared Monsieur Duval and ignored Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, did she hold interviews late at night with them? She had distinctly refused the "Automobile Girls'" invitations to the hotel, yet she had not refused to meet others there. And what part could this ferocious looking old man possibly have in the drama?

All this passed rapidly through Bab's mind as with her hand clasped tightly in Ruth's the two girls watched the intruder with bated breath. To Bab there was something strangely familiar about him, his movements suggested some one she

had seen before, yet she could find no place in her memory for him.

Failing to find what he desired, the old man again turned toward the countess a look of indescribable menace on his face. He took a step toward her then—a sudden burst of weird music floated up from the gloomy drawing room. With a smothered exclamation the intruder whirled and making for the window swung himself over the ledge. Ruth clutched Barbara for support. She was trembling with fear.

“Don’t be frightened, dear,” soothed Bab bravely. “That isn’t ghost music. It’s only Miss Thorne playing the harp. It’s an unearthly hour for music, but she couldn’t have begun to play at a more opportune moment, either. I believe that frightful old man thought it was ghost music. Just listen to it. It’s enough to give any one the creeps.”

The demented old woman played on in a wailing minor key, and presently footsteps were heard coming down the hall. By this time Mollie, Grace and the countess were wide awake and seeing Bab and Ruth in their room demanded to know what had happened. A moment later Madame de Villiers and Miss Sallie, both fully dressed, entered the room.

“No more sleep for me to-night,” announced Miss Stuart firmly. “I feel that the sooner morning comes and we get out of this house the better pleased I shall be.”

At that instant a melancholy strain like the wail of a lost soul rose from down stairs. Then all was silent.

“I begin to believe it is the departed spirit of her sister Lucy that executed that last passage,” shuddered the countess. “Come, my dears let us finish dressing. It will soon be morning and then surely some way will be provided for us to go back to Palm Beach.”

“Shall we tell her?” whispered Ruth to Bab.

“We’d better,” nodded Bab. “Then she will be constantly on her guard.”

“Listen, everyone,” commanded Ruth. “We are going to tell you something but you mustn’t feel frightened. We think the countess should know it at once. You tell them about it, Bab.”

Bab obediently began a recital of what had transpired after she and Ruth had been so suddenly wakened. The others listened in consternation to her story. The

countess who turned very pale while Bab was speaking, looked appealingly at Madame de Villiers. The stern old woman was apparently much agitated. "He shall not harm the Countess Sophia," she muttered, forgetful of those about her. "I will protect her even from him."

"Aunt Sallie, shall I call Father?" asked Ruth a few moments later. The seven women were seated about the room in silent dejection.

"No, Ruth," responded her aunt. "We will not waken him. A man that can sleep through a concert such as we were favored with deserves to be left in peace. It is after four o'clock now. I think we'll let him sleep until six, at least. Then after breakfast, perhaps, he will be able to devise some means by which we may return to the hotel."

It was a very tired and sleepy band of picnickers that gathered around the Thorne breakfast table that morning, and breakfast was not over when the honk of an automobile horn was heard and a large touring car rolled up the avenue.

"Hurrah!" shouted Ruth. "It's Mr. Warren. Oh, but I'm glad to see him."

It was indeed Mr. Warren, who, when the party did not return that night, had taken the fastest launch he could find and made for the picnic ground. He had discovered the note, as Mr. Stuart had hoped, had returned to the hotel where the history of Thorne house and its mistress was not unknown and had come for them himself after a few hours sleep.

"I should be happy and honored if you would all come again," said Miss Thorne as she waved adieu to her guests from the front piazza, while Jim and Chloe bobbed and bowed and chuckled over the generous present they had each received from Mr. Stuart.

As the automobile rolled down the avenue they caught a last glimpse of the mistress of Thorne House still waving her handkerchief, and in every heart was a feeling of tender sympathy for the little old woman whose present was so irrevocably linked to the past.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE WATER FÊTE

“Roll along, roll along,  
O'er the waters so blue,  
We're afloat, we're afloat  
In our birch bark canoe,”

sang Grace's high sweet voice as their boat bobbed gayly up and down with the little rippling waves of the lake.

“That is a pretty song, my dear child,” exclaimed Miss Sallie Stuart, from a cushioned seat in the stern of the boat, “but you should substitute ‘naphtha launch’ for canoe. Nothing would induce me to ride in one.”

“The Count de Sonde is going to be at the fête in a canoe,” observed Maud Warren in the tone of one imparting a piece of valuable information. “He asked me to go with him, but Papa was unreasonable, as usual.”

“In a canoe with that little foreigner!” cried Miss Sallie in amazement. “Does he know how to paddle?”

“The count is an expert boatman,” replied Maud stiffly. She had mixed sensations of fear and dislike for Miss Sallie, although fear was the stronger sentiment of the two.

“I imagine his swimming and his canoeing are about alike,” said Ruth aside to Barbara; “just paddling in shallow water.”

The “Automobile Girls” were busily engaged in decorating their launch for the Venetian Fête, which was to take place that evening. The lake dotted with numbers of boats looked like an immense flower bed. Hundreds of craft of every land were anchored near the shore, each filled with gay parties of young people who were stringing up rows of Japanese lanterns, bunting and flags.

“There's not a boat on the lake that can compare with ours,” cried Mollie proudly, as she tacked the end of a festoon of small banners to the awning-pole, while Barbara gave a finishing touch by crossing the silk flags of the



“Automobile Girls” on the bow.

“If only the lanterns don’t catch fire this evening,” said Miss Sallie.

“What a pessimist you are, Auntie, dearest!” exclaimed Ruth. “We can easily pitch them in the water if they do, and still be very handsome with our banners and things.”

“Here comes the count,” cried Maud, who had ignored the conversation of the others and was busily scanning the multitudes of boats in search of her admirer.

Her friends politely controlled a desire to laugh when they saw the count presently emerge from the boats along the shore in a small canoe that was decorated with one lantern hung from a bamboo stick in the bow, while the French flag waved triumphantly from the stern. The count, in white flannels, was working laboriously with the paddle. His little mustache twitched in an agony of exertion and occasionally he paused to wipe the perspiration from his brow.

“The count is quite an athlete, isn’t he, Maud?” asked Mollie wickedly. “I should think he might lead the parade to-night.”

But Maud was not listening. Her whole attention was concentrated on the canoe, which was making straight for the launch.

“Here I am, Count,” she cried, waving her handkerchief to the young Frenchman, who, as soon as he espied the boat full of girls, had begun to paddle with a grand flourish, at the same time casting melting glances in the direction of Maud. But he had not calculated on the distance between the canoe and the launch, and a final, fancy stroke with the paddle, sent the frail little boat scurrying over the water.

It collided with the larger boat, and in an instant turned turtle, dragging the flag of the French ignominiously into the depths while the discomfited son of France, clung to the side of his boat, and wildly called for help.

At first the girls were speechless with laughter and the last of the De Sondes received neither sympathy nor aid. Even Maud joined in the merriment, while the enraged nobleman sputtered angrily in French and denounced America and everything in it as fit only for pigs.

Presently Barbara wiped the tears from her eyes and threw out a life preserver to the unfortunate man.

“There, Count,” she called, “you can’t sink as long as you hold on to that. We’ll see if we can’t right your boat, and you can paddle back to shore.”

“I’m sorry we can’t offer you the hospitality of our boat,” said Miss Sallie, “but we are anchored, you see, and the engineer is ashore. Besides, I am afraid your wet clothing would spoil our decorations.”

The count, however, was too enraged to remember any English. He shook his fist at the upturned canoe and poured forth a perfect torrent of maledictions against it.

Just then a passing launch paused and gave the needed assistance, taking the count on board and towing the canoe to shore. As the little boat was righted an envelope that had evidently fallen from the count’s pocket, floated past them in the current.

“You dropped something,” called Barbara, but the launch had already started for shore and the count did not hear her. Using the crook of her parasol Ruth tried to fish it out. As she drew it to the side of the boat it sank out of sight but not before she had read the inscription on it, written in an angular foreign-looking handwriting: “To Madame La Comtesse Sophia von Stolberg.”

Barbara, too, saw it, and so did Mollie, whose face flushed crimson with the memory of what her beloved countess had said to her that night on the balcony of Thorne House. At that very moment, pinned inside of Mollie’s white silk blouse, was the dangerous paper which “concerned the count very intimately.”

Was it about that mysterious document that he was now writing to the countess?

For the first time Mollie felt the shadow of a doubt cross her mind. It was only a tiny speck of a doubt, but it left its impression, try as she would to shake it off.

Ruth and Barbara exchanged glances, but said nothing. They had seen enough to know that some sort of correspondence was being secretly carried on between the Countess von Stolberg and the Count de Sonde. If Maud were to marry the count she would deeply regret it, the Countess Sophia had said.

Strangely enough, this speech came back to each of the three girls at the same moment.

Ruth felt that perhaps they had rushed too quickly into an intimacy with the countess. For the first time Mollie was inclined to be a little suspicious. While

Barbara who had even more evidence against the Countess Sophia tried vainly to fit together the pieces of this most mysterious puzzle.

“Well, fair and beautiful ladies, are you quite ready for a sail on the Grand Canal? Have you your wraps and bonnets? Is Grace’s guitar on hand?” called Mr. Stuart that evening, after dinner, rapping on three doors one after the other.

“In a minute!” called a chorus of voices from the three rooms, while Mr. Stuart put on a look of resigned patience and waited for the girls to appear. At length, tired of waiting, he strolled toward the elevator when Marian De Lancey Smythe hurried along the corridor.

She averted her face when she saw Mr. Stuart, for Marian had sedulously kept out of sight for a number of days, and they had wondered not a little at it.

“Why, Miss Marian,” called the kind-hearted man, who had always felt an interest in the strange young girl, “aren’t you going to see the water fête to-night?”

“I’m afraid not, Mr. Stuart,” she replied, her lips trembling a little, partly from loneliness and partly because people were not often kind to her. “Mama is going with Mr. Duval and some friends, but I didn’t care to go with them.”

“Very well, Miss Marian; you must go with us, then. Get your wraps and meet us on the piazza.”

And ten minutes later, her eyes alight with pleasure, Marian made one of the party of girls who presently found themselves floating in the long procession of illuminated boats on the lake.

All the hotels had emptied themselves upon the lake front, and hundreds of boats had already filled and were forming in line for the water. The moon would not be up until very late, but the place was aglow with Japanese lanterns, which decorated the launches and rowboats and hung in festoons along the boat landings.

The girls had hardly got their lanterns lit when there was a burst of music, and the procession began to wind its sinuous way about the lake.

“The fireworks will begin in a moment, girls,” said Mr. Warren, “and then you will be a part of a wonderful spectacle to those on shore.”

Certainly the Stuart boat was one of the most picturesque of all the craft that floated in the parade. The glow of the lanterns made a soft illumination about the four young girls, each of whom wore a long broadcloth cape, a final gift from Mr. Stuart before leaving Chicago. Barbara's was her favorite dark red, Ruth's was pink, Mollie's her own particular blue and Grace's a delicate lavender.

"Daughter," continued Mr. Warren, turning to Maud who in an elaborate white silk evening wrap, was leaning languidly back in her seat, "aren't you feeling well to-night?"

"Oh, perfectly well, Papa," replied Maud, resting her chin on her hand and looking out across the fleet of boats moving slowly along the shore. "But spectacles of this sort are so childish and tiresome, I think. They do bore me—oh, there's the count," she cried, interrupting herself.

Her father looked so grieved and annoyed that Mr. Stuart's heart was filled with compassion for his old friend.

"See what a good time the other girls are having," went on Mr. Warren, in a pleading tone. "Look how jolly they are in their bright capes. I wish you would get one, daughter. These grown-up things make you look so much older than you really are."

He pressed the girl's hand but she drew away with a petulant expression.

"Please don't, Papa. You know how I detest public demonstrations."

"Oh-h-h!" cried the others.

A sky rocket had exploded and thousands of stars hung for an instant suspended in mid-air. Then an entire artillery of Roman candles seemed to be let loose at once. There was a blare of trumpets, a grand burst of music and the gorgeous water pageant was outlined against the sky like an illuminated picture.

Other boats began dropping out of line after the music had stopped, and Mr. Stuart ordered the engineer to run farther out into the lake where the illumination could be seen to better advantage. Grace struck a chord on her guitar and began to sing: "'Tis night on Venice waters," when Marian, to the surprise of the others, suddenly joined in with a sweet contralto voice.

"Why, Marian, I never dreamed you could sing like that," exclaimed Ruth, when the song was done.

Marian blushed, but said nothing. She had hardly spoken during the whole evening.

The air was full of music that night and the sound of laughter and singing floated across the lake from scores of other boats. The strains of the “Marseillaise” came to them from a launch that Maud had been watching for some time.

“I know whose voice that is,” said Barbara. “It’s Monsieur Duval’s.”

“It is, I think,” replied Ruth, “although the boat is too far away for us to see him plainly.”

Marian drew a scarf over her head and crouched down in her seat.

“Could she be afraid of her own mother?” wondered Barbara, for Mrs. De Lancey Smythe was easily recognized as one of the occupants of the boat. The count, who was playing on a tinkling little mandolin, sat beside her. As the boat drew nearer they noticed another figure wrapped in a long blue broadcloth cape. It was that of a woman, sitting with her back to them. A scarf concealed her head and face.

“Barbara,” whispered Ruth, “are we dreaming or is it the Countess Sophia?”

Barbara strained her eyes to distinguish the figure. Mollie and Grace also had seen the familiar wrap and poor little Mollie’s face burned with something very like mortification.

The boat skimmed lightly over the water and in a moment only the lantern at its bow could be seen swinging in the blackness.

“It looks like the countess,” whispered Barbara briefly in reply. “Marian,” she said, turning to the other girl who had closed her eyes as though she wished to shut out the sight of the other boat, “we just saw your mother go past with Monsieur Duval and the count, and we thought—we were almost certain we recognized the other person in the boat. Did you notice who it was?”

Marian opened her eyes and looked straight into Barbara’s.

“I am sorry, Barbara,” she said sadly, “but I can’t answer that question to-night.”

## CHAPTER XIX

### RED DOMINOS

The water fête a thing of the past, the Warrens' domino ball became the excitement of the hour.

The "Automobile Girls" were talking over their costumes when there came a rap on their door.

Grace responded, to find the corridor empty; but at her feet lay a sealed envelope addressed to Barbara, who hastily tore it open and read aloud the enclosed note.

"Maud and the Count have planned to elope during the domino ball. At midnight Maud and her chaperon will steal out of the side entrance of the hotel. The chaperon will wear a black domino, but will remain in her room until ten minutes before midnight, when she will go to the veranda, meet Maud, and the two will go to the east entrance of the hotel grounds, where they will be met by the count with an automobile. They will go to the village and be married there. Arrangements have been made and the license secured. Maud will wear a red silk domino and a black mask. Just over her heart will be a small black silk heart the size of the one enclosed. I promised to warn you should anything serious arise, and have done so at great personal risk. Stop the elopement if you can without outside aid. Some day I will explain why.

"M. S."

"'M. S.' Marian Smythe. She is a good scout, girls," said Ruth. "But I didn't think that Maud would go so far as this."

"This pattern for the heart—I imagine that Marian is suggesting that we all wear dominos exactly like Maud's. But why?" put in Barbara.

"We'll take that step in the dark, for Father is waiting now to telegraph for the silk to make our dominos, and discuss details later."

"I did want a pink domino," sighed Mollie. "But you're right, Ruth; and the

count will be a dizzy man before we're through with him!"

"Won't the count be suspicious on seeing five Mauds and change his plans?" asked Grace.

"He'll not see five Mauds. There will be a big crowd at the ball, and four of the Mauds will carefully keep out of one another's way," explained Ruth.

It was after the girls had gone to bed that night that the full answer came to Ruth, so she aroused Barbara to tell her of the plan.

"I have it, Bab! We'll switch couples on the count! I'm sorry, but you'll have to take the risk, for you're the only one tall enough to represent Maud. I'm sure that Mrs. De Lancey Smythe is to be the chaperon on the occasion, and if we can persuade Aunt Sallie—and I think we can—to take her place, our Count de Sonde will find himself with the wrong pair on his hands—and, oh, Bab, shan't we have fun seeing the count rage!"

It was a brief statement of the plan, but Barbara understood.

"Maud will not be easy to fool, and what if the count gets the right pair?"

"Just before the hour set, one of us will get a note to Mrs. Smythe changing the place of meeting. There—at the new place—Maud and her chaperon will wait in vain for her count, who will be eloping with the wrong couple."

"It leaves many loopholes for failure, but I can think of no better way; so I'm for it if your Aunt Sallie consents."

"Monsieur Duval is the unknown X of the problem," stated Ruth slowly, "but that's one of the many chances we'll have to take."

At last it was the night of the ball.

"How lovely!"

One of the five red dominos paused on the threshold of the ball room, almost breathless with admiration. Glowing lights, exotic decorations, swaying, brilliantly clad figures moving to perfect dance music, made indeed an entrancing scene.

"Yes, lovely, but lovelier outside. Shall we go into the garden?" whispered a voice in the ear of the little red domino.

“Not yet,” she responded, and sped away among the dancers.

“Mademoiselle,” whispered a voice that made the blood of a second red domino tingle, “is it all arranged?”

“Yes,” she answered under her breath.

“You won’t fail us?” whispered the other.

“No,” she replied quietly, but there was a threat in his tone that boded evil. Then this red domino slipped away in the crowd.

Meanwhile, a third red domino was peering from behind a screen of palms when she felt her arm seized and, turning, encountered the angry little mask that had been pursuing red dominos until his brain reeled.

“Mademoiselle,” he hissed, “you are cruel! Why do you avoid me so?”

“Ah, Count, can’t you wait so short a time?” and the third red domino was lost in the crowd.

The fourth red domino had been amusing herself like a wilful butterfly on a summer’s day. But it was getting late, and she paused at length to look about her. As she passed a grotto in the garden, formed by palms and orange trees, she heard the low chatter of voices speaking French. A vine-covered trellis screened her from view. One of the voices she recognized as Monsieur Duval’s. She heard him say:

“In three quarters of an hour we shall start. The maid tells me the officer is asleep. She saw to that. The young one is on the veranda with the older one, and they never retire until after midnight. We must have that paper to-night, even though we use violence.” The fourth red domino did not wait for more.

“I must find Father,” she told herself. “How shall I ever get him in time? They’re talking of the countess, and Monsieur Duval intends to go to the villa!”

But what of the fifth red domino, the hostess of the great ball?

Time had hung rather heavily on her hands. No one recognized her, and, not being a graceful dancer, she was somewhat neglected.



## CHAPTER XX

### CONCLUSION

At about half-past eleven Barbara concluded that she had better deliver the letter to Mrs. De Lancey Smythe. Summoning a bellboy, she went to the woman's room. On the way she showed the boy a dollar bill.

"This will be yours," she said, "if you do exactly as I tell you. If, when you deliver this note, the recipient should ask who gave it to you, say 'some one in a domino,' then come away quickly. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied the boy, his eyes on the dollar bill.

In a few minutes the room was reached. Mrs. De Lancey Smythe, in a black silk domino and mask, responded to the knock on the door.

"Now," whispered Barbara, who kept out of sight, and the boy delivered the note which read:

"Meet me at the Casino gate. Same time. Have found it necessary to change meeting place."

"Who gave you this, boy?"

"Some one in a domino," he replied, turning away.

"Wait! What did the person say?"

"Just 'take this note to room 601 and give it to the lady there.'"

"It's from the count," and, satisfied, she reentered the room.

Meanwhile, Ruth, forgetting Maud Warren, searched frantically for her father. In and out of corridors, smoking and supper rooms, ball room, verandas, and garden she hurried. The recollection of Maud returned, however, when over the hum of talk and laughter the strains of the "Marseillaise" floated out.

"In honor of De Sonde," thought Ruth contemptuously.

Some one began to sing, and the place soon rang with the notes of the stirring

French song. People began throwing confetti, and the air was flecked with the bright-colored stuff. It was midnight.

No one noticed two red dominos, each accompanied by one in black, steal from different doors of the hotel and disappear in the dark.

Ruth finally found her father standing in a doorway, talking to a little red domino.

“Father! I overheard Mr. Duval and some accomplices planning to rob the countess of a valuable paper to-night! Do send help at once!”

“Paper! Oh, Mr. Stuart, it must be the one the countess entrusted to me,” and Mollie pulled from her bosom a chamois bag.

Mr. Stuart took a paper from the bag and glanced through it. Only a few minutes later he and four officers were speeding toward the villa of the countess.

Meanwhile, Miss Stuart and Barbara had been assisted into an automobile waiting at the east entrance. As they neared the station Barbara became nervous. Was the chauffeur a confederate of the plotters or had he been hired to make the run knowing nothing of the details?

Before the car had come to a full stop the count leaped out and turned to help his companions alight. Barbara leaned forward and said sharply to the chauffeur:

“Return at once to the hotel without the gentleman. Ask no questions. You will be answerable to Mr. Stuart for any treachery.”

The car disappeared in the darkness, leaving the count dancing and gesticulating in anger.

When Mr. Stuart and the officers entered the drawing room of the countess’s villa they saw the old man who had before menaced the two women standing threateningly in front of them. Behind him was another man, evidently ready to respond to any command of the old man.

“The paper you seek is not here, Monsieur,” said the countess proudly.

“I say it is here! Give it to me at once!”

“Officers, this is your man! Take him!” shouted Mr. Stuart.

Two of the officers seized and handcuffed the second man, but the old man with

surprising agility leaped from the room, and the officers could find not the slightest trace of him.

“Ah, Mr. Stuart,” said the countess, “I do not know what chance brought you to my rescue, but help was greatly needed and I am grateful.”

“Ruth overheard a talk this evening and sent us here to see if we could serve you. The plot was instigated by Monsieur Duval.”

“That old man was Monsieur Duval himself. He is a very dangerous enemy to have.”

“That I already know, Countess. After we learned of your danger, Mollie gave me the paper you had put in her care. It was hardly prudent to give such a document to a young girl. I think we are entitled to an explanation.”

“Ah, please not to-night, Monsieur! But may I ask you to bring Miss Stuart and the girls here to-morrow afternoon? Then I shall be glad to tell you my story.”

“Very well,” replied Mr. Stuart stiffly, displeased at the countess’ lack of frankness.

On Mr. Stuart’s return to the hotel the girls overwhelmed him with questions and called eagerly for a glimpse of the mysterious paper.

Mr. Stuart unfolded the document. It was signed by the Prefect of Police of Paris and stamped with the official seal. Two photographs were pasted to the sheet and under each was a description of the man.

“The count and Monsieur Duval!” gasped Ruth.

From the paper the girls learned that Duval was a French criminal who had served several terms in prison, but who was usually clever enough to escape detection. His real name was Jacques Dupin. The “count,” whose name was Latour, was merely a tool of Dupin’s.

“This says,” cried Ruth excitedly, scanning the paper, “that Dupin can assume any disguise he wishes. He is a linguist and a trained actor and is known as Gentilhomme Jacques, or Gentleman Jack. He plays only for big stakes.”

“How did the countess become involved in this, Mr. Stuart?” asked Barbara, and at the question Mollie’s pretty face clouded.

“The countess has asked us to the villa to-morrow afternoon to offer an

explanation,” replied Mr. Stuart shortly.

At noon the next day Ruth rushed up to her companions with exciting news.

“Girls, the count, or Latour, was arrested this morning when about to board a train and has confessed that he had plotted to marry Maud, obtain control of her fortune, and then desert her! Duval was the brains of the plot. Mrs. Smythe was helping them, and, listen girls, she’s been arrested as a professional swindler!”

“Oh, poor Marian!” exclaimed Mollie sympathetically, to be echoed by the others. But just at that moment Marian came up to them, her face radiant.

“Oh, girls, such news! Mrs. Smythe accused me last night of spoiling her plans, and in her anger she let out that she’s not my mother! My mother, who died when I was a baby, was her neighbor. Some money was left me and Mrs. Smythe was made my guardian. She used the money, of course, and kept the truth from me. My name is Marian Dale. I’m poor, but I’m free for the first time in my life, and I’ll work!”

Mr. Stuart had come up and heard the last part of the tale; so he now broke in:

“You are not friendless, my girl. You must stay here as my guest with my other girls for a while, then we’ll discuss your future.”

“You are kind, Mr. Stuart. But I can’t be a burden. I must find work at once. But, oh, I’m grateful to you!” and her eyes were misty.

“I must turn my other girls on you, I see.”

Maud Warren was a changed girl when she realized the danger her headstrong conduct had placed her in. Her father, feeling that a real reformation had begun, asked Marian Dale to come to them as Maud’s companion and encourage her in a saner view of life. This appealed to Maud, and the two girls became close friends, much to the happiness of both.

That afternoon when the “Automobile Girls” arrived at the countess’s villa they were introduced to the Baron von Lichtenberg, who, the countess told them, bore a message from her father.

To the girls’ amazement and fluttered delight, the countess was in reality the Princess Sophia Adele von Nichtenstern. The princess wished to marry the Count de Sonde; and when her father insisted that she marry instead a noble of advanced years for reasons of state, she fled to America under the protection of

her cousin and second mother, the Baroness von Lichtenberg, whom the girls knew as Madame de Villiers.

“But since then, my friends, my father has met the Count de Sonde and he has also learned how greatly the man for whom he intended me has persecuted me, so he has given his consent to my marriage with the count. You can imagine my consternation when I met the false Count de Sonde and learned that he was trying to marry your friend Maud. I then sent to Paris and learned the identity of these two men. I wish to tell you, too, that both Monsieur Duval and my other persecutors have been using my maid, and that on several occasions she has taken my clothes and impersonated me.

“Mr. Stuart, I did wrong to involve the pretty Mollie in my affairs; but my father had not then forgiven me and I feared to have him learn at that time of my whereabouts. Will you forgive me?”

The princess was to start for home almost immediately under the protection of the Baron and Baroness von Lichtenberg, but before leaving Florida she exacted a promise from each of the “Automobile Girls” and from Maud Warren as well that they would visit her when she should become the wife of the Count de Sonde.

After the princess had left Palm Beach a package was handed to Miss Stuart. In it was a gift for each of the Automobile Girls. Mollie received a handsome bracelet beautifully ornamented and set with jewels. Inside was inscribed “S von N.—F. de S.”

“Oh,” cried Mollie, “the count gave her this! How she must have loved it, and she gave it to me!”

Barbara’s gift was a gold filigree star of exquisite workmanship; Ruth’s a splendid oriental scarf embroidered in gold and silver threads, and Grace’s a beautiful gold chain.

The “Automobile Girls” spent two more gay and happy weeks at Palm Beach, then turned their faces northward once more, each going to her own home.

It was not until the next winter that they were together again, and what befell them then is told in the sixth and last volume of “THE AUTOMOBILE GIRLS SERIES” under the title, “THE AUTOMOBILE GIRLS AT WASHINGTON; Or, Checkmating the Plots of Foreign Spies.”

# THE END

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