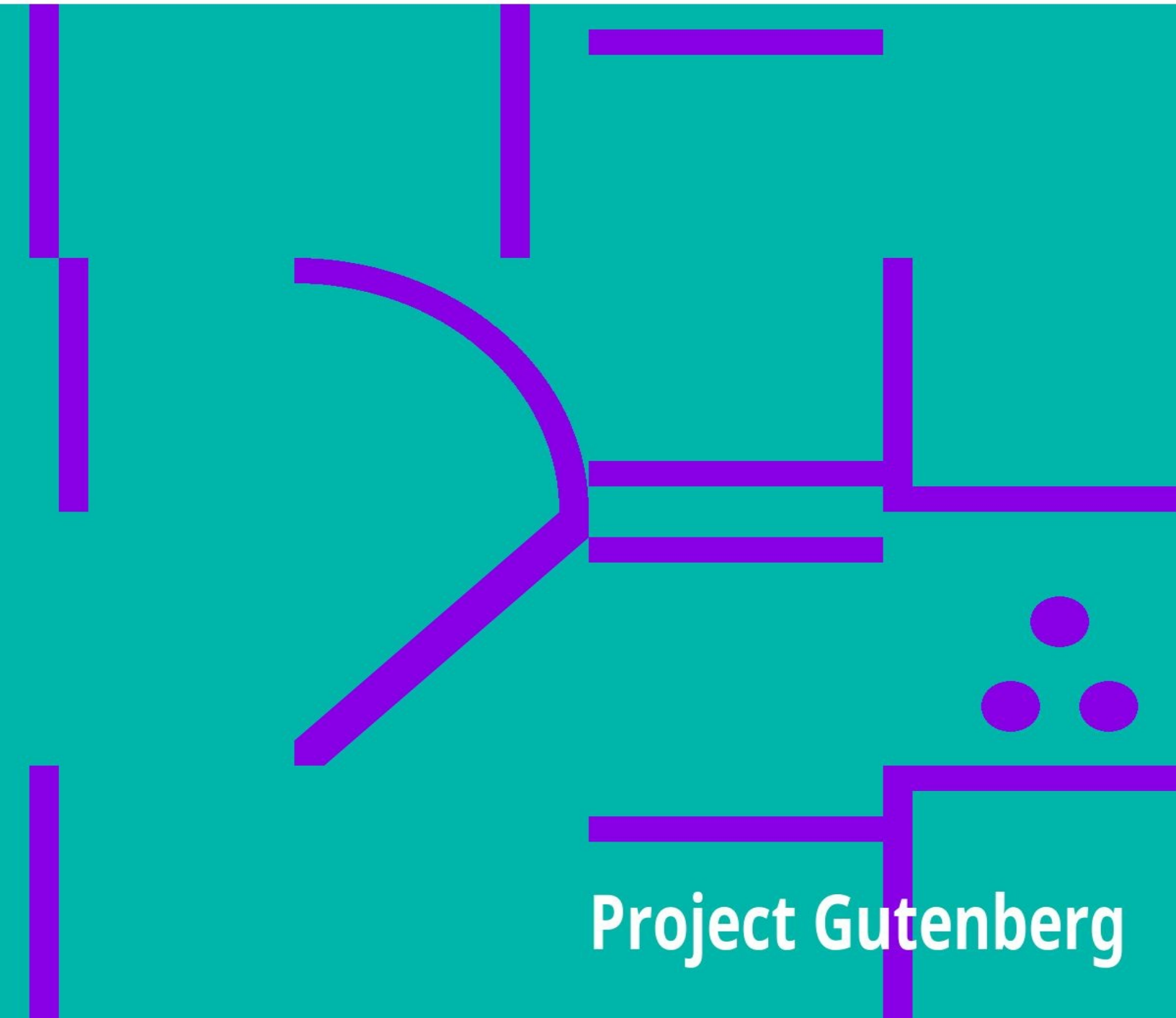
The Girl Next Door

Augusta Huiell Seaman



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THE

GIRL NEXT DOOR

Marcia turned to stare out of the window at the house opposite

THE

GIRL NEXT DOOR

BY

AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

Author of "The Sapphire Signet," "The Boarded-Up House," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY

C. M. RELYEA

NEW YORK

THE CENTURY CO.

TO

HOA-SIAN-SI^{N}-NÎU

(Margaret Gillespie Fagg)

AND TO THE MEMORY OF

HOA-SIAN-SI^{N}

(John Gerardus Fagg, D.D.)

THIS BOOK IS

AFFECTIONATELY

DEDICATED

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THE GIRL NEXT DOOR

CHAPTER I

MARCIA'S SECRET

"Marcia Brett, do you mean to tell me—"

"Tell you—what?"

"That you've had a secret two whole months and never told me about it yet? And I'm your *best* friend!"

"I was waiting till you came to the city, Janet. I wanted to *tell* you; I didn't want to *write* it."

"Well, I've been in the city twelve hours, and you never said a word about it till just now."

"But, Janet, we've been sight-seeing ever since you arrived. You can't very well tell secrets when you're sight-seeing, you know!"

"Well, you might have given me a hint about it long ago. You know we've solemnly promised never to have any secrets from each other, and yet you've had one *two whole months*?"

"No, Jan, I haven't had it quite as long as that. Honest! It didn't begin till quite a while after I came; in fact, not till about three or four weeks ago."

"Tell me all about it right away, then, and perhaps I'll forgive you!"

The two girls cuddled up close to each other on the low couch by the open window and lowered their voices to a whisper. Through the warm darkness of the June night came the hum of a great city, a subdued, murmurous sound, strangely unfamiliar to one of the girls, who was in the city for the first time in all her country life. To the other the sound had some time since become an accustomed one. As they leaned their elbows on the sill and, chins in hand, stared out into the darkness, Marcia began:

"Well, Jan, I might as well commence at the beginning, so you'll understand how it all happened. I've been just crazy to tell you, but I'm not good at letter-writing, and there's such a lot to explain that I thought I'd wait till your visit.

"You know, when we first moved to this apartment, last April, from 'way back in

Northam, I was all excitement for a while just to be living in the city. Everything was *so* different. Really, I acted so *silly*—you wouldn't believe it! I used to run down to the front door half a dozen times a day, just to push the bell and see the door open all by itself! It seemed like something in a fairy-story. And for the longest while I couldn't get used to the dumb-waiter or the steam-heat or the electric lights, and all that sort of thing. It *is* awfully different from our old-fashioned little Northam—now isn't it?"

"Yes, I feel just that way this minute," admitted Janet.

"And then, too," went on Marcia, "there were all the things outside to do and see—the trolleys and stores and parks and museums and the zoo! Aunt Minerva said I went around 'like a distracted chicken' for a while! And beside that, we used to have the greatest fun shopping for new furniture and things for this apartment. Hardly a bit of that big old furniture we brought with us would fit into it, these rooms are so much smaller than the ones in our old farm-house.

"Well, anyhow, for a while I was too busy and interested and excited to think of another thing—"

"Yes, too busy to even write to *me*!" interrupted Janet. "I had about one letter in two weeks from you, those days. And you'd *promised* to write every other day!"

"Oh well, never mind that now! You'd have done the same, I guess. If you don't let me go on, I'll never get to the *secret*! After a while, though, I got used to all the new things, and I'd seen all the sights, and Aunt Minerva had finished all the furnishing except the curtains and draperies (she's at that, yet!), and all of a sudden everything fell flat. I hadn't begun my music-lessons, and there didn't seem to be a thing to do, or a single interest in life.

"The truth is, Jan, I was frightfully lonesome—for *you*!" Here Marcia felt her hand squeezed in the darkness. "Perhaps you don't realize it, but living in an apartment in a big city is the *queerest* thing! You don't know your neighbor that lives right across the hall. You don't know a soul in the house. And as far as I can see, you're not likely to if you lived here fifty years! Nobody calls on you as they do on a new family in the country. Nobody seems to care a rap who you are, or whether you live or die, or anything. And would you believe it, Janet, there isn't another girl in this whole apartment, either older or younger than myself! No one but grown-ups.

"So you can see how awfully lonesome I've been. And as Aunt Minerva had decided not to send me to high school till fall, I didn't have a chance to get acquainted with any one of my own age. Actually, it got so I didn't do much else

but moon around and mark off the days till school in Northam closed and you could come. And, oh, I'm *so* glad you're here for the summer! Isn't it gorgeous!" She hugged her chum spasmodically.

"But to go on. I'm telling you all this so you can see what led up to my doing what I did about—the *secret*. It began one awfully rainy afternoon last month. I'd been for a walk in the wet, just for exercise, and when I came in, Aunt Minerva was out shopping. I hadn't a new book to read nor a blessed thing to do, so I sat down right here by the window and got to thinking and wondering *why* things were so unevenly divided—why you, Jan, should have a mother and father and a big, jolly lot of brothers and sisters, and I should be just *one*, all alone, living with Aunt Minerva (though she's lovely to me), with no mother, and a father away nearly all the time on his ship.

"And it seemed as if I just hated this apartment, with its little rooms, like cubbyholes, all in a row. I longed to be back in Northam. And looking out of the window, I even thought I'd give anything to live in that big, rambling, dingy, old place next door, beyond the brick wall, for at least one could go up and down *stairs* to the different rooms.

"And then, if you'll believe me, Jan, as I stared at that house it began to dawn on me that I'd never really 'taken it in' before—that it was a very strange-looking old place. And because I didn't have another mortal thing to do, I just sat and stared at it as if I'd never seen it before, and began to wonder and wonder about it. For there were a number of things about it that seemed decidedly *queer*."

"What's it like, anyway?" questioned Janet. "There were so many other things to see to-day that I didn't notice it at all. And it's so dark now I can't see a thing."

"Why, it's a big, square, four-story brick house, and it's terribly in need of paint. Looks as if it hadn't had a coat in years and years. It stands 'way back from the street, in a sort of ragged, weedy garden, and there's a high brick wall around the whole place, except for a heavy wooden gate at the front covered with ironwork. That gate is always closed. A stone walk runs from the gate to the front door. 'Way back at the rear of the garden is an old brick stable that looks as if it hadn't been opened or used in years.

"You'll see all this yourself, Janet, when you look out of the window in the morning. For this apartment-house runs along close to the brick wall, and as we're three floors up, you get a good view of the whole place. This window in my room is the *very* best place of all to see it—fortunately.

"But the queer thing about it is that, though the shutters are all tightly closed or

bowed,—every one!—and the whole place looks deserted, it really *isn't*! There's some one living in it; and once in a long while you happen to see signs of it. For instance, that very afternoon I saw this: 'most all the shutters are tightly closed, but on the second floor they are usually just bowed. And that day the slats in one of them were open, and I thought I could see a muslin curtain flapping behind it. But while I was looking, the fingers of a hand suddenly appeared between the slats and snapped them shut with a jerk.

"Of course, there's nothing so awfully strange about a thing like that, *as a rule*, but somehow the way it was done seemed *mysterious*. I can't explain just why. Anyhow, as I hadn't anything else to do, I concluded I'd sit there for a while longer and see if something else would happen. But nothing did—not for nearly an hour; and I was getting tired of the thing and just going to get up and go away *when*—"

"*What?*" breathed Janet, in an excited whisper.

"The big front door opened (it was nearly dark by that time) and out crept the queerest little figure! It appeared to be a little old woman all dressed in dingy black clothes that looked as if they must have come out of the ark, they were so old-fashioned! Her hat was a queer little bonnet, with no trimming except a heavy black veil that came down over her face. She had a small market-basket on her arm, and a big old umbrella.

"But the queerest thing was the way she scuttled down the path to the gate, like a frightened rabbit, turning her head from side to side, as if she was afraid of being seen or watched. When she got to the gate, she had to put down her basket and umbrella and use both hands to unlock it with a huge key. When she got outside of it, on the street, she shut the gate behind her, and of course I couldn't see her any more.

"Well, it set me to wondering and wondering what the story of that queer old house and queer little old lady could be. It seemed as if there *must* be some story about it, or some explanation; for, you see, it's a big place, and evidently at one time must have been very handsome. And it stands right here in one of the busiest and most valuable parts of the city.

"The more I thought of it, the more curious I grew. But the worst of it was that I didn't know a soul who could tell me the least thing about it. Aunt Minerva couldn't, of course, and I wasn't acquainted with another person in the city. It just seemed as if I *must* find some explanation. Then, all of a sudden, I thought of our new colored maid. Perhaps she might have heard something about it. I made

up my mind I'd go right out to the kitchen. So I went and started her talking about things in general and finally asked her if she knew anything about that old house. And *then*—I wish you could have heard her! I can't tell it all the way she did, but this is the substance of it:

"It seems that she's discovered that the janitor here is the son of an old friend from North Carolina. Of course she's been talking to him a lot, and he has told her all about the whole neighborhood, and especially about the queer old house next door. He says it's known all around here as 'Benedict's Folly.'"

"Why?" queried Janet.

"Well, because years and years ago, when the owner built it (his name was Benedict), it was 'way out of the city limits, and everybody thought he was awfully foolish, going so far, and building a handsome city house off in the wilderness. But he wasn't so foolish after all, for the city came right up and surrounded him in the end, and the property is worth no end of money now.

"But here's the queer thing about it. Old Mr. Benedict's been dead many years, and the place looks as if no one lived there—but *some one does*! It's a daughter of his, a queer little old lady, who keeps herself shut up there all the time; some think she's alone, others say no, that some one else is there with her. No one seems to know definitely. Anyhow, although she is very wealthy, she does all the work herself, and the marketing; and she even carries home all the things, and won't allow a single one of the tradesmen to come in.

"Mr. Simmonds (that's our janitor) says that two years ago, in the winter, a water-pipe there burst, and Miss Benedict just *had* to get a plumber; and he afterward told awfully peculiar things about the way the house looked,—the furniture all draped and covered up, and even the pictures on the walls covered, too,—and not a single modern improvement except the running water and some old-fashioned gas-fixtures. And the little old lady never raised her veil while he was there, so he couldn't see what she looked like.

"Mr. Simmonds says every one thinks there is some great mystery about 'Benedict's Folly,' but no one seems to be able to guess what it can be. Now, Janet, isn't that just fascinating? Think of living next door to a mystery!"

"It's simply thrilling!" sighed Janet. "But, Marcia, I still don't see what this has to do with a *secret*. Where do *you* come in? I don't see why you couldn't have written all this to me."

"Wait!" said Marcia. "I haven't finished yet. That was absolutely all I could get

out of our maid Eliza, all she or any one else knew, in fact. But as you can imagine, I couldn't get the thing out of my mind, and I couldn't stop looking at the old place, either. I tried to talk to Aunt Minerva about it, but she wasn't a bit interested. Said she couldn't understand how any one could keep house in that slovenly fashion, and that's all she would say. So I gave up trying to interest *her*.

"Now, I must tell you the odd thing that happened that very night. You know I've said it was raining hard all that day, and by ten o'clock the wind was blowing a gale. I was just ready for bed, and had turned off my light and raised the shade, when I thought I'd take another peep at my mysterious mansion across the fence. All I could see, however, were just some streaks of light through the chinks in the shutters in that one room on the second floor. All the rest of the place was as dark as a pocket. And as I sat staring out, it suddenly came to me what fun it would be to try to unravel the whole mysterious affair all by myself. It would certainly help me to pass the dull days till you came!

"But then, too, the only way to do it would be to watch this old place like a cat, and I knew *that* wouldn't be right. It would be too much like spying into your neighbor's affairs, and, of course, that's horrid. Finally, I concluded, that if I could do it without being meddlesome or prying, I'd just watch the place a *little* and see if anything interesting would happen. And while I was thinking this, a strange thing *did* happen—that very minute!

"The wind had grown terrific, and, all of a sudden, it just took one of the shutters of that lighted room, and ripped it from its fastening, and threw it back against the wall. And the next moment a figure hurried to the window, leaned out, and drew the shutter back in place again. But just for one instant I had caught a glimpse of the whole inside of the room! And what do you suppose I saw, Jan?"

"*What?*" demanded Janet.

"Well, not much of the furnishing, except a lighted oil-lamp on a table. But, directly in the center of the room, in a perfectly enormous armchair sat—a woman! And it wasn't the one I'd seen in the afternoon, either. I'm sure of that. I couldn't see her face, for it was in shadow, but she was looking down at something spread out on her lap. And she held her right hand over it in the air and waved it back and forth, sort of uncertainly. You can't imagine what a strange picture it was—and then the shutter was closed. There was something so *weird* about it all.

"If I was curious before, I was simply *wild* with interest then. It seemed as if I *must* know what it all meant—what that strange old lady could be doing, sitting

there in state in the middle of the room, and all the rest of it. You don't blame me, do you, Jan?"

"Indeed I don't! I'd be ten times worse, I guess. But what about the *secret*? And *did* you find out anything else?"

"Yes, I did. And that's the secret. The whole mysterious thing is in the secret, because no one but you knows I'm the least interested in the affair, and I don't want them to—now! I'll tell you what happened next."

But just at this moment they were interrupted by a knock at the door, and a voice inquiring:

"Girls, *girls*! haven't you gone to bed yet? I've heard you talking for the last hour."

"No, Aunt Minerva!" answered Marcia, "we are sitting by the window."

"Well, you must go to bed *at once*! It's nearly midnight. You won't either of you be fit for a thing to-morrow. Now, mind, not another word! Good-night!"

"Good-night!" they both answered, but heaved a sigh when Aunt Minerva was out of hearing.

"It's no use!" whispered Marcia. "We'll have to stop for to-night. But there's lots more, and the *most* interesting part of it, too. Well, never mind, I'll tell you all the rest to-morrow!"

CHAPTER II

THE FACE BEHIND THE SHUTTER

Janet had no sooner hopped out of bed next morning than she flew to the window to examine "Benedict's Folly" by broad daylight. In the streaming sun of a June morning the dingy old mansion certainly bore out the truth of Marcia's mysterious description.

"Gracious! I should think you would have been interested in it from the first!" she exclaimed.

"Interested in what?" yawned Marcia, sleepily, opening her eyes.

"'Benedict's Folly,' of course! Let's see," went on Janet, who possessed a very practical, orderly mind; "from your story last night it seems there must be two people living there—but look here! how did you know, Marcia, that it was another old lady you saw that night when the shutter blew open?"

"Why, for several reasons," answered Marcia. "In the first place, the one who goes out is short and slight. The one sitting in the chair was evidently large, and rather stout, and—and different, somehow, although I didn't see either of their faces. And then, it wasn't the lady in the chair who closed the shutter. She evidently never moved. So it *must* have been some one else."

"Yes, it must have been," agreed Janet, convinced. "Queer that nobody seems to know about the second one. I wonder who she is? And are there any more? Go on with your story, Marcia."

"No," said Marcia. "Wait till we can be by ourselves for a long while. I don't want to be interrupted. Aunt Minerva's going out this morning, and then we'll have a chance."

So, later in the morning, the two girls sat by Marcia's window, each occupied with a dainty bit of embroidery, and Marcia began anew:

"Well, after that rainy night, for several days I didn't see a thing more that was interesting about the old house or the queer people who live in it. I used to watch once in a while to see if the little lady in black would go out again in the afternoon, as she did before, but she didn't. Then, a day or two later, I did

something that surprised even myself, for I hadn't the faintest *intention* of doing it. I had been taking a walk that afternoon and was just coming home, passing on the way the high brick wall of the Benedict house. It was just as I reached the closed gate that an idea popped into my head.

"You know, they say that no visitors are ever admitted, and no rings or knocks at the gate are ever answered. Well, something suddenly prompted me to ring that bell and see what would happen. I never stopped to ask myself what I should say if some one came and inquired what I wanted. I just rang it suddenly (and I had to pull hard, the old thing was so rusty) and far away somewhere in the house I heard a faint tinkle.

"Then I got kind of panic-stricken, wondering what I'd say if any one did really come. But I needn't have worried, for what do you suppose happened?"

"Nothing!" answered Janet, promptly.

"That's just where you're mistaken; but you'd never guess what it was. About a minute after I'd rung the bell, I heard light footsteps on the walk behind the gate. *But*, instead of coming *toward* the gate, they were hurrying *away* from it; and in another minute I heard the front door close. After that it was all quiet, and nothing else happened. Then I went on home."

"I know," interrupted Janet, whose quick mind had already worked out the problem, "exactly what occurred. It was Miss Benedict, who had been just about to come out on her way to do the marketing. And your ring frightened her, and sent her hurrying back into the house. *Isn't* it all singular!"

"Yes, that must have been it," agreed Marcia. "And it made me more curious than ever to understand about it. And I was so annoyed at myself for ringing at all. If I hadn't, I might have seen Miss Benedict close by, when she came out of the gate. It served me right for doing such a thing, anyhow!

"But after that I got to watching, every time I went out, thinking I might see her on the street somewhere, especially if it was about the time she usually did her marketing—along toward dusk. Several days passed, however, and I never did. I *had* thought of watching from my window to see when she went out, and then following her. But that didn't seem right, somehow. It would be too much like spying on her. So I just concluded I'd trust to chance. And luck favored me at last, one morning, about a week after I'd rung her bell.

"It happened that the night before, Eliza suddenly discovered we were all out of oatmeal for breakfast, and I promised her I'd get some very early in the morning,

when I went to take my walk. You know, I've found that on these warm summer days in the city it's much pleasanter to take a walk in the real early morning than to wait till later in the day, when it's crowded and hot. And I always used to love walking in the early morning, up in Northam.

"Well, anyhow, I got up that day about six. I knew that no stores near here would be open so early, and I decided to walk over toward the other side of town. It's a sort of poor section there, and the stores often open up quite early, so that folks can do their marketing before they go to work. It was a beautiful, cool morning, and I was quite enjoying myself when—Jan, *what* do you think?—I looked up, and about half a block ahead of me was a little black figure with a market-basket, hurrying along. I *knew* it was Miss Benedict!

"Can you imagine my surprise—and delight? I suddenly made up my mind I'd keep behind her, and go into the same store she did. There could surely be no harm in *that*! And by and by I saw her turn into a little grocery-shop; and a minute or two after in I walked, went to the counter, and stood right near her. There was no one in the store beside ourselves and the grocer. He looked sleepy, and was yawning while he wrapped up something for her. He asked me to 'Wait a minute, please!' which, of course, I was only too delighted to do, as it gave me a perfect right to stand close by my mysterious little neighbor and hear her speak.

"And it was right there, Janet, that I got the surprise of my life. She still wore her black veil, and it was so thick that not a bit of her face could be seen. Her dress was the most old-fashioned thing—it looked twenty years old, if not more. I don't know what sort of a voice I had expected to hear, but it was nothing in the least like what I *did* hear.

"I can't exactly describe it to you, Jan, but it was the most beautiful *speaking* voice I've ever heard in my life! It was soft, and flute-like, and so—so *appealing*! It somehow went straight to my heart. It made me feel as if I wanted to take *care* of Miss Benedict, somehow, I can't exactly explain it. Even when she was speaking of such commonplace things as butter and eggs and sugar, it was like—like *music*!

"Well, in a few moments she had finished, and the grocer packed her things in her basket, and she went away. I had to stay, of course, and get my oatmeal, and I didn't see her again. But being so close to her and hearing that lovely voice had changed my whole feeling about her. At first, I had just been interested and awfully *curious* about the whole mysterious affair, and, I'll confess, just a wee bit

repelled by the account of the queer little lady and the strange way she lived. I wanted to know the explanation of the mystery, but I didn't particularly want to know *her*. But after that, I felt different,—sort of bewitched by that beautiful voice. I wanted to *help* that Miss Benedict. I wanted to *do* something for her, or try to make her happier, or—or *something*, I couldn't quite explain what. And I wanted—oh, so much!—to see her *face*, and know what she was like, and more about *herself*. Can you understand, Jan?"

"Indeed, I can. But do go on. Did you ever meet her again?"

"No, I didn't. But I've seen—and heard—something else that's strange, more strange than all the rest!"

"Tell me, quick!" demanded Janet.

"Two nights ago, I sat here by the window. It was too hot to turn on the light, but it was very dark outside. Presently I heard footsteps in the Benedict garden. They were light, quick footsteps, and sounded exactly as if some one were running about, or skipping and jumping. First I thought it must be a big dog, for it couldn't possibly have been either one of those two old ladies, running and skipping that way! And then I heard a soft humming, as if some one were singing a tune half under the breath. And then, very soon after, a door opened, and a voice called out, very softly, 'Come in, now!' And after that all was quiet. Now, Janet McNeil, I'm simply positive there's *some one else* in that house beside the two old ladies,—some one who hasn't been seen yet. What do you make of it?"

"You must be right," replied Janet, thoughtfully. "It *couldn't* be either of them running about in the garden in the dark and humming a tune. It isn't at all what they'd be likely to do. I think it must be some one else, more—more *human* and natural, somehow. And younger, too. But what on *earth* do they all keep so shut up for, and act as if they were afraid to be seen! It's the queerest thing I ever heard of. You certainly *have* moved next door to a 'dark-brown mystery,' Marcia!"

For the ensuing hour the girls embroidered steadily and discussed "Benedict's Folly" and its inmates in all their peculiar phases. But, turn and twist it as they might, they could find no answer to the riddle. After a while, Janet changed the subject.

"By the way, Marcia, how are you coming on with your violin practice? Have you begun taking lessons here yet? You know that was one of the principal things you folks moved to the city for,—so that you could study with the best

teachers."

"Yes, I've begun with Professor Hardwick," said Marcia, "and I've practised quite hard lately. It's about all I had to do. He says I've made some progress already."

"Oh, *do* get your violin and play some for me!" begged Janet. "I'm just starving for some good music. I haven't heard any since you left Northam."

So Marcia obligingly went to the parlor and brought back her violin. When she had tuned it and tucked it lovingly under her chin, she sat down in the window-seat and ran her bow over the strings in a shower of liquid melody. For one so young she played astonishingly well. Janet listened, breathless, absorbed.

"Marcia dear, you *have* improved!" she exclaimed, as her chum stopped for a moment. "Now do play my favorite!" Marcia laid her bow on the strings once more, and slipped into the tender reverie of the "Träumerei." But before it was half finished, Janet, wide-eyed with astonishment, laid her hand on Marcia's arm.

"Look!" she breathed. Marcia followed the direction of her gaze, and turned to stare out of the window at the house opposite. And this is what she saw:

The shutter of a window on the top floor had been pushed partly open, and a face looked out,—a face with big, appealing eyes, and a frame of golden, curling hair falling all about it. Straight over at the two in the window it gazed, eager, absorbed, delighted. And then suddenly, as it detected their own interested stare, it withdrew, and the shutter was softly closed.

The two girls drew a long breath and gazed at each other.

"Janet,—*what* did I tell you! There *is* some one else in that house!" cried Marcia.

"I guess you're right!" admitted Janet, quieter, but no less excited. "But do you realize who that third person *is*, Marcia Brett? It isn't an old lady; it's some one just about our own age—it's a young *girl*!"

CHAPTER III

THE GATE OPENS

For the two ensuing days, Marcia and Janet, tense with excitement, discussed the most recently discovered inmate of "Benedict's Folly," and watched incessantly for another glimpse of the face behind the shutter. How was it, they constantly demanded of each other, that a girl of fourteen or fifteen had come to be shut up in the dreary old place? Was she a prisoner there? Was she a relative, friend, or servant? Was she free to come and go?

To the latter question they unanimously voted "No!" How could she be aught else but a prisoner when she was never seen going in or out, was forced to take her exercise after nightfall in the dark garden, and was kept constantly behind closed shutters? No girl of that age in her right mind could deliberately *choose* a life like that!

"Do you suppose she has always lived there?" queried Marcia, for the twentieth time. And as Janet could answer it no better than herself, she propounded another question:

"And why do you suppose she opened the shutter and looked out, seeming so delighted, when I played, and then drew in again so quickly when we noticed her? Is *she* afraid of being seen, too?"

"Evidently," said Janet. "She must be as full of mystery as the rest of them. And yet—I *can't*, somehow, feel that she *is* like them; she's so sweet and young and—oh, *you* know what I mean!"

Of course she knew, but it didn't help them in the least to solve this latest phase of their mystery. Finally Marcia, who still clung a bit shyly to the fairy lore of her earlier years, declared:

"I believe she's a regular *Cinderella*, kept there to do all the hard work of the place by those queer old ladies, and I shouldn't be a bit surprised if she's down in the kitchen this minute, cleaning out the ashes of the stove! Come, Jan, let's go for a walk, and when we come back I'll play on the violin by the window. Maybe our little *Cinderella* will peep out again!"

The two girls put on their hats and strolled out for their usual afternoon walk and

treat of ice-cream soda. But they had gone no farther from their own door than the length of the Benedict brick wall when they were suddenly brought to a halt in front of the closed gate by hearing a sound on the other side of it. It was a sound indicative of some one's struggling attempt to open it—the click of a key turning and turning in the lock and the futile rattling of the iron knob. And then the sound of a voice murmuring:

"Oh, dear! What *shall* I do? I can't get this open!"

"Janet," whispered Marcia, "that's *not* the voice of Miss Benedict! I *know* it! I believe it's *Cinderella*, and she's trying to run away! What shall we do—stay here?"

"No," Janet whispered back. "Let's just stroll on a little way, and then turn back. We can see what happens then without seeming to be watching."

They walked on quickly for a number of yards, and then turned to approach the gate again. Even as they did so they saw it open, and out stepped a little figure.

It was not Miss Benedict! The slim, trim little girlish form was clad in plain dark clothes of a slightly unfamiliar cut. But the face was the one that had appeared in the upper window, and the thick golden curls were surmounted by a black velvet tam-o'-shanter. On her arm she carried a small market-basket, and her eyes had a bewildered, almost frightened, look.

In their excited interest Marcia and Janet had, quite unconsciously, stopped short where they were and waited to see which way their *Cinderella* would turn. But though they stood so for an appreciable moment, she turned neither way, and only stood, her back to the gate, gazing uncertainly to the right and left. And then, perceiving them, she seemed to take a sudden resolution, and turned to them appealingly.

"Oh, please, *could* you direct me how to find this?" she asked, holding out a slip of paper. Marcia hurried to her side and read the written address. And when she had read it, she realized that it was the little grocery-shop on the other side of town where she had once encountered Miss Benedict.

"Why, certainly!" she cried. "You walk over five blocks in that direction, then turn to your left and down three. You can't miss it; it's right next to a shoemaker's place."

The child looked more bewildered than ever, and her eyes strayed to the busy street-crossing near which they stood, crowded with hurrying trucks and automobiles.

"Thank you!" she faltered. "Do I go this way?" And then, with sudden candor, "You see, I'm strange in these streets." Her voice was clear and pretty, but her accent markedly un-American. Both girls half consciously noted it.

"See here," said Marcia; "would you care to have us take you there? We're not going in any special direction, and I've been there before."

An infinitely relieved expression came over the girl's face. "Oh, *would* you be so kind? I'm just—just scared to death on these streets!"

They turned to accompany her, one on each side, and piloted her safely across the busy avenue. Then, in the quiet stretch of the next block, they proceeded together in complete and embarrassing silence.

It was a silence that Marcia and Janet had fully expected their companion to break—possibly to reveal some reason for her errand and her strangeness in the streets. They themselves hesitated to say much, for fear of seeming curious or anxious to force her confidence. But she said not a word. The strain at last became too much for Janet.

"I don't blame you for feeling nervous in these city streets," she began. "I'm a country girl myself, and I act like a scared rabbit whenever I go out alone here." The girl turned to her with a little confiding gesture.

"I've never been out in them alone before," she said. Then there was another silence during which Marcia and Janet both searched frantically in their minds for something else to say. But it was the girl herself who broke the silence the second time.

"Thank you for your music the other day," she said, turning to Marcia. "I heard you. I often hear you and listen."

"Oh, I'm so glad you liked it!" cried Marcia. "Do you care for music?"

"I adore it," she replied simply.

"Look here!" exclaimed Marcia, suddenly; "how did you know it was I that played the violin?"

"Because I've watched you often—through the slats!"

Marcia and Janet exchanged glances. So the watching was not all on *their* side of the fence! Here was a revelation!

"That last thing you played the other day—will you—will you tell me what it was?" went on their new companion, shyly.

"Why, that was Schumann's 'Träumerei,'" answered Marcia. "I love it, don't you?"

"Yes but I never heard it before; that is, I never *remember* hearing it, and yet—somehow I seemed to *know* it. I can't think why. I don't understand. It's as if I'd *dreamed* it, I think."

Marcia and Janet again exchanged glances. What a strange child this was, who talked of having "dreamed" music that was quite familiar to almost every one.

"Perhaps you heard it at a concert," suggested Janet.

"I never went to a concert," she replied, much to their amazement. And then, perceiving their surprise, she added:

"You see, I've always lived 'way off in the country, in just a little village—till now."

"Oh—yes," answered Janet, pretending enlightenment, though in truth she and Marcia were more bewildered than ever.

But by this time they had reached the little grocery-shop, and all proceeded inside while their new friend made her purchases. These she read off slowly from a slip of paper, and the grocer packed them in her basket. But when it came to paying for them and making change, she became entangled in a fresh puzzle.

"I think you said these eggs were a shilling?" she ventured to the grocer.

"Shilling—no! I said they were a quarter," he retorted impatiently.

"A quarter?" she queried, and turned questioning eyes to her two friends.

"He means this," said Marcia, picking out a twenty-five-cent piece from the change the girl held.

"Oh, thank you! I don't understand this American money," she explained. And Marcia and Janet added another query to their rapidly growing mental list.

On the way back home, however, she grew silent again, and though the girls chatted back and forth about quite impersonal matters,—the crowded streets, the warm weather, the sights they passed,—she was not to be drawn into the conversation. And the nearer they drew to their destination, the more depressed she appeared to become. At last they reached the gate.

"Shall you be going out again to-morrow?" ventured Marcia. "If so, we will go with you, if you care to have us, till you get used to the streets."

The girl gave her a sudden, pleased glance. "I—I don't know," she said. "You see, Miss Benedict hurt her ankle a day or two ago, and she can't get around much, so—so I'm doing this for her. If she wants me to go to-morrow, I will. I'd be *so* glad to go with you. How shall I let you know?"

"Just hang a white handkerchief to your shutter before you go, and we'll see it. We'll watch for it!" cried Marcia, inventing the signal on the spur of the moment. And then, impetuously, she added:

"My name is Marcia Brett, and this is Janet McNeil. Won't you tell us yours, if we're to be friends?"

"I'm Cecily Marlowe," she answered, "and I'm *so* glad to know you." As she spoke she was fumbling with the big key in the lock of the gate, and as the latter swung open, she turned once more to face them, with a little pent-up sob: "I don't know why I'm here—and I'm *so* lonely!" Then, frightened at having revealed so much, she turned quickly away and shut the gate.

As they listened to her footsteps retreating up the path and the closing of the front door Marcia and Janet turned to each other, a thousand questions burning on their tongues. But all they could exclaim in one breath was:

"Did you *ever*!"

CHAPTER IV

THE BACKWARD GLANCE

The next twenty-four hours were spent in delightful speculation. So her name was Cecily Marlowe! Was she any relation of Miss Benedict? "Marlowe" and "Benedict" were certainly dissimilar enough.

"But then she might be a relation on Miss Benedict's mother's side," suggested Marcia.

"Does it sound likely when you think what she said just at the last—that she didn't know why she was there?" replied Janet, scornfully. "She couldn't be in doubt about it if she were a *relation,* either come on a visit or there to stay!" Which argument settled *that* question.

"But where do you suppose she has come from?" marveled Marcia. "She said she'd always lived in a little country village, and she didn't know a thing about American money. She's foreign—that's certain. Even her clothes and her way of speaking show it. But from where?"

"Did you notice that she said 'shilling'?" suggested Janet. "That shows she must be English. She *looks* English. Now will you tell me how she could get 'way over here from England and not know why she had come?"

"It sounds as if she might have been kidnapped," said Marcia. "Why, Janet! this is precisely like a mystery in a book. Do you *realize* it? And here we are living right next door to it! It's too good to be true!"

Janet's mind had, however, gone off on another tack. "I can't understand that remark she made about the music. 'Träumerei' is certainly about as well known as any piece of classic music. She said she never remembered hearing it, and yet it seems somehow familiar to her. Can you make anything out of *that*?"

Marcia couldn't. "Maybe it's all just a notion," she suggested helplessly. "Suppose I play some on the violin here in our window right now. She seems to enjoy it so. And maybe she'll open her shutter again."

So they sat on the window-seat, and Marcia played her very best, including the "Träumerei," but no golden head appeared from behind the shutter that

afternoon.

"Never mind," said Janet. "We'll see her to-morrow, most likely. Perhaps she's busy downstairs now."

"But isn't she the prettiest little thing!" mused Marcia, reminiscently. "The loveliest big blue eyes, and curly golden hair, and such a *trusting* look in her face, somehow! It went right down to the very bottom of my heart, if it doesn't sound silly to put it that way."

"Yes, I know," agreed Janet. "I felt the same way. But doesn't it strike you queer that—"

"Oh, the whole thing's queer!" interrupted Marcia. "The queerest I ever heard of. I guess you agree with me now, Janet, that I had a secret worth talking about in 'Benedict's Folly.' But let's wait till to-morrow and see what happens."

The morrow came and went, however, and nothing happened at all. Hour after hour the two girls watched for the signal of the white handkerchief, but every shuttered window of the old mansion remained blank. Neither did any one go in or out of the gate. Late in the afternoon Marcia played again at the window, but the sweetest music called forth not a single sign from behind the walls of the house next door. Janet had but one solution to offer.

"They probably didn't need any marketing done to-day, so she naturally didn't go out."

"But why couldn't she have at least looked out a moment from her window?" cried Marcia, disconsolately. "Surely that would have been easy to do, when she said she cared so much for the music. She must have *known* I was playing just for her!"

"She may have been somewhere in the house where she couldn't. You can't tell, and oughtn't to blame her without knowing," declared Janet, defending the conduct of the mysterious Cecily. "To-morrow we'll see her again, no doubt."

On the morrow her prophecy was fulfilled. They did see her again, but under circumstances so peculiar that they were quite dumfounded.

All the morning they watched and waited in vain for some signal from the upper window. But none came. And the main part of the afternoon passed in precisely the same way. They sat very conspicuously in their own window-seat, so that there could be no doubt in Cecily's mind about their being at home. Marcia even did a little violin practice while they waited. And still there was no sign.

Suddenly, about five o'clock, Janet clutched at her chum's arm.

"Look!" she cried.

Marcia looked, and down the path from the front door of the strange house she saw Cecily, dressed to go out, approaching the gate. It was plain that she was bound on another marketing expedition for the basket hung from her arm.

"*Well!* what do you make of that!" exclaimed Marcia in bewilderment. "Did she signal to us?"

"No, she didn't," returned Janet. "I've watched every minute. She *couldn't* have forgotten it. But, do you know, there may be some very good reason why she didn't—or couldn't—and perhaps she's hoping we'll see her, and be on hand outside, anyway, as we promised."

"But she *must* have seen us sitting in the window," argued Marcia. "She might at least have looked up and waved her hand, or nodded, or smiled—or something!"

Cecily, meanwhile, was fumbling with the lock of the big old gate, which seemed, as on a former occasion, to give her a great deal of trouble.

"Come," cried Janet to Marcia. "We'll just about have time to catch her if we hurry." And seizing their hats, the girls hastened downstairs. Their front door closed behind them just as Cecily came abreast of them. What happened next was like a blow in the face!

Cecily Marlowe passed them by without a look

They had started forward, each with a friendly smile, expecting their new companion to meet them in similar fashion. To their[Pg 49]
[Pg 50]
[Pg 51] amazement, Cecily Marlowe, after the first sudden look into their faces, dropped her eyes, and passed them by without a glance, precisely as if they were utter strangers to her.

Both girls gasped, stared at her departing figure till she turned the corner, and then into each other's faces.

"The ungrateful little thing!" Marcia presently exploded. "If that wasn't the 'cut direct,' I've never seen it before!"

"An unmistakable way of telling us to mind our own business!" even Janet had to admit. "How humiliating! And yet—"

"Yet—what?" demanded Marcia, indignantly. "You're surely not going to try to excuse such inexcusable conduct as *that*! I see very plainly what's happened. She's thought it over and decided that we were meddlesome and just trying to *push* an acquaintance with her, and she thinks she's a little too exclusive for that kind of thing, and the simple remedy was to 'cut us dead'!" Marcia was quite out of breath when she finished this summing up.

"It *does* look like it," Janet admitted. "But somehow, even yet, I can't feel that she *wanted* to do it—of her own accord, I mean."

But Marcia couldn't see it in that light. They discussed the question hotly, still standing on the front stoop of the apartment. So long, in fact, did they argue it back and forth, turning and twisting the sorry little occurrence, viewing it in every possible light, that before they realized it, Cecily was returning, her errands accomplished. How she had managed to find her way and cross the streets in safety, they could only conjecture.

To reach her own gate, she had to pass directly by where they were standing, and they saw her approaching down the block.

"Here she comes," muttered Marcia. "Now, let's stand right here and watch her as she goes by. She can't *help* but see us. We'll give her one more chance to do the proper thing."

And so they waited, breathless, expectant, while the girl came rapidly on, her

eyes cast down, watching the pavement. But even when she was quite in front of them, she did not once look up, and without comment their gaze followed her retreating figure to the gate.

As she fitted the big key and swung the gate open, they were just about to turn to each other in angry impatience when something else happened.

Cecily Marlowe turned her head and looked back at them for one long, tense moment. It was such a wistful, imploring look, a gaze so full of appeal for forgiveness, so plainly in contrast with her recent conduct, that their hearts melted at once.

Simultaneously they waved their hands and smiled at her, and she smiled back in return, the most adorable little smile in the world, full of trust and confidence and utter friendliness.

Then she hurried in and closed the gate, leaving her two new friends outside more bewildered than ever.

CHAPTER V

THE HANDKERCHIEF IN THE WINDOW

The next day was spent by the two girls in an expedition to one of the near-by ocean beaches with Aunt Minerva. Under ordinary circumstances it was a treat that would have delighted their hearts. But, as matters stood, they only chafed with impatience to be back at their bedroom window, watching the house next door. The date for the trip, however, had been set some time before, and Aunt Minerva would have thought it very strange if they had begged off, for such flimsy reason as they could have offered.

The day after found them again on watch, though what they expected to see they couldn't have told. It was plain that, in spite of appearances, Cecily Marlowe's friendly feeling toward them was undiminished. The charming backward smile had indicated *that* unmistakably. But how to make it fit in with her refusal to signal and her forbidding conduct they could not understand, and the mystery kept them in a constant ferment of surmise.

But even as they sat discussing it next morning, their fancy-work lying unheeded in their laps, they looked out suddenly with a simultaneous gasp of astonishment and delight. There was a tiny white handkerchief attached to the shutter in the upper window and fluttering in the breeze!

"It's the signal—our signal!" cried Marcia. "Now what shall we do?—show that we've seen it by waving something? Here's my red silk scarf."

"No," decided Janet. "Perhaps she'd rather not have us do anything that might attract attention. Let's go right down to the street, as we said we would, and see if she's there."

They lost not a moment's time in reaching their front steps. But there was no sign of Cecily till they had come abreast of the Benedict gate. This they discovered ajar, and two blue eyes peeping out of a narrow crack. As they came in sight, there was a smothered exclamation, "Oh! I'm so glad!" The gate opened wider, and Cecily stood before them.

"You are *so* good!" she began at once, in a low voice, stretching out both hands to them. "I was afraid you—you wouldn't come. I left the signal there almost all

day yesterday—"

"We were away!" cried Marcia, promptly. "I'm *so* sorry. We went—"

"Oh, then—oh, it's all right!" breathed Cecily, in relief. "I was sure you were angry at—at the way—I acted."

It was on the tip of Marcia's tongue to demand why she *had* acted so, but she refrained. And Cecily hurried on:

"I—I just had to signal for you. I—we are in great trouble—and I don't know what to do."

"Oh, what *is* it?" cried both girls together.

"Miss—Miss Benedict is very ill," she continued hesitatingly. "She—she fell and hurt her ankle the other day, and—it's been getting worse ever since. She's in bed—suffering great pain both yesterday and to-day. It's terribly swelled—"

"But why doesn't she send for a doctor?" interrupted Janet, hastily. "She *ought* to have one if it's as bad as that."

"I asked her that, too, yesterday, and she only said: 'No, no! I cannot, must not have a doctor, child!' And when I asked what I could do for her, she answered, 'I don't know, I'm sure!' So there she lies—just suffering. And—and I couldn't think of anything else to do, so I signaled to you. You are my only friends—in all this city!"

There was something infinitely pathetic about the way she brought out this last statement. It touched the hearts of both her listeners, and because of it they inwardly forgave her, once and for all, for any action of hers that had offended them. And they had the good sense not to comment on the strangeness of Miss Benedict's behavior.

"Well, if she won't have a doctor, we must think what else there is to be done," began Janet, practically.

"I wish you'd let me bring Aunt Minerva in to see her," said Marcia. "She hurt her ankle just like that, two years ago, and she'd know exactly what—"

"Oh, no, no!" cried Cecily, starting forward. "Miss Benedict would not want that—does not want to see any one. Please—*please* do not even *mention* to your aunt anything about her—or me! Miss Benedict would not wish it."

The request was certainly very peculiar, but the girls were able to conceal their surprise, great as it was. "Very well," said Marcia, soothingly. "If you'd rather

have it that way, we certainly won't speak of it. But I've just had another idea. I remember Aunt Minerva had a certain kind of salve that she used for her ankle, and she kept it tightly bandaged on. It did her lots of good—cured her, in fact. Now I believe I could get that salve at a drug-store here—"

"Oh, *could* you?" exclaimed Cecily, in immense relief. "Let us go at once."

"But you needn't trouble to go," said Marcia. "We won't be ten minutes and will come right back with it."

"I prefer to go," replied Cecily Marlowe, with such an air of quiet finality that neither dared to question it. All three started out, after Cecily had locked the gate, and proceeded to the nearest drug-store. Here Marcia made the purchase, and paid for it from the change in her own hand-bag. But when they were outside the store Cecily turned to her gravely:

"I have a little English money of my own, but I did not like to offer it in the shop. If you will—will tell me how much the salve cost—in shillings—I will give it to you." And she held out several English shillings to Marcia.

"Oh, you needn't do that! I'm glad to be able to think of something to do for Miss Benedict. It's such a little matter—"

"Please!" reiterated Cecily. "I wish to tell her I bought it myself."

"Why?" cried Marcia, and then the next moment wished she could recall a question that seemed to border on the personal.

"Because I—I dare not tell her I have—have been talking to you!" hesitated Cecily, in an unusual burst of candor. And after that revelation they all walked back to the gate in an uneasy silence.

When they stood again in front of the blank barrier to the mysterious house, Cecily turned to Marcia.

"I love your music," she said. "I always listen to it whenever you play. I knew you had been playing—just for me—these last few days, and I wanted to look out of my window and—and wave to you, but—I must not. I am always there when you play—listening. I wanted you to know it."

"Oh, I'm so glad!" cried Marcia, delightedly. "I *hoped* it would please you. I'll play more than ever now. I'll do all my practising there, too."

"Cecily," said Janet, abruptly, venturing on personal ground for the first time, "you are very lonely there, in that big house, with no other young folks, aren't

you?"

"Yes," answered Cecily, speaking very low, and glancing in an uncertain way at the gate.

"Well, why don't you ask—er—Miss Benedict, if you couldn't run in and visit us once in a while, or go out for a walk with us sometimes? Surely she wouldn't object to that."

"Oh, no, no!" cried Cecily, hastily. "I'd—oh, *how* I'd love to, but—but—it wouldn't do,—it wouldn't be allowed! No, I must not." There was nothing more to be said.

"At least, then," added Marcia, "you'll let us know if you need anything else—you'll signal to us?"

"Yes," said Cecily, "I'll do that." She got out the key, and unlocked the gate. Then she faced them with a sudden, passionate sob.

"You are so wonderfully good to me! I love you—both! You're all I have to—care for!"

Then the gate was shut, and they heard her footsteps fleeing up the pathway.

CHAPTER VI

CECILY REVEALS HERSELF

That night the two girls held a council of war.

"It's perfectly plain to me," said Marcia, "that that poor little thing is right under Miss Benedict's thumb. I think the way she's treated is scandalous—not allowed to go out, or speak to, or associate with, any one! And scared out of her wits all the time, evidently. What on earth is she there for, anyhow?"

Janet scorned to reply to the old, unanswerable question. Instead she remarked:

"She's breaking her heart about it, too. I can see that. And, Marcia, wasn't it strange—what she said just at the last—that she loved us, and that we were all she had to care for! Where *can* all her relatives and family be? Miss Benedict certainly can't be a relative, for Cecily calls her 'Miss.' To think of that lovely little thing without a soul to care for her—except ourselves. Why, Marcia, it's—it's amazing! But the main question now is what are we going to do about it? We *must* help her somehow!"

"I know what *I'm* going to do about it," replied Marcia, decisively. "I'm going to tell Aunt Minerva about it, and see if she can't—"

"Wait a minute," Janet reminded her. "You forget that Cecily fairly begged us not to mention anything about her to any one."

"That's so," said Marcia, looking blank. "What *are* we going to do then?"

"There's only one thing I can think of," answered Janet, slowly. "Miss Benedict may forbid Cecily to meet or speak to *us*, but she can't forbid us meeting and speaking to Cecily, can she? So why can't we just watch for Cecily to come out, and then go and join her? She can't stop us—she can't help herself; and between you and me, I think she'll be only too delighted!"

"Good enough!" laughed Marcia. "But what an ogre that Miss Benedict must be! I'm horribly disappointed about her. After I heard her speak that time I was sure she must be lovely. It doesn't seem possible that any one with such a wonderful, sympathetic voice could be so—so downright hateful to a dear little thing like Cecily."

"I must say it seems just horrid!" cried Janet, vehemently.

That night, after darkness had fallen, the two girls, settling themselves without a light at their open window, heard, as Marcia had once before described, the sound of running feet in the garden beyond the wall. This time there was no doubt in their minds about it. It was certainly Cecily, taking a little exercise, probably on the deserted path.

"I wonder why she *runs*," marveled Marcia. "*I* shouldn't feel like running around there all by myself."

"I think I can understand, though," added Janet. "She's cooped up all day in that dreary old place, and probably has to keep awfully quiet. I'd go crazy if I were shut in like that. I'd feel like—like jumping hurdles when I got out of doors. And she's a country girl, too, remember. Get your violin, Marcia, and play something. I know it will comfort her to know we're near by and thinking of her."

So Marcia brought her violin, and out into the darkness of the night floated the dreamy, tender melody of the "Träumerei." The romance of the situation appealed to her, and she played it as she never had before.

At the first notes the running footsteps ceased, and there was silence in the garden. When the music ended, they thought they could distinguish a soft little sound, half sigh, half sob, from the velvet blackness below; but they could not be sure. And a little later came the click of a closing door.

Marcia put down her violin. "The lonely, lonely little thing!" she exclaimed, half under her breath.

For two days thereafter they maintained a constant, but fruitless, vigil over "Benedict's Folly." Cecily did not appear, either at her window or on a marketing expedition. Neither was there any sound of her footsteps in the garden at night.

The girls began to worry. Could it be that Miss Benedict had discovered the truth about the remedy for her sprained ankle and had, perhaps, shut Cecily up in close confinement, or even sent her away altogether? They were by this time at a loss as to just what to think of that mysterious lady.

On the third afternoon, however, to their intense relief, they saw Cecily emerge from the house and walk toward the gate, with the market-basket on her arm. It

took them just about a minute and a half to reach the street.

Cecily came abreast of their own door-step in due time, her eyes cast down as usual; but they were waiting in the vestibule, and she did not see them.

She was well in advance, but still in sight, when they came down the steps and strolled in the same direction. It was not till they had turned the corner that they raced after her, and at last, breathless, caught up with her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, with a little start; "I—I did not expect to see you to-day. I—you mustn't come with me!" In spite of her words, however, it was evident that she was really delighted by their unexpected appearance.

"Look here, Cecily," began Marcia, "why can't we join you when you go to market or are doing your errands?"

"Oh, that would be lovely!" answered Cecily—"only Miss Benedict usually asks me when I come in whether I have met or spoken to any one, and—I can't tell what isn't true!"

Here was a poser! The girls looked crestfallen.

"No—you can't, of course," hesitated Janet.

"And besides that," went on Cecily, "this is the last time I shall go, anyhow, because she's very much better now,—the salve helped her ankle very much,—and she says she's going out herself after this. I don't expect to get out again."

There was a moment of horrified silence after this blow. Then Janet, no longer able to endure the bewilderment, burst out:

"Cecily dear, please forgive us if we seem to be prying into your affairs. It's only because we think so much of you. But who *is* Miss Benedict, and what is she to you?"

"I don't know!" said Cecily slowly.

"You *don't know*!" they gasped in chorus.

"No, I really don't. It must seem very strange to you, and it does to me. Miss Benedict is a perfect stranger to me, and no relation, so far as I know. I never saw or heard of her before I came here."

"But why *are* you here then?" demanded Marcia.

"I—don't know. It's all a mystery to me. But I'm so lonely I've cried myself to sleep many a night."

"Won't you tell us all about it?" begged Marcia. "We're your friends, Cecily,—you say the only ones you have,—and we don't ask just out of curiosity, but because we're interested in you, and—and love you."

"Well, I will then," agreed the girl, as they walked along. "I'll just tell you how it all happened. Ever since I can remember anything, I've lived in Cranby, a little village in England. Mother and I lived there together. We never went anywhere, not even up to London, because she was never very strong. Father was dead; he died when I was a tiny baby, she told me. We just had a happy, quiet life together, we two.

"Well, about the beginning of this year, Mother was suddenly taken very, very ill. I don't know what was the matter, but I hardly had time to call in a neighbor and then bring the doctor." Cecily paused and choked down a rising sob.

"She—she just slipped away before we knew it," she went on, very low. Marcia pressed her hand in wordless sympathy. Presently Cecily continued:

"Afterward, the neighbor, Mrs. Waddington, told me that while I was fetching the doctor Mother had begged her to see that, if she didn't recover, I should be taken over to New York, and left with a family named Benedict, and she had Mrs. Waddington write down the address. But just then Mother grew so much worse that she couldn't explain why I was to be taken there, or what they were to me or I to them. After it was all over we searched everywhere, hoping to find some papers or letters or something that would tell, but we found nothing. So Mrs. Waddington kept me with her for two or three months. Then a friend of hers, a Mrs. Bidwell, was going to the States, and it was arranged that I should go in her care. About two weeks before we sailed Mrs. Bidwell wrote to the Benedict family, saying she was bringing me to New York.

"So we sailed from Liverpool, and the very day we landed, Mrs. Bidwell brought me here. We rang the old bell at the gate, and then waited and waited. I thought no one would ever come. But at last the gate opened, and Miss Benedict stood there in her hat and veil.

"She acted very strangely from the first. Mrs. Bidwell told her all about me, and she never said a single word, but only shook her head several times. I thought she was certainly going to refuse to take me in, her manner was so odd. After she had stood thinking a long time she suddenly said to me, 'Come, then!' and to Mrs. Bidwell, 'I thank you!' And she led me inside, followed by the driver with my box, and shut the gate." Cecily stopped short, as if that were the end of the story.

"Oh, but—go on!" stammered Marcia, quivering with impatience.

"But I must do my marketing now," said Cecily. "Here we are at the shop. I'll tell you the rest when we come out."

CHAPTER VII

SURPRISES ALL AROUND

"How long have you been in New York?" began Janet, when at last they emerged from the little shop.

"About two months," said Cecily. "And I've lived in that place all this time, and have not known why. Miss Benedict has never explained. She acts toward me as if I were a lodger, or—or some one she allowed to stay there for reasons of her own, but didn't particularly want to have about. She's kind to me, but never—friendly. Sometimes she looks at me in the strangest way—I can't imagine what she's thinking about. But why does she live like this?" and she turned inquiring eyes on the girls.

"I'm sure *we* don't know!" exclaimed Marcia. "We only wonder about it. The house seems to be all shut up."

"Why, it *is*!" Cecily enlightened them. "And it makes it so dark and gloomy! There is lovely furniture in the drawing-room, but it is all covered over with some brown stuff—even the pictures. And most of the other rooms are not used at all—nothing on the ground floor. I eat down in the basement, and my bedroom is on the top floor—where I looked out that time. I have never been in any of the other bedrooms except Miss Benedict's, when her ankle was bad."

"But what do you do with yourself all day?" asked Janet.

"I keep my room in order, and help Miss Benedict whenever she lets me. Of course, she prepares all the food herself, but in such a pretty, dainty way. But there are a good many hours when the time hangs so heavy on my hands. Sometimes she lets me dust the rooms on the ground floor. She keeps everything very, very neat, even if it is all covered up and never used. The rest of the time I sit in my room and read the few books I brought with me, and tell myself long stories, or listen to your music. I dare not now even peep through the shutters. Once I opened them, when you were playing, but Miss Benedict came in just then and forbade me to do it again."

"Doesn't she ever let you go out and take a walk or get a little exercise?" questioned Marcia.

"No, the only times I have gone out have been just lately, when her ankle has been so bad. At night, after it is dark, she lets me run about the garden a bit, but never in the daytime."

"But how did she find out about your knowing *us*?" broke in Janet.

"Why, of course I told her—that first time after you were so good to me—all about meeting you, and how lovely you were to me. I thought she'd be so glad I'd found such nice friends. But she looked so queer—almost frightened, and she said: 'You must not speak to them again. It was kind of them to help you, but you must not encourage them in any way. Remember, child!' And I was only trying to obey her when I passed you without looking up the second time I went out."

"Cecily," said Marcia, suddenly, "what does Miss Benedict look like, anyhow? Do you ever see her without that veil? Isn't she very old and plain?"

"Why, no," answered Cecily, simply. "She's very beautiful."

"*What!*" they gasped in chorus.

"Yes, I was surprised too, that day I came. After the driver had brought my box into the hall (she wouldn't let him take it any farther), and she had shut the door behind him and we were left alone, she seemed to—to hesitate, but at last she raised her hands and took off her bonnet and veil. I don't know what I expected, but I was surprised to see such a lovely face. Her hair is gray, almost white, and so soft and wavy. And yet she has rosy cheeks, and white teeth, and the most beautiful big gray eyes. And her voice is very sweet, too. Do you know, I believe if she'd only *let* me, I could just love her, but she holds me off as if she were somehow *afraid* of me. It's all very strange."

The girls were completely nonplussed by this latest bit of information, and found it hard to couple Cecily's attractive picture with the little black-robed and veiled figure that they knew as Miss Benedict. The voice alone tallied, and Marcia recounted how she had once met Miss Benedict in the little grocery-shop. Suddenly, however, she was struck by a new thought, and demanded:

"But how about the other one?"

Cecily opened her eyes wide. "Other one?" she queried. "Oh, you mean the other person in the house?"

"Why, yes," said Marcia. "The other old lady who sits in the room on the second floor."

"Oh, *is* it an old lady?" inquired Cecily, in surprise.

"Why, of course! Didn't you know it?" exclaimed Marcia.

"I knew there was *some* one in there—some invalid. For Miss Benedict has always warned me to be very quiet in going by that door, because some one was ill in there. But she never told me who it was, nor anything more about her. She always waits on her herself. Even when her ankle was hurting her so, she would drag herself out of bed many times a day to go into that room. But tell me, how did *you* know there was an old lady in there?"

Then Marcia recounted what she had seen on the night the wind tore open the shutter. "How strange this all is," she ended, "that Miss Benedict should never tell you who this person is! Why do you suppose she is keeping it a secret?"

As this was a problem none of them could solve, they could only conjecture vainly about it as they walked along. But by this time they had approached within a block of the house itself, and before they turned the corner once more they all unconsciously halted.

"Cecily," said Marcia, suddenly inspired with a bright idea. "I have the grandest scheme! If Miss Benedict is going to do the marketing after this, perhaps we won't see you again for some time. But I've a plan by which we can *hear* from each other as often as we like. You take a walk in the garden every night, don't you?"

"No, not always," answered Cecily. "Miss Benedict allows me to, but often I don't care to. It's so dark and—and lonesome."

"Well, after this, be sure to go out every night. Our window, you know, is directly over the garden wall, only three stories up. I'm going to have a long string with a weight attached to it, and fasten it in the window. Every night, after dark, we'll write a note to you, fasten it to the string, and drop it down into the garden among the bushes. You can find it in the dark by feeling for the string, and if you have one written to us, you can fasten it on, and we'll pull it up. Isn't that a dandy idea?"

Cecily's eyes sparkled for a moment, but suddenly her face clouded. "Oh, it—it would be glorious!" she murmured. "Only—I must not. Even if Miss Benedict doesn't know about it, I know she would forbid it if she did. So—it would be wrong for me to do it!"

"Oh, Cecily! why should you care?" cried Marcia, impatiently, "And why should she object to three girls sending little notes to one another? It would be cruel to forbid that. It isn't really wrong, you know."

"But she isn't cruel to me," Cecily interrupted. "You mustn't think that. She—well, somehow, I feel she *would* be nice to me, only something is holding her back. She isn't a bit cruel. I sometimes feel as if I could care for her in spite of everything. So I don't want to go against her wishes."

"Well, then," began Janet, "here's a way out of it. We will write to *you* anyway. Miss Benedict can't forbid us to do that, and you needn't answer at all—needn't even read them, if you don't want to. But we'll write, nevertheless, and you can't prevent it!"

When Cecily smiled, her face lit up as if touched by a shaft of sunlight. And she smiled now.

"I don't believe I *ought* to read them," she said; "but, oh! it would keep me from being so very lonely. But I must be going back now. I've been longer than usual. Good-by!"

Cecily was still smiling as she turned away, while Janet and Marcia stood looking after her, waving farewell to her as she rounded the corner.

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE END OF THE STRING

It was past midnight, that night, before the two girls could settle themselves for a wink of sleep. So bewildering had been Cecily's revelations about herself and Miss Benedict and the conditions in the mysterious house, that they found inexhaustible food for discussion and conjecture.

The most interesting question, of course, was the absorbing mystery of how Cecily came to be there at all.

"Why should her mother have sent her there?" demanded Marcia, for the twentieth time.

"Perhaps she was a relative," ventured Janet.

"That's perfect nonsense," argued Marcia, "for then Miss Benedict would surely have acted quite differently. If she had been the most distant connection, Miss Benedict would surely have told her. No, I should say she might be the child of a friend that Miss Benedict never cared particularly about, and yet she doesn't quite like to send her away. Isn't it a puzzle? But what *do* you think of Miss Benedict being *beautiful*! I can't imagine it!"

"And then, too, think of Cecily's not knowing there was another old lady in the house!" added Janet.

"What a darling Cecily is!" exclaimed Marcia, irrelevantly. "If Miss Benedict knew how sweet and loyal and obedient Cecily is, she'd be a little less strict with her, I'm sure. I suppose she doesn't want her to gossip about what goes on in that queer house. And, by the way, we must get our string in working order to-morrow. Let's send her other things beside notes, too—things she'd enjoy."

And until they fell asleep they planned the campaign for lightening the lonely hours of the girl next door.

"They heard Cecily's light footsteps"

Next day they jointly wrote a long letter,—telling all about themselves, their homes, their[Pg 83]

[Pg 84]
[Pg 85] schools, their studies, and any other items they thought might interest her, —fastened it to the end of the string, and dropped it into the dark garden after nightfall. Later they heard Cecily's light footsteps in the gloom below, and when they pulled up the string just before they went to bed, the note was gone.

"Well, she's evidently decided that it would be all right for her to take it," said Janet; "and I'm relieved, even if she doesn't answer. I can see why she mightn't think it right to do *that*. And now we must plan to send her something besides, every once in a while. I should think she'd just die of lonesomeness in that old place, and with hardly a thing to do, either!"

That night they sent her down a little box of fudge that they had made in the afternoon, and the next night a book that had captivated them both. And when they pulled up the string the evening after, there was the book again, and in it a tiny note, which ran:

> DEAR GIRLS: You are too, too good to me. I ought not to be writing this. It is wrong, I fear, but I just cannot sleep until I have thanked you for the sweets, and this beautiful book. I read it all, to-day. You are making me very happy. I love you both.

Meantime, they had seen Miss Benedict go in and out once or twice, limping slightly, and had watched her veiled figure with absorbed interest.

"Who could possibly imagine her as beautiful!" they marveled. And truly, it was an effort of imagination to connect beauty with the queer, oddly arrayed little figure.

Also, at various times during each day, Marcia made a point of giving a little violin concert at her window, and, at Janet's suggestion, had chosen the liveliest and most cheerful music in her repertoire for sad little Cecily's entertainment.

The two girls likewise exhausted every possibility in the line of small gifts and tiny trifles to amuse and entertain their young neighbor. But there was no further communication from her till one night after they had sent down an embroidery ring and silks, the latest pattern of a dainty boudoir-cap, and elaborate instructions how to embroider it. Next night there was a note on the end of the string when they drew it up. It read:

> How dear of you to send me this! I *love* to embroider, and had brought no

materials with me. And now I want to ask you a question. Do you mind what I do with it after it is finished? Is it my very own? What can I ever do to repay you for all your kindness!

In their answer they assured her that she could make any use of the boudoir-cap that pleased her. And then they spent much time wondering what use she *was* going to make of it.

Two nights later, when they pulled up the string, they found, to their surprise, a small parcel attached to the end. It contained a little box in which lay, wrapped in jeweler's cotton, a tiny coral pendant in an old-fashioned gold setting, and a silver bracelet of thin filigree-work. The pendant was labeled, "For Marcia, with Cecily's love," and the bracelet, "For Janet, with love from Cecily."

The two girls gazed at the pathetic little gifts and sudden tears came into their eyes.

"Oh, Jan!" half sobbed Marcia; "we oughtn't to keep them! They're probably the only trinkets she has."

But Janet was wiser. "We must keep them," she decided. "Cecily doesn't want all the giving to be on one side, and she has probably been longing to do something for us. I suppose these are the only things she had that would be suitable. Much as I hate to have her deprive herself of them, I know she'd be terribly hurt if we sent them back. To-morrow we must write her the best letter of thanks we can."

So the days went by for two or three weeks. The girls caught, in all this time, not so much as one glimpse of Cecily, but they managed, thanks to their "line of communication," to keep constantly in touch with her. Meantime, the summer weather waxed hotter and hotter, and the city fairly steamed under the July sun. Their own time was taken up by many diversions: trips to the parks, beaches, and zoo; excursions out of town with Aunt Minerva; shopping, and quiet sewing or reading in their pleasant living-room. Every time they went out of their home on a pleasure-jaunt, they felt guilty, to think of the lonely little prisoner cooped up in the dreary house next door, and both declared they would gladly give up their places to her, had such a thing been possible.

Then, one night, something unusual occurred. They had sent down the usual note, and also a little work-basket of Indian-woven sweet-grass, the souvenir of a recent trip to the seaside. To their astonishment, when they drew up the string, both note and basket were still attached. This was the first time such a thing had happened.

"What *can* be the matter?" queried Marcia. "Can it be possible that Cecily feels she mustn't do this any more?"

"*I* didn't hear any footsteps down there to-night, did you?" said Janet.

"No, come to think of it, I didn't. She must have stayed indoors for the first time since we began this. But what do you suppose is the reason?"

Janet suddenly clutched her friend. "Marcia, can it be possible that Miss Benedict has discovered what we've been doing, and won't let her come out any more?"

"I believe that's it!" Marcia's voice was sharp with consternation. "Wouldn't it be dreadful, if it's so?" They sat gloomily thinking it over.

"Well, what are we going to do about it?" demanded Marcia.

"Wait till to-morrow night and try again," counseled Janet. "It's just possible Cecily had a headache or felt sick from this abominable heat and couldn't come down. Let's see what happens to-morrow."

The next night they tied the basket and another note to the string and dropped it down hopefully. But they drew it up untouched, precisely the same as before.

"It's just one of two things," decided Marcia. "Either Cecily is ill or Miss Benedict has found out about our little plan and forbidden Cecily to go on with it. What are we to do? Keep on sending notes, or stop it? Suppose Miss Benedict herself should find one sometime."

"I don't care!" cried Janet, decisively. "If Cecily is ill, she'll get better pretty soon and come out some night, and there'll be nothing for her. She'd be dreadfully disappointed. I don't care if there *is* the possibility that Miss Benedict knows all about it. I'm going to keep right on writing and take the chance!"

For a whole week they followed their usual program, nightly sending down a fresh note that they always later drew up, unclaimed. And as the days passed they became more and more alarmed. Something had certainly happened to Cecily. Of that they were sure, and their misgivings grew more keen with the passing time.

"Can it be that she isn't there any more?" conjectured Marcia, suddenly, one day. "Perhaps Miss Benedict has sent her away!"

This was a new and startling possibility. The more they contemplated it, the more depressed they grew. If that were the case, then, they might never see

Cecily again, and the delightful and curious friendship would be ended forever.

Their usual good spirits were quite subdued, and even their hearty appetites suffered somewhat, which worried Aunt Minerva not a little, though she attributed it to the heat. Finally, one night, precisely one week after the first unclaimed communication, they sent down the usual letter, begging Cecily, if possible, to let them know what was the matter. It seemed to both, during the interval they left it there, that they heard light, almost stealthy footsteps in the garden below. But neither felt certain about it. An hour later they drew up the string. Their own note was still attached to it at the bottom, but just above it they saw fastened a little scrap of paper, no bigger than a quarter of an ordinary note-sheet. Both girls started with delight.

"Quick!" cried Marcia. "Cecily has answered at last! Oh, I'm so glad!"

Janet unfastened it, her fingers trembling with excitement, and spread it out on the table.

It was not in Cecily's handwriting, and contained but a few words. Both girls read it at a glance, and then stared into each other's eyes, half terror-stricken, half amazed. For this is what it said:

> Will you please come to the gate to-morrow morning at half-past nine?
>
> BENEDICT.

CHAPTER IX

FOR THE SAKE OF CECILY

"What *can* it mean?" muttered Janet. "What does she want of us?"

"Why, it's perfectly plain," declared Marcia. "She has discovered that we have been trying to correspond with Cecily, and she's going to demand an explanation—probably warn us that we must stop it. Are you—afraid to go, Janet?"

"Not I! Why should I be? Miss Benedict can't do or say a thing to harm *us*! But I *am* anxious for poor little Cecily. I just hate to think we may have brought trouble on her."

"Oh, I wish now we'd never suggested such a thing!" moaned Marcia. "We've just succeeded in making that poor little thing miserable, I suppose."

"Well, we can only remember that we *meant* to make her happy, and we *did*—for a while, at least," comforted Janet. "And what's more, I'm not going to worry about it another bit to-night. Maybe it's something entirely different, anyway."

Marcia, however, could not bring herself to this cheerful view of things. All night long she tossed beside the sleeping Janet, wondering and wondering about what the coming interview might mean, and blaming herself a thousand times for placing Cecily in the position of having deceived her guardian. When morning came she was pale and heavy-eyed, which alarmed her aunt not a little.

"You ought not go out this morning, Marcia," remarked Miss Minerva, anxiously. "The sun is very hot, and you look as if you had a headache."

"Oh, no, I haven't, Aunty!" cried Marcia, eagerly, fearful of a hitch in their plans. "I didn't sleep very well, but a walk in the fresh air will do me good, I know." And so Miss Minerva saw them go, without further protest.

They both halted at the gate in the brick wall and looked into each other's eyes. The hot morning sun beat down upon them as they stood there, and passers-by eyed them curiously. Each was perfectly certain that the thumping of her heart could be heard. And still they stood, hesitating.

"You're afraid!" accused Janet.

"I'm—not!" protested Marcia. "And I'll prove it!" She raised her hand suddenly—and pulled the rusty bell-handle.

It seemed a long, long time before there was any response. But at last they heard the click of the opening front door and the sound of footsteps on the path. This was followed by the creaking of a key turning in the lock of the gate. Janet gripped Marcia by the hand, and with pounding hearts they stood together, while the gate slowly opened. In another instant, the veiled, black-gowned figure of Miss Benedict stood before them. She waited a moment, silent, appearing to look them over critically.

"Come in, if you please!" she said at last, very softly, and held the gate open for them. They entered obediently, and she shut the gate. It was not until they were inside the house, standing in the dim hall with the front door closed behind them, that another word was spoken. Then Miss Benedict faced them again, but she did not remove her bonnet or throw back her veil.

"I have asked you to come here this morning," she began, "because I understand that you have become acquainted with the child Cecily Marlowe."

Cold chills ran up and down their spines. It had come at last! "Yes," faltered Janet, "we—we *have* become acquainted with her." It was not a brilliant reply, but, for the life of her, she could think of nothing else to say. They waited, shuddering, for what might be coming next.

"So she has told me," went on Miss Benedict. "I also understand that lately you have been dropping notes to her into the garden—at night."

Janet noticed, even in the midst of her trepidation, how wonderfully sweet and soft and harmonious the voice was.

"Yes," replied Marcia, very low, "we have." The worst was out—now let the blow fall! They braced themselves to receive it.

"Cecily is ill!" said Miss Benedict, abruptly.

They each uttered a startled little "Oh!"

"She has not been at all well for over a week," the lovely voice continued. "I am very much worried about her."

Janet and Marcia glanced into each other's eyes in astonishment. Cecily ill—and Miss Benedict actually *caring* about it! Here were surprises indeed!

"Oh, I hope it's nothing serious!" exclaimed Marcia, anxiously.

"I hope it is not—and I *think* it is probably only the hot weather and—and want of exercise." Miss Benedict hesitated a little over the last. "She has been so—poorly, and has—has evidently been so anxious to—to see you, that I thought I would—surprise her by asking you to come and—visit her a while." It was plainly a struggle for Miss Benedict to make this seem the natural, normal thing to do. "Will you—come up to her room?"

The girls were almost too stunned at the turn events had taken to reply. "Why—we'd be glad to," faltered Marcia, at last.

"Then, if you will follow me—" Miss Benedict led the way, through the dark halls and up three pairs of stairs. At the door of a room on the fourth floor she paused, knocked, and then entered. They followed, dimly perceiving a little form in the bed, for the shutters, of course, were closed. As they entered after Miss Benedict Cecily sprang to a sitting posture, with a cry of mingled wonder, consternation, and joy. She, too, glanced uncertainly at Miss Benedict.

"I have asked your friends to come and—and see you for a while," she explained hesitatingly to the bewildered child. "Perhaps it will make you—feel better." Then she turned abruptly and went out of the room, closing the door after her.

For a moment they stared at one another.

"Cecily!" cried Janet, at length, "what *does* this all mean, anyway?"

"I never dreamed of such a thing as seeing you—here!" faltered the invalid.

"What made her do it?" demanded Marcia. "We found a note from her tied to our string. How did she know about it?"

Cecily seemed to shrink back at this piece of news. "I told her, myself," she said. "I was very sick one night—I think I had a fever. My head was so hot and ached so. And she was—oh! so good to me! I could hardly believe it! She bathed my head, and sat by me, and put her cool hands on my forehead. It really seemed as if she—cared! And I felt so ashamed to think I'd—disobeyed her that I just told her right out all about it—how lonely I'd been, and how good you were to me, and how I'd enjoyed hearing from you."

"And what did she say?" breathed Marcia, in an awe-struck whisper.

"Not a word except, 'Never mind now, little girl!' And she never said a thing more about it. I didn't dream that she'd ever do such a thing as *send* for you to come and see me!"

They marveled over it all a moment in silence. Then Marcia burst out: "Oh,

Cecily, we've been *so* worried about you! We couldn't think why you didn't even take the letters any more. Have you been very ill?"

"Why, I don't know—I just feel horrid most of the time. My head aches a lot, and every once in a while I'm awfully cold, and then I seem to be burning up—"

"Why, I believe you must have malaria!" interrupted Marcia. "That's what Aunt Minerva has sometimes. You ought to go out more, and have fresh air and—sunshine—" She stopped suddenly, remembering the conditions. "But anyway, it isn't serious," she hurried on, after an embarrassed pause. "And you ought to have some quinine. I wonder if Miss Benedict would let us get it for you. I'll ask her, later." Then they hurried on to tell her how they had continued to send down a note every night, hoping that she would get it, and how they had feared that she might have gone away.

And Cecily, in return, told them how she had enjoyed the notes and gifts, but how guilty she had always felt about receiving them, especially when she had answered them.

"And I finished embroidering the boudoir-cap," she ended, "and—and I gave it to Miss Benedict."

"You *did*?" they both gasped.

"Oh, I *hope* you don't mind!" exclaimed Cecily, hastily; "but—but I felt as if I wanted to *do* something for her. She—I—I think I'm getting to like her—more and more."

"What did she say?" asked Marcia. "Was she pleased? I can't imagine her wearing such a thing."

"She looked at it and then at me—very strangely for a minute. Then she said: 'Thank you, child. I—I never wear such things, but I'll keep it—for your sake!'"

"Isn't that queer!" exclaimed Janet. "You thought she cared nothing about you!"

"Yes," agreed Cecily; "but lately—I'm not so sure."

In the pause that followed, the girls glanced curiously about the darkened room, trying to realize that they were actually inside the mysterious house at last. It was a large, square room, furnished with heavy chairs and an old-fashioned bureau and bed. Every shutter was fastened and the slats tightly closed. Only the dimmest daylight filtered in. The effect was gloomy and depressing to the last degree. They wondered how Cecily had stood it so long.

"I'm going to ask Miss Benedict if we can't open these shutters," cried Janet, suddenly

"I'm going to ask Miss Benedict if we can't open these shutters," cried Janet, suddenly. "I should think you'd die of this gloom. It's really bad for you, Cecily!"

"Oh, don't!" exclaimed Cecily, in consternation. "I asked her once, when I first came, and she didn't like it at all! She said no, she preferred to have them shut, and I must not touch them."

"I don't care!" went on Janet, ruthlessly. "You weren't sick then. I'm sure she'd let you now!" And, true to her word, she turned to Miss Benedict, who entered at this moment, still bonneted and veiled.

"I believe Cecily has malaria, Miss Benedict," she began bravely, but with inward trepidation.

"Oh, do you think so? Is it serious?" The melodious voice sounded startled and concerned.

"I don't think it's so serious," Janet continued, "but she'd probably get over it quicker if she had a lot of fresh air and sunshine. Couldn't she have the shutters open? It would do her lots of good."

Cecily and Marcia trembled at Janet's temerity and watched Miss Benedict with bated breath. But instead of being annoyed, she only seemed surprised and relieved.

"Why, do you think so?" she queried. "Then—surely they may be opened. I—I do not like the—the glare of so much daylight myself, but Cecily may have it here, if she chooses." And following up her words, she pushed open one of the shutters. A broad shaft of sunlight streamed in, and, blinking[Pg 105]
[Pg 106]
[Pg 107] from the previous gloom, Janet and Marcia threw open the others.

Cecily gave a delighted cry, "Oh, how lovely it is to see the sun again!" But Miss Benedict, with an abrupt exclamation, retreated hastily from the room.

The girls stayed a few moments more, chatting. Then they wisely suggested that perhaps they had better go, and not tire Cecily by too long a call. Hearing Miss Benedict's footstep in the hall below, they took their leave, promising to come again, as soon as it seemed best. On the landing of the stairway they found the black-veiled figure apparently waiting for them.

Now, during all the strange little interview, a curious impression had been

growing upon Janet, strengthened by every word Miss Benedict had uttered—an impression that here was no grim, forbidding jailor, such as they had imagined the mistress of "Benedict's Folly" to be. Instead, they had encountered a gentle, almost winning, little person, worried about the illness of the child in her care and plainly anxious to do everything suggested to make her more comfortable. Janet suddenly resolved on a bold move.

"Cecily is so lonely," she began, turning to Miss Benedict. "Don't you think it would do her lots of good to come in and visit us once in a while? Marcia's aunt would be so glad to see her. As soon as she is a little better, can't she—"

"No," interrupted Miss Benedict, her little figure suddenly stiffening and a determined note creeping into her soft voice. "I am sorry. Cecily cannot make visits. It is out of the question!"

It was like striking a hidden rock in a smooth, beautiful sheet of water. And her words admitted of no argument. Janet and Marcia followed her meekly and in silence down to the front door. Here, in an uncertain pause, Marcia made one further suggestion.

"May we bring Cecily some quinine?" she ventured. "If she has malaria, she ought to have that. We have lots of it at home."

"It would be very kind of you," replied Miss Benedict, in an entirely different tone. "Come to-morrow and see her again—if your aunt will permit it. Perhaps it would be well to explain to her—" and here her manner became confused—"that—I—er—do not make calls or—or receive them, but this is just—just for the sake of the child." It was plain to the girls that this admission was wrung from her only by a great effort. She opened the front door and followed them to the gate. When she had unlocked it, Marcia turned to her impulsively.

"Thank you *so* much for letting us come! We are very, very fond of Cecily. She is such a dear, and we've been terribly worried about her. As a relative, I'm afraid you have been still more anxious."

The black figure started. "She is no relative of mine!" came abruptly from behind the veil.

"Oh, I beg your pardon, I should say—*friend*," stuttered Marcia, embarrassed, "or—or the daughter of a friend, perhaps."

"She is not," Miss Benedict contradicted, in a strange, flat tone, as if repeating a lesson. "I do not know who she is—nor why she is here!"

CHAPTER X

THE FILIGREE BRACELET

Aunt Minerva took off her silver-rimmed spectacles, wiped them excitedly, and put them on again.

"And she said she didn't know who the child was or why she was there? Well—I—never!" she exclaimed, adjusting them all awry.

Marcia had decided to tell her aunt all about it. And Janet had agreed with her that since Miss Benedict had spoken as she did, there could be no further occasion for secrecy. So that night they gave her an entire history of the affair, and found her a willing listener, interested and sympathetic beyond their wildest expectations.

"Why, Aunty, I didn't suppose you'd care much about it!" exclaimed Marcia, in surprise. "And here you are, nearly as excited over it as we've been."

"Why, who would not be?" said Miss Minerva. "It's precisely like a mystery in a book. I wasn't interested in the old place at first, because I was too busy and it seemed as if the people living there were such slack housekeepers. I haven't any sympathy with *that*. But what could she mean by that last remark? Not know who the child is—or why she's there! It's absurd! I can't believe it!"

"Well, that's what she *said*!" asserted Marcia, again. "And if any one ever heard of a bigger mystery, I'd like to know about it!"

Miss Minerva took up her mending again. "Then I don't see why she keeps the girl," she commented.

"She keeps her, *I* think, because she's getting sort of fond of her," reasoned Janet. "You can easily see that. Cecily said she was very good to her the night she was so ill. And then, too, it must have been a hard pull for her to go so far as to send for *us* to come in just because it might please Cecily."

"We must see that the child has the quinine, and it wouldn't hurt her to have a glass or two of currant jelly. Don't forget them when you go in to-morrow," Miss Minerva reminded them. "I'd like to have her here and nurse her myself and feed her up a bit. And that's another strange thing—why should that woman" (Miss

Minerva invariably alluded to Miss Benedict as "that woman") "allow you to go in and visit the child, yet forbid her to visit you?"

"Don't ask us why," laughed Marcia. "We're as much in the dark as any one else. What *I* want to know is why did Miss Benedict allow Cecily to open her shutters to-day when she refused her a while ago. And why doesn't she open them over all the rest of the house?"

"Well, what *I* want to know," added Janet, "is why Cecily's mother should have sent her over here to the Benedicts' at all, when nobody knew her or claimed her. Whatever made her think of such a thing?"

"There are several explanations that might suit such a case," mused Miss Minerva. "Mrs. Marlowe might have been a married sister, or some more distant relative, who—"

"Then wouldn't Miss Benedict know about it—or at least *suspect* some such connection?" interrupted Marcia.

"That's true," acknowledged her aunt. "There *must* be some other explanation. *What* a puzzle!"

"What's more," added Janet, "I remember that Cecily told us this: when she first came, Miss Benedict questioned her all about herself—where she came from, and all that. And after Cecily had told her she never said a word, but just walked away, shaking her head."

Miss Minerva's mind suddenly took a new turn. "Didn't you say the child sent you a couple of gifts—little trinkets—not long ago? I'd like to see them."

"We've never worn them," said Marcia. "It just seemed as if we couldn't—she ought not to have given them away. And yet—I know just how she felt—she wanted to do *something*! I'll get them." She brought the box and laid it in her aunt's lap.

Miss Minerva examined the coral pendant first. "The dear little thing!" she murmured. "She must think a lot of you to have parted with this!" Then she laid it down and took up the bracelet. "Gracious!" she exclaimed immediately, letting it fall and then picking it up again. "Am I going crazy, or are my eyes deceiving me?" She turned it over and over.

"What's the matter?" cried both girls at once.

"*Matter?*" cried Miss Minerva. "Why, just this: that bracelet is exactly like one I've had put away for years!" The girls stared at her incredulously. "I'll get it this

minute and prove it!" And she hurried out of the room.

While she was gone they examined the bracelet more closely than they had yet done. It consisted of two thin rims of silver, joined by silver filigree-work, a quarter of an inch wide. Here and there, at intervals in the filigree, and forming part of the pattern, were several strange characters, looking, as Marcia declared, like those on the receipt from a Chinese laundry. The workmanship was unusually delicate and beautiful.

In five minutes Miss Minerva was back, flushed and disheveled, from a hunt through several bureau-drawers and boxes.

"I couldn't find it at first," she panted. "In Northam I used to be able to lay my hand on anything I wanted, at an instant's notice, but in this apartment!" She heaved a resigned sigh and laid something beside the bracelet on the table.

It was the exact duplicate—in every last detail! Even the complicated characters were identical! The three stared at the trinkets in an expressive silence. Not for a moment could it be doubted that these two bracelets were once a pair. They were so unusual that it was impossible there could be others like them. This astonishing fact was patent to them all.

"Aunt Minerva, where *did* you get yours?" breathed Marcia, at last.

"Why, that's easily explained," answered Miss Brett. "Your father brought it to me about ten or twelve years ago, after one of his voyages. He said that a Chinese sailor in Hong-Kong had offered to sell it to him for a small sum, and seeing it was a rather unique little trinket, he bought it and brought it home to me. I never wear such things, however. Jewelry never did appeal to me, and bracelets, particularly, always seemed a nuisance. So I put it away intending to give it to you some day, Marcia. And after a while I actually forgot all about it—till to-night!"

Janet sat up very straight. "There's just one thing I'd give my head to know—this minute! *Where* did Cecily get *her* bracelet?"

"Well, that you can easily find out—but I'm afraid you'll have to wait till to-morrow morning!" laughed Marcia.

"There's something very strange about this," marveled Miss Minerva, turning the two trinkets over and over. "Actually, I can hardly tell now which is mine and which hers, except that mine is a little more tarnished from having been laid away. Your father said, when he gave me mine, that he'd never seen anything like it in any of those foreign jewelry-shops and that was why he'd been specially

attracted to it."

"Aunty," said Marcia, suddenly, "where do you suppose that sailor got it?"

"Your father said," replied Miss Minerva, "that he'd probably stolen it, or somebody else had. It may have passed through dozens of hands after it was taken from the original owner. You never can tell about such things in the East, and it's useless to inquire."

Again they all stared hard at the two silver trinkets, lying side by side on the table.

"And these two bracelets once belonged to the same person," murmured Marcia, at last; "perhaps to some one connected with Cecily. And to think they should have drifted halfway around the world to find themselves side by side again in busy, practical New York!"

CHAPTER XI

THE LIFTED VEIL

Next morning Marcia and Janet sallied forth to make their promised visit to Cecily. They were armed with a box of quinine pills, two glasses of currant jelly, a new magazine, Marcia's violin in its case, and, last, but not least, the two filigree bracelets. And they were literally bursting with news and excitement.

Miss Benedict opened the gate for them as before, and to their inquiries replied that Cecily seemed a little better. If she noticed the suppressed excitement in their manner, she did not comment upon it, but only led the way to Cecily's room without further words. She was bonneted and veiled as usual. At the door she left them, saying she would not go in.

"Cecily, Cecily!" cried Marcia, immediately; "we have news—such strange news for you!" Cecily was at once all eagerness and animation.

"Oh, tell me, quickly!" she exclaimed, sitting up in the bed. "I feel so much better. I'm going to get up to-day. But how can you have any news—about me?"

"Cecily," said Janet, sitting down on the edge of the bed, "have you been thinking, all this time, that Miss Benedict knew everything about you, and why you came here, and all that?"

"Why, of course!" cried Cecily, opening her eyes wide. "She has never explained it to me, and she's so—*queer* that I never liked to ask her. But I always thought she *knew*!"

"Well, she doesn't—not a thing, apparently," replied Janet, and then repeated to her all the strange conversation at the gate on the day before.

When she had finished, Cecily sat as if stunned—quiet and rigid and staring out of the window. So much had it appeared to affect her that Janet was suddenly sorry she had said a word about it.

"Then—what does it all mean?" murmured Cecily, at last. "I'm here where I've no right to be. Nobody knows me—or wants me. How did it all happen? Don't I belong to *anybody*?" She looked so bewildered, so frightened, so unhappy, that Janet and Marcia both put their arms about her.

"It's all right, Cecily; it's *sure* to be all right—in the end. *We* would love you and want you if nobody else did. And I'm sure Miss Benedict must care for you too. She really acts so. But the question is, how did you ever come to be sent here at all? Didn't your mother ever say anything to you about this place or any of the people over here?"

"No," said Cecily, in a hushed voice. It was evident from her manner that her grief over the loss of her mother was very keen, and she had only once voluntarily referred to it or to anything connected with it.

"My mother never, never mentioned the name of Benedict to me,—I never heard of it before."

"But couldn't Miss Benedict possibly have been some connection—some distant connection that she never thought of or mentioned?" persisted Marcia.

"No—my mother's people were all English," declared Cecily, "and they were all dead. We had no relatives living."

"Well, your father, then?" supplemented Janet. "What about him?"

"I never knew him to remember him. Mother said he died when I was a baby a year or two old. He hadn't any relatives, either."

"Well, here's something else we have to tell you, and it's the strangest thing yet," began Janet. "Can you tell us where you got that bracelet, Cecily,—the one you were so lovely as to send to us?"

"Why, I always had it," answered Cecily. "Even when I was a tiny little girl and it was much too big for me, it seemed to be mine. Mother kept it in a box, but she let me play with it once in a while. Then when I was older and it fitted me better, she let me wear it. I *think* she said my father gave it to me. I don't remember very clearly. I don't believe I ever thought much about it, although I realized it was rather unusual. But why do you ask?"

"Did she ever say it had a mate—that there was a pair of them?" questioned Marcia.

"Oh, no! I'm sure she never said anything about another."

"What do you think of this, then?" Marcia drew the two bracelets out of her bag, and laid them side by side on the bed.

"Why, how very, very *queer*!" cried Cecily, incredulously. "Where *did* you get the other?"

Marcia outlined its history. "You see, there isn't a shadow of doubt that there was once a pair of them," she ended, "and that they both belonged to the same person. Now *who* could that person be?"

"It must have been some one connected with you, Cecily," added Janet. "Everything points that way. Well, one thing is certain: if we could find out the truth about these two bracelets, I believe we'd find out about Cecily, too—why she is here and the whole mystery!"

All three were very silent for a moment, considering.

"I know one thing," ventured Marcia, at length. "Cecily, you must *not* give this bracelet away. It was dear and sweet of you to think of it in the first place—and we'll keep the little coral pendant for both of us if you like. But the bracelet is something that may mean a great deal to you yet, and you ought to have it. Don't you agree with me, Janet?"

"I certainly do," added Janet, heartily; "and what's more, I've thought of something else. When Captain Brett comes home next time, he *may* be able to tell us something more about the other bracelet. When do you expect him, Marcia?"

"Not for two or three months," replied Marcia, ruefully. "I'd give anything if it could only be sooner. It seems as if we *never* could wait that long!"

"Well, let's not think of it just now," comforted Janet. "I don't suppose we can find out anything till he *does* come, so there's no use fretting. How would you like to hear some music, Cecily? Marcia's brought her violin."

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"In the sudden light of the open door she stood revealed"

"How good of you!" cried Cecily, an almost pathetic eagerness in her voice. "It will be wonderful to hear it near by!"

So Marcia opened the case and took out the instrument, tuned it, tucked it lovingly under her chin, and slipped into a rollicking Hungarian dance by Brahms, while her little audience listened spellbound.

"Oh, something else, please!" sighed Cecily, blissfully, when it was ended. And Marcia, changing the theme, gave them the lullaby from "Jocelyn," and after that Beethoven's Minuet in G.

"Just *one* more," begged Cecily; "that is—if you're not too tired. The one I—I like so much!"

"I know—the 'Träumerei,'" nodded Marcia, and once more laid her bow across the strings.

When the last note had died away, they were all suddenly startled by a strange sound just outside the door—a sound that was partly a sob and partly a half-stifled exclamation.

Before she quite realized what she was doing, Janet, who happened to be sitting near the door, sprang up and threw it open.

In the hall outside stood Miss Benedict, her hands clasped tensely in front of her. But, strangest of all, her veil was thrown back from her face, and in the sudden light of the open door she stood revealed! In an instant they realized that Cecily had not exaggerated the beauty of her singularly lovely face. She plainly had been listening, captivated, to the music within the room, and something about it must have stirred her strangely.

All this they noticed in the fraction of a moment, for, as she saw them, she pulled down her veil with a hasty movement, murmuring something about having heard music and coming to see what it was.

But she did not pull it down quickly enough to hide one fact from the gaze of the two girls—that her beautiful gray eyes were brimming with tears!

CHAPTER XII

MISS BENEDICT SPEAKS

It was Miss Minerva who decided that Miss Benedict must be told about the coincidence of the two bracelets.

"Certainly, she ought to know!" she declared positively. "There must be *some* reason why that child has been sent to her, and she ought to be told all the facts concerning her. Who knows but what *she* may have some explanation of this bracelet mystery! You tell her the very next time you go in. And don't forget to take a jar of that quince marmalade, besides." Aunt Minerva had determined on keeping Cecily well supplied with toothsome dainties, which commodities, she keenly suspected, were scarce in the big house. In fact, the girls had told her that the marketing for that establishment, so far as they had seen, seemed to consist mainly of milk and eggs, rice and prunes!

So a day or two after, when they visited Cecily again, they planned to have an interview with her guardian. Marcia was shy about broaching the subject, so the task was left to Janet, who, being anxious to settle the matter immediately, began it as soon as the gate was opened.

"Miss Benedict," she said, "there is something quite strange about Cecily that we should like to tell you. Could you spare a few moments to hear about it?"

"Why—er—of course!" replied the little black-veiled lady, in a rather startled voice. "Will you—er—that is, I will come to her room in a little while—if you will kindly close the shutters—first!" And she directed them to proceed upstairs, without this time accompanying them.

Cecily was overjoyed at their appearance. She was sitting by the window, fully dressed, the sunshine streaming in on her, transforming her curls into a radiant halo. A definite change had come over her during the last few days, caused, no doubt, by the enjoyment of light and sunshine and companionship. She was losing some of her former wan, wistful, frightened aspect, and assuming more of the confiding, sunny characteristics that were natural to her. At the moment the girls entered she was reading a magazine brought by them on their previous visit.

After the first greetings and chat they reported their conversation with Miss

Benedict.

"She's coming up soon," ended Marcia, "and we must get the shutters closed. But what on earth *for*? Why *can't* she be like ordinary people and enjoy the air and sunshine like the rest of us? Do *you* know, Cecily?"

"No, I can't imagine. It has all seemed very strange to me ever since I came. But you know how odd Miss Benedict is. I can't abide asking her any questions, and she never explains anything. The whole house is darkened like this all the time, and since she let me open my shutters, she's never once been in this room in the daytime. She never goes out without that heavy veil, not even into the garden. I don't understand it!"

"Do you know," suggested Marcia, half under her breath, "one would almost think she had done something wrong and was ashamed of showing her face in the daylight. I've heard of such things. And that would explain some other queer things about this place, too, like—"

"Hush!" warned Janet. "I hear her coming."

In another moment Miss Benedict had opened the door. And in the very dim light (Marcia had been closing the shutters as they talked) they saw an unusual sight. Miss Benedict had come to them without her bonnet and veil!

The change in her appearance was surprising. Her wonderful white hair was piled on top of her head in a heavy coronet braid. Her complexion was singularly soft and youthful, and her lovely gray eyes, even in the dim light, easily seemed her most attractive feature. It was a curious contrast made by the removal of the ugly bonnet and veil. In them she appeared a little, insignificant, unattractive personality. Without them, though short and slight of figure, she possessed a look and manner almost regal.

She did not refer to the omission of her usual headgear, but took a seat and quietly asked them what they had to tell her.

Janet undertook to explain, and began by telling how Cecily had sent the little gift to them, via the string, and ended by explaining about Aunt Minerva's duplicate. Miss Benedict listened to it all without comment. When Janet had finished and held out the two bracelets for her to examine, she merely took them and laid them in her lap, scarcely glancing at them. They waited, breathless, for her response.

"No," she said, "I know nothing about these bracelets. It is, of course, very singular—a surprising coincidence that your aunt should have one of them. But I

know nothing about them, any more than I know about Cecily herself." It was the first time she had ever referred to the matter before Cecily, and it was evident that it was not easy for her to do so.

"I might as well speak plainly to you all about this, since the matter has come up. I did not know little Cecily; I had never heard of her, nor anything about her before she came here. I cannot imagine why she was sent. I have no relatives whose child she could have been, nor any friend who could have given her into my care."

"Then why," interrupted Janet, "if you will pardon me for asking, Miss Benedict, —why did you take her in the day she came?"

Miss Benedict's manner instantly became a trifle confused and embarrassed. "It is—er—a little difficult to explain, I confess," she stammered. "The truth is—I—er—it is commonly reported that we—that is—I have some means. I have frequently, in the past years, received very strange letters from people utterly unknown to me,—begging letters, letters proposing to invest my money for me, —oh! I cannot begin to tell you all the strange things these letters propose. I understand it is a not unusual experience—with well-to-do people. I have even received letters proposing that I adopt the writer's children and eventually settle my money on them!"

Here Janet and Marcia could not repress a giggle, and Miss Benedict smiled slightly in sympathy.

"It *does* sound absurd," she admitted; "but it is quite true, and has often been most annoying. So, when the letter arrived announcing Cecily's coming, for which there was given no particular explanation, I thought it simply another case of a similar kind. And I resolved to dismiss both the child and her attendant as soon as they appeared.

"But when the day came, strangely enough, I changed my mind. It was Cecily herself led me to do so. I felt as soon as I looked at her that, whoever had sent her here and for whatever purpose, the child herself was innocent of any fraud or imposture. She believed that I would receive her, that I *knew* it was all right. There was something *trusting* about her eyes, her look, her whole manner. I cannot explain it. And that was not all—there was another reason.

"I suddenly realized how very lonely I was, how desirable it would be to have with me a young companion—like Cecily. I know that the life I lead is—is different—and peculiar. It is owing to unusual circumstances that I cannot explain to you. But I have become so accustomed to this life that of late years I

scarcely realized it *was* so—different. But when I saw Cecily—I felt suddenly—its loneliness."

With the laying aside of her veil, Miss Benedict seemed also to have laid aside some of the reticence in which she had shrouded herself. And her three hearers, listening spellbound, realized how utterly charming she could be—if she *allowed* herself to be so.

"A great desire seized me," she went on, "to take her in and keep her with me a while. If, later, some one came to claim her, well and good. I would let her go. Or if no one came and I found I had been mistaken,—that she was not companionable,—I could make some other provision for her. Meantime, I would yield to this new desire and enjoy her presence—here. In addition to that, the lady in whose company she had traveled was not in position to keep Cecily longer with her, and the child would be left without protection. So I took her in. And so I have kept her ever since, because I am daily becoming more—attached to her."

It was a great admission for this reticent little lady, and they all realized it. So deeply were they impressed that none of them could make any response. Presently Miss Benedict continued:

"After Cecily had told me her story I determined to write to the village of Cranby, England, and find out what I could about her mother, Mrs. Marlowe. I knew no one to whom I could address the inquiries, but sent them on chance to the vicar of the parish church. In due time I received a reply. It stated that Mrs. Marlowe was not a native of that town, but came there to live about twelve years ago, with her three-year-old daughter. Nothing was known about her personal affairs except that her husband and all her people were dead, and that she had come there from a distant part of England because the climate of her former home did not agree with her little daughter. She never talked much about herself, and lived in a very retired, quiet way. She left no property or effects of any value. Why she should have sent her child to me was as much a mystery as ever. About Cecily's father the vicar knew nothing. That is all the information I have."

Miss Benedict stopped abruptly. Cecily opened her lips to say something, then closed them again without having spoken. Marcia fidgeted uneasily in her chair. Miss Benedict looked down at her lap. An embarrassed silence seemed to have fallen on them all. Only Janet, knitting her brows over the puzzle, was unaware of it.

"But, Miss Benedict," she began, "we all think that these bracelets may have

something to do with Cecily's affairs—might explain a good deal of the mystery, if we could only puzzle them out. Have you noticed what strange signs there are on them? We think they must be something in Chinese. Let me give you a little more light and then you can see them better." And Janet, deeply immersed in the subject and still unconscious of her blunder, was about to go and open a shutter, when Miss Benedict quickly raised her hand.

"Please—er—*please* do not!" she exclaimed hurriedly.

"Oh! I beg your pardon—I forgot!" cried Janet, in confusion, and the silence at once became more embarrassed than ever. So much so, in fact, that Miss Benedict evidently felt impelled to explain her conduct. And she made the first revelation concerning her singular mode of life.

"I am—er—my eyes are not able to stand it. For years I have suffered with some obscure trouble in them. I can *see*, but I cannot stand any bright light. It hurts them beyond endurance. At home I must have the rooms darkened in this way. And when I go out, even my heavy veil is not sufficient. Behind it I must also wear smoked spectacles."

She said no more, but she did not need to. A little inarticulate murmur of sympathy rose from her listeners. And in the twilight of the room Marcia glanced quickly and guiltily into Janet's contrite face.

CHAPTER XIII

VIA WIRELESS

It was a week after the events of the last chapter. The girls had gone regularly every day to visit Cecily. It was Marcia who had finally mustered up courage to ask Miss Benedict if Cecily could not go into the garden and enjoy there some outdoor air and sunshine. Miss Benedict had hesitated at first, but at last she conceded that Cecily and the girls might sit in the garden if they would go out of the house by a small side door and remain on that side of the house.

They found that this door was on the opposite side of the house from Cecily's room: consequently, they had never seen it. And they soon discovered one reason, at least, why Miss Benedict wished them to remain exclusively on that side. It was screened both back and front by thick bushes and trees. And at the side, above the garden wall, rose the high blank side of a building, unrelieved by a single window. Here they were as absolutely screened from public view as if they were within the house. Here also was an old rustic bench and table, and they spent several happy mornings in the secluded spot, sewing, reading, and chatting.

Cecily seemed fairly to open out before their eyes, like a flower-bud expanding in warm, sunny atmosphere. Only at times now did she show any trace of the frightened repression of their earlier acquaintance. They seldom talked abut the mystery surrounding her, because they had discovered that any allusion to it only made her uneasy, unhappy, and rather silent. Moreover, further discussion of it was rather useless, as they seemed to have reached a point in its solution beyond which progress was hopeless.

So they talked gaily about themselves and their own affairs, sometimes of their former home in Northam, the pleasant New England village. Occasionally Cecily would reciprocate by allowing them glimpses of her life in the obscure little English town from which she had come. Only rarely did she allude to the circumstances of her present home, and though the girls secretly ached to know more about it, they were too tactful to ask any questions.

One query, whose answer they could not guess was this: who was the other mysterious old lady, kept so closely a prisoner in her room by Miss Benedict?

And why was she so kept? Marcia and Janet were never tired of discussing this question between themselves. That it was a relative, they could not doubt. And they recalled one or two remarks Miss Benedict had dropped, particularly when she had said: "We—that is—I have some means."

The "we" must certainly have referred to herself and the other one. But could that "other one" be mother, sister, aunt, or cousin? And why was there so much secrecy about her? Cecily had only said that Miss Benedict referred to her as "the lady in there who is not very well." But why conceal so carefully just an ordinary invalid?

"You never can tell, though," remarked Janet, decisively, one night when they had been discussing the matter with Aunt Minerva. "Were you ever more stunned, Marcia, than at the reason she gave for having all the shutters closed? I think it was the most pitiful thing I ever heard, I could just have sat and *cried* about it. And it was so different from all the awful things we'd imagined. Perhaps there is just as good a reason for this other mystery."

"But what puzzles me," broke in Aunt Minerva, impatiently, "is why that woman, if she's so wealthy, doesn't go to a good oculist and have some treatment for her eyes. They can do such wonders nowadays. Why on earth does she endure it? I never heard of anything so silly!"

"I suppose it's for the same reason that she wouldn't have a doctor when she hurt her ankle," said Marcia. "She evidently doesn't want a stranger in the house, even for such important things as those."

One day Cecily asked Marcia why she never brought in her violin since the occasion of the first visit, and requested that she bring it with her next day and give them a concert.

So on the following day Marcia came armed with her violin case and also an interesting new book from the library that she thought Cecily would enjoy.

"Let's read the book first," Cecily elected. So, sitting in the secluded corner of the garden, the three spent a happy morning, reading aloud, turn about, while the others worked at their embroidery. At last, when all were tired, Cecily begged Marcia to play, and she laid her book aside and took up the violin.

"What shall I play?" she asked. "Something lively?"

"No," said Cecily. "Play something soft and sweet and dreamy. I feel just in that mood to-day. It's too hot for lively things."

Marcia played the Liszt "Liebestraum," and a lovely setting of the old Scotch song "Loch Lomond," and after that the "Melody in F." And then, at Cecily's entreating glance, she drifted, as usual, into the "Träumerei."

"Do you know," said Cecily, when she had ended, "I believe I must have heard that thing when I was a baby. It's the only reason I can think of that it seems so—so familiar. And yet—unless I'd heard it a great, great many times then, I don't think it would have made such an impression on me. And where could I have heard it? Play it again, Marcia, please."

Marcia obligingly began, but she had gone no farther than the first few measures when the door opened and Miss Benedict appeared. She seemed very much agitated, and her bonnet and veil, donned in an evident hurry, were slightly awry.

"I beg you," she began, turning to Marcia, "not to play any more. I—er—it is—is not because it is not beautiful, but it is—is slightly disturbing to—some one inside."

"Why, of course I won't, Miss Benedict," said Marcia, dropping her bow. "I wouldn't have done such a thing if I'd dreamed it would disturb any one."

"It isn't—it isn't that *I* don't love it," stammered Miss Benedict, "for I do. But it seems to be very upsetting to—" She hesitated, just a fraction of a moment, and then seemed to take a sudden resolution.

"—to my sister!" she ended flutteringly, as though the simple admission carried something damaging with it. It required strong self-control for the three girls not to exchange glances.

"Oh, I hope I haven't done her any harm!" cried Marcia, contritely.

"No—she—it has just made her a little nervous. She will be all right soon, I trust. But I noticed that it had the same effect—before," went on Miss Benedict. "I fear I shall have to ask you not—not to play again in her hearing. And I am very sorry, both for Cecily—and myself." And she retreated into the house again, closing the door softly.

On the way back to luncheon that noon the girls excitedly discussed the newest turn of affairs and the newest revelation made by their strange neighbor. And so absorbed were they in this fresh interest and so anxious to impart it to Aunt Minerva that they scarcely noticed she was laboring under a suppressed excitement quite as great as their own. Indeed, she paid but scant attention to their recital; and when they had finished, her only comment was:

"Very odd—very odd indeed. But you never can guess about the news *I* have!"

"No, no! Of course I can't guess. Tell us—quick!" cried Marcia, impatiently. "It's something wonderful, I know!"

Miss Minerva made no reply, but suddenly laid a wireless telegram before them. Marcia snatched it up and read aloud:

"*Change of sailing-plans. Will be home in two days.*

BRETT."

"Hurrah! hurrah!" she cried. "Father's coming! A whole two months before we expected him! *Now* we'll hear something about the bracelet—and who knows what will happen after that!"

CHAPTER XIV

THE WRITING ON THE BRACELETS

In the joy of seeing her father after months of absence Marcia almost forgot the mystery of Benedict's Folly. Almost—but not quite!

Captain Brett had been at home twenty-four hours, and had had time to give an account of all the intervening weeks, before the subject was broached. Then the next morning, with a great air of mystery, the two girls and Aunt Minerva made him sit down and listen to the entire story. At its conclusion they produced the two filigree bracelets for his inspection.

"H'm!" he exclaimed, and, whistling softly under his breath, examined them with minute care. And then, being a man of few words, he only remarked: "So you think these were once a pair?"

"Why, of course!" cried Marcia. "Don't you?"

"It looks remarkably like it," he conceded.

"Do tell us how you happened to get yours!" she begged.

"There's nothing much to tell," replied Captain Brett. "Happened to be in Hong-Kong one day, and a ragged-looking Chinese sailor thrust this under my nose and whined that he'd let me have it for two Mexican dollars. They're always trying to get rid of things like this when they want some spare cash. One never knows where they pick them up. I didn't want the trinket particularly, but I saw that it was a unique little piece and worth probably much more. So I bought it, tucked it away in my trunk, and forgot it till I arrived home, when I gave it to you, Minerva. That's all I know about it."

"How long ago was that?" asked Janet.

"Must have been at least twelve years ago. I'm not sure of the exact year."

"But what do these things mean?" questioned Miss Minerva, pointing to the strange characters in the silver-work.

"They're Chinese characters, certainly, but I don't know what they mean. You see them on lots of their jewelry and gimcracks—generally mean 'good luck,' or

'happiness,' or some such motto. Can't say whether these mean anything of that kind or not."

"But tell me, Father, don't you honestly believe that if we could get these translated—find out what they mean—it might give us *some* clue to the puzzle?" Marcia appealed to him.

"It might—or it might not," he answered skeptically. "So many of these characters might be meaningless, as far as any personal application was concerned."

"Well, anyway, *could* we get them translated, just for our own satisfaction?" demanded Marcia.

"Nothing simpler!" smiled Captain Brett. "My boatswain is a Chinese—very learned man—reads his Confucius in off hours! He'd be sure to help you with it."

"Oh, goody! And when can we have it done?" cried Marcia, aglow with anticipation.

"Well, you're all coming down to visit the ship to-morrow. Bring the bracelets along, and I'll see that Lee Ching is on hand to give you his assistance. But—I warn you—*don't* count too much on what you may discover from it! I don't want you to have a bad disappointment."

In spite of which warning, notwithstanding, the girls slept little that night, so excited were they over the prospect, and, when they did sleep, dreamed impossible dreams—mainly of quite unintelligible translations of cryptic Chinese characters.

The visit to Captain Brett's ship, *The Empress of Oran*, would have been an event, apart from any other interest involved in the expedition. Marcia and Janet had never in their lives been on board of an ocean steamer. Even the approach to it was fascinating,—the long, covered wharves with their strange, spicy odors, the bustle and activity of loading and unloading, the narrow gangways, the dark waist of the vessel, and the immaculate white paint of the decks.

They examined every inch of the huge steamer, from the stoking-room to the donkey-engines on the forecastle deck, and spent half an hour in the cozy, tiny cabin that was the captain's own, marveling at the compactness and handiness of every detail.

When they all went up to the after-deck for luncheon, which was served under an awning, Marcia and Janet could scarcely eat for watching the deft, silent,

sphinxlike Chinese cook who waited on them. They tasted strange dishes that day, some of which, like curry and rice, were scarcely acceptable to their unaccustomed palates.

"Now," said the captain, in the middle of the meal, "if we were only out on the China Sea or bowling along over the Pacific, this would be just right. You'd have more of an appetite in that salt air than you do hemmed in by these noisy docks!"

But it was not the docks that had stolen away the appetites of Marcia and Janet. They were boiling with impatience to see the boatswain, that student of Confucius, who could, perhaps, throw some new light on their mystery. Ambrosia and nectar for luncheon would scarcely have appealed to them under the circumstances!

At last, however, the meal was ended with the curious little Chinese nuts whose meat is almost like a raisin. Then, when the table was cleared and the captain had lit his cigar, he spoke the word that caused their hearts to jump and their eyes to brighten:

"Now I suppose you want to see Lee Ching!" He beckoned to a sailor and sent him to find the boatswain.

Lee Ching arrived with promptitude, saluted his captain, and stood gravely at attention. He was not a young man, and he had a decidedly Oriental, mask-like face. It seemed strange that he should be dressed in the conventional boatswain's uniform, with peaked cap and the whistle of his office. One could imagine him better in some brilliant-hued, wide-sleeved Chinese garment, with a long pig-tail down his back.

"Lee Ching," said the captain, "these young ladies are very much interested in these two bracelets that have come into their possession. The characters on them, you see, are in your language. We wonder if you will be so kind as to translate them for us?"

"Words on two bracelets are Identical," replied Lee Ching, precisely

Lee Ching took the trinkets and examined them minutely. Presently he asked:

"Will ladies have what say by word of mouth?" The captain was about to answer yes, and then changed his mind:

"No. It may be rather important, and we want to remember it accurately. We would be obliged if you would write it out."

Lee Ching nodded gravely. "Will captain permit I retire to cabin?" he requested, and on being dismissed, he retreated with a formal bow.

"But *can* he write English?" cried Marcia, when he had disappeared.

"Of course he can, better than he can speak it!" laughed the captain. "English is child's play compared to that brain-paralyzing language of his! I must say, though, that Lee Ching is rather unusual—as Chinese sailors go. He's studied in the University of Pekin, reads and writes English well, and never speaks Pidgin-English. Why he's spending his life as boatswain of a trading-steamer I don't know. He's fitted for far different things. But I have an idea it's on account of his health that he follows the sea."

The time before Lee Ching's reappearance seemed to the girls interminable, though, in all probability, it was not more than fifteen minutes.

At last, however, he returned, laid the bracelets and a slip of paper in the captain's hand, and was about to retire.

"One moment!" said Captain Brett. "Is the writing on the two bracelets the same?"

"Words on two bracelets are identical," replied Lee Ching, precisely.

"That is all, then, and thank you!" And the captain dismissed him.

"Oh, *read* it," cried Marcia, "or I shall die[Pg 157]
[Pg 158]
[Pg 159] of impatience!" and she hung over his shoulder while he read aloud Lee Ching's queer, angular handwriting.

When he had finished, a blank look crept over the expectant faces of the two girls.

"Is *that* all?" cried Janet. And Marcia exclaimed, "Why, how disappointing! It

doesn't tell us a single thing!"

"Wait a minute," said the captain, tugging thoughtfully at his short mustache, while he studied the paper, "I'm not so sure of that!"

CHAPTER XV

PUZZLING IT OUT

"To begin with," Captain Brett went on after a long and (to Janet and Marcia) very trying pause, "we've something to hold on to in just the date—Sept 25, 1889—and Amoy."

"What's Amoy, anyway?" demanded Marcia.

"It's a large seaport in the province of Fu-kien, China, and I've stopped there many a time myself. Then there's the date of this wedding. Somebody might possibly remember it. There's just the faintest chance."

"But there aren't any names given," argued Marcia. "And besides, there must be hundreds of Chinese weddings going on all the time. I don't believe you could find any one who could remember just this particular one!"

"There are one or two things about this you don't understand, Marcia. First place, I'm almost certain this isn't any Chinese wedding referred to here. The Chinese don't do things that way. I know a little about their customs. It's English or American. You can bank on *that*!

"Another thing—about the names. I'm pretty sure that this contains both names—at least the ones the parties went by in China. You see, the Chinese have no equivalents in their language for such names as Jones or Robinson or Brett, for instance. What they do is to take some characteristic of a person, and give him a name signifying that characteristic. I strongly suspect that whatever words in Chinese stand for 'maker of melodies' and 'flower-maiden' are the names the man and woman were known by there."

"Then," interrupted Janet, who had been doing some rapid thinking, "the man must have been some kind of a musician, and the woman may have loved flowers, or looked like a flower, or something of that sort."

"I think it extremely likely," agreed the captain.

"*Maker of melodies—musician!*" cried Marcia, suddenly hopping up from her deck-chair in excitement. "Does that make you think of anything?"

The captain and Janet both looked rather mystified and shook their heads.

"Why, *Cecily*, of course!" exclaimed Marcia. "Don't you remember how she adores music—and always seems to be remembering something about that 'Träumerei'? I'll warrant—just anything—that these people who got married were some relation to her! And besides, didn't she have one of the bracelets?"

"It looks as if you *had* run down a clue," admitted Captain Brett. "But I'm sorry to say it doesn't help us much in discovering who these contracting parties were. One point, however, I think it seems to settle—the question whether the bracelet came into the possession of your little friend in some such manner as I got the other, or whether it was hers by right as a family trinket. I believe the latter—almost beyond question. But now comes the difficulty. How are we going to unearth anybody who has any remembrance of—"

Marcia suddenly inspired with an idea, interrupted: "Why not ask Lee Ching? He's Chinese. Who knows but what he came from just that region?"

"Nothing like trying," said the captain. "I don't know what province he hails from, but it won't hurt to ask." And he sent a sailor to summon Lee Ching once more. When he appeared the captain put his first question:

"Lee Ching, what province did you come from?"

"Fu-kien," came the answer, promptly, and the girls' hopes were raised sky-high.

"Did you ever live in Amoy?"

"No, never lived there—always in hills back beyond."

"Well, do you, by any chance, happen to know anything about the parties spoken of in that bracelet translation?"

"No. Was at sea at date mentioned. Young man then—not very well on dry land. Must live on ship always—or not live. Never was acquainted with parties mentioned."

"Thank you. That is all, Lee Ching."

The bright hopes of the girls were considerably dampened, but Marcia was not to be downed.

"Anyway," she argued, "you've other Chinese sailors on board. Why couldn't we question them all? We might find *some* one who knows."

The captain was rather dubious about it. "Yes, the cook and four sailors are Chinese. You can question them if you like, but I'm afraid it won't be much satisfaction. They're an appallingly ignorant lot! But I'll have them summoned."

In a few moments the five were lined up, and, true to the captain's estimate, a hopeless-looking lot they were. After much confused questioning in Pidgin-English it developed that the cook and two sailors were from the province of Shansi, a third from Kiang-su, and the two others from nowhere in particular that they could seem to remember. None of them knew anything about Amoy beyond the squalid shops about the wharves.

The captain dismissed them all with a disgusted wave of his hand and turned to the girls.

"You see how worse than useless it is to try and find out anything from such sources! I knew it would be so, but I didn't want to discourage you. Now you just leave me to myself for half an hour to smoke in peace and do a little thinking. Go and look at them unloading, or roam around and amuse yourselves in any way you like. Perhaps, if I rack my brains hard, something will occur to me."

They left him pacing up and down on the deck, puffing at his cigar, while they went to explore the great ship all over again. But the occupation, though fascinating, failed to keep their thoughts from the latest phase of the queer mystery that surrounded Cecily Marlowe.

"Do you know," said Marcia, as they stood looking down into the well of the vast engine-room, "it seems simply impossible to me to connect lovely, dainty, English Cecily with anything so oriental as China. I can't understand it. I can't imagine any connection. Can you?"

"No, I can't," admitted Janet. "And, more than that, where does Miss Benedict come in on this Chinese proposition? Nothing could be less connected with it than she! I believe she'd have a fit if she ever saw that awful-looking crowd of Chinese sailors your father had there a while ago. Did you ever see such a rascally looking lot? And poor little Cecily would be horrified!"

"I liked Lee Ching, though. He's so grave and serious and dignified. And isn't his English fascinating? I just love to hear him talk. But oh, I wish Father hadn't sent us away for half an hour! I can hardly wait for the time to pass! Let's go and look at those men on the dock unloading. Why do they make such a racket? You'd think there was a fire or something!"

So they whiled away the time, and at last, promptly on the minute, raced back to Captain Brett.

"Well?" demanded Marcia, breathless. "What now?"

"Just had a happy thought!" The captain threw the stump of his finished cigar

over the rail. "I've been trying to think whom I could remember meeting in China during the past years—some responsible person who might know these people or be able to track them down. Suddenly recalled old Major Goodrich. He was an English military attaché stationed at Hong-Kong for a while, and I got to know him rather well. He was retired some years ago, and the last I heard of him he was living in this country, somewhere in Pennsylvania, with his only daughter, who happened to have married an American. If anybody were likely to know anything about this business it would be he, for he knew everybody and everything worth knowing about in Amoy at the time. I'll look up his address and write to him to-night. Now I hope that satisfies you both!"

"Father, you're a trump!" cried Marcia, blissfully. "I *knew* you'd get right to the bottom of this mystery at once."

"Hold on! Don't count your chickens before they're hatched!" warned the captain. "This is only a possibility—not a *probability*. The major may know nothing whatever about it. But look here! it's high time we were heading for home. We don't want to be late to dinner."

They reached the apartment, bursting with news to tell Aunt Minerva, but were met at the door by that lady, flushed, flustered, and very much excited.

"Such a state of affairs!" she cried. "An hour ago I received a telegram from Cousin Drusilla in Northam saying she was very ill indeed and wouldn't I come up at once, as she was virtually all alone. Of course I've got to go. I can't leave her there sick without a soul to look after her. But what on earth are you all going to do?"

"Oh, go right along, Minerva! The girls and I will get on famously. They can try their hand at housekeeping, and you've a good maid in the kitchen to help. Don't you worry a minute!"

"Yes, but—" began Aunt Minerva.

"You've got just fifteen minutes to catch the Boston express," said the captain, decisively, looking at his watch. "Give me that suitcase and come right along."

Aunt Minerva, who had really been all packed and ready for the past twenty-nine minutes, meekly obeyed.

"I won't be gone more than a few days," she remarked, as she kissed the girls good-by. "I'll get some one to take my place with Drusilla just as soon as I can. Don't let Eliza boil the corn too long, and tell her—" The sentence was never finished, for the captain at that point gently but firmly led her into the hall and

closed the door.

And, though the girls suspected it not, this sudden departure of Aunt Minerva had more bearing on the mystery they were trying to solve than any of them dreamed!

CHAPTER XVI

ONE MYSTERY EXPLAINED

Meantime, Cecily Marlowe, immured in the lonely house, had been having an experience all her own. And when the girls came to see her, the day after the visit to the ship, she too was bursting with news. But she quietly waited till they had told their own tale, and was as puzzled as they about the strange translation of the characters on the bracelet. Of anything pertaining to China or the Chinese she had not the remotest notion, and could not understand how it could have any connection with her affairs.

"Now you must hear *my* story," she began, when they had discussed the newest development till there was nothing left to discuss. "It's about Miss Benedict. She has—but just wait, and I'll begin at the beginning. It was two nights ago, and she had one of those[Pg 171]
[Pg 172]
[Pg 173] headaches. She has such very bad ones, you know. She says they are from her poor eye-sight, and she suffers terribly.

"Well, she had a worse one than usual, and so she was obliged to call me into her room and ask me to fetch things for her. I sat by her and bathed her head and fanned her, and at last she fell asleep. Even then I didn't go away, but sat there fanning and fanning her for a long time, till finally, after a couple of hours, she woke up.

"She was very much better then, and presently she began to talk to me quite differently from what she ever had before. First she asked me if I were contented and happy here. I said I tried to be, but I was very lonely sometimes. She didn't say much to that, but suddenly she spoke again:

"Child, I suppose you wonder very much at this queer life I lead!"

"'Child, I suppose you wonder very much at this queer life I lead, don't you?' I said, yes, I couldn't help wondering about it. Then she turned away her head and whispered:

"'Oh, if you only *knew*, you would not wonder! I have been very unhappy. My life has been very unhappy!' All I could think of to answer her was that I was so

sorry, and she need not tell me anything she didn't wish to. I would never ask about it. And she raised herself up in bed, and said:

"'That's just it, dear child. I have always supposed that young folks were one and all curious, inquisitive, and thoughtless. That is one reason I was so—so strict with you—in the beginning. But you and those two nice girls next door have been a revelation to me.'

"Wasn't that lovely of her?" exclaimed Cecily, interrupting herself.

"Just darling!" cried Marcia. "But do go on, Cecily. We're crazy to hear what came next!"

"Well, next she said: 'People think I live a very singular life, I know. They think I'm eccentric—queer—crazy, even! Oh, *I* know it! But there are few alive to-day—and none in this neighborhood—who even guess at the real reason, who—remember!' And then she put her hand to her head as if it was aching badly, and dropped back on the pillow. She was very quiet for a while, but at last she looked up again and said: 'Little Cecily, would you care to have a home with me always? Would you be willing to put up with my queerness and peculiarities, and some of the strange conditions here?' And I answered, indeed, yes; if I could go out once in a while and visit you girls occasionally, I should very much like to stay. And she said:

"'Of course you shall, dear. You have been dreadfully shut in here, but that was before I knew you so well. I was not sure I *wanted* to keep you before, but now I know that I do. I only ask you to be as considerate of me as you can. Some day, I feel certain, I shall lose my sight. I know that it is coming. When it does come, I shall have to depend very, very much on you. I and one other. You will not fail me then, will you, Cecily?'

"Girls, I could have cried then and there—I felt so *sorry* for her. And I told her she could *always* depend on me, no matter what happened. I had no other home and no one else to care for me except you girls. And after that she told me the story about herself—at least, some of it. I can't tell it in her words, so I'll use my own. But this is it:

"A great many years ago, when this house was new, she lived here with her father and an older sister and a younger brother. They were all very happy together, and the brother was the pride and joy and hope of the whole family. But one time he had a violent disagreement with his father (she didn't tell me what it was about), and she and her sister took sides with her father against the brother. After that they had the same disagreement a great many times, and at last one so

bad that the young man declared he wouldn't endure it any longer, and threatened to leave home.

"They didn't believe he was really serious about it, but the next morning his room was vacant, and a note pinned to his pillow said he had gone away never to return. They felt awfully about it, of course, but that wasn't the worst. About two weeks later they received word that he had taken passage on a steamer for Europe, and after only a day or so out he was discovered to be missing, so he must have fallen overboard, or been washed over and drowned. Wasn't that frightful?"

Janet and Marcia looked horrified. "What did she do then?" they whispered.

"That's the most dreadful part," went on Cecily. "The shock was so great that the father died a week afterward—the doctors said virtually of a broken heart. So there were two gone, and within a month. The two that were left, Miss Benedict and her sister, shut themselves up and went into mourning and saw almost no one. For a while they were paralyzed with grief. And then, little by little, very gradually, they began to realize that people were talking about them—saying dreadful things. One of the few friends they *did* see let drop little hints of the gossip that was going on outside. People were saying that they were to blame for it all, and that they probably weren't so sorry as they pretended to be, for now they could enjoy all the money themselves. Can you imagine anything so horrid?"

"Oh, but that's nonsense!" interrupted Janet impatiently. "How could any one say it was their fault?"

"Well, you know how people talk," replied Cecily. "They meant that by nagging and quarreling they had driven the brother away on purpose, and then made it so unpleasant for the father that he couldn't stand it any longer either. It wasn't said in so many words, but just little hints and allusions and shrugging shoulders and all that sort of thing. But the meaning was there underneath it all, as plain as anything.

"Their grief and the horrid talk about them made them feel so very badly that they determined to live in such a way that no one could accuse them of enjoying an ill-gotten fortune. So they shut up the house,—at least a large part of it,—and dismissed all their servants, and did most of the work themselves. After a while the few friends they had began to drop away, one by one, till no one came to see them any more.

"And then one day, two or three years later, the older sister had a paralytic stroke

and lost her memory. She's been shut up in that room ever since, and Miss Benedict takes care of her. She can sit up in a chair and knit, and she likes to have a chess-board on her lap, and move the pieces around, because she once loved to play the game with her younger brother. But she can't remember anything—not even who she is herself, and nothing about what has happened. Miss Benedict feels terribly about her, especially about her not remembering anything, and she says that is why she didn't tell me about her at first. It seemed so terrible.

"She says all the friends and relatives they had are dead and gone now, so no one knows the real reason for their queer life. And as the years have passed she has grown more and more into the habit of living this way till it seemed quite natural to her—at least it did till I came; and now she is beginning to realize again that it *is* queer. And she was so afraid of gossip and talk that when you first wanted to be friends with me she would not allow it, for fear of starting more unpleasant inquiries into her life."

"But what about her poor eyes?" asked Janet.

"Oh, yes! About ten years ago she began to have those terrible pains in her eyes, and then she had to darken all the house and wear the veil and dark glasses outdoors. She went to a doctor about them, but was told that the case was hopeless unless she had some complicated operation and spent months in a dark room. This she felt she couldn't do on account of her sister, whom she *would* not leave to a stranger's care. So she has just suffered ever since.

"That's all, girls, except that she told me her sister's name is Cornelia and that hers is Alixe. I'm to call her Miss Alixe after this. It makes me seem a little nearer to her."

"What a pretty name—Alixe!" commented Marcia. "It just seems to suit her, somehow. But isn't that the saddest story? It just goes to show how unhappy we can make people by talking about them and their affairs."

"And oh! there's one thing more. Miss Benedict—I mean Miss Alixe—gave me permission to tell you all this, but she only asks that you will not repeat it except to your father and aunt. She says she knows you can be depended on to do this."

That day, before Janet and Marcia left, they encountered Miss Benedict in the hall. And, by the way she pressed their hands in saying good-by they felt that she knew Cecily had told them her story, though she made no reference to it.

"Cecily may run in and visit you a while to-morrow. I think the change will do

her good," she remarked at parting. And that was the only hint she gave of a change in the affairs of "Benedict's Folly."

When Janet and Marcia were at last outside the gate they gazed up at the forbidding brick wall and drew a long breath of wonder.

"So *that* is the story!" breathed Marcia. "What an awful thing—that two people's lives should be spoiled just by unkind gossip!"

But Janet was thinking of something else. "I wonder why Miss Benedict didn't tell what the family had the disagreement about!" she queried.

CHAPTER XVII

MAJOR GOODRICH ASSISTS

During the week following Aunt Minerva's departure, the two girls had a busy life, taking charge of the unaccustomed tasks of housekeeping.

But with all their absorbing occupations, the three were waiting on tiptoe of expectation for a reply from Major Goodrich. And even Captain Brett could scarcely conceal his impatience as the days went by and no answer came.

At last one morning the mail-box contained a letter postmarked from Pennsylvania, and Marcia carried it upstairs two steps at a time.

It was from the major. He wrote:

> Is there any way you can think of to furnish me with an idea of what the Chinese for that expression, "maker of melodies," *sounds* like? The only way that occurs to me is to see whether, by any faint chance, Lee Ching could write it in that Romanized Colloquial, used by the missionaries. That might give me an idea. It's a hundred chances to one, he doesn't know it. If so, just spell it out for me yourself in English—the nearest you can get to it.
>
> The reason I want to know it is this: there was a young fellow in Hong-Kong at the British military station, a military aide of promise, who had a magnificent singing voice. Every one went wild over him there. He was the life of the garrison and in social circles as well. Many an evening we spent listening to one of his impromptu recitals. But what makes me suspect that he may be the one we're after is that he foolishly went and married the daughter of a Chinese mandarin from one of the Hong-Kong yamêns. He had been the means of rendering the father some very important service, and met the daughter quite by accident. The whole affair was a rather remarkable story, but I haven't time to detail it all to you now.
>
> I saw the girl just once—afterward. She was a fascinating little creature, with the golden butterfly pins in her black hair, and her rich silk robe hung with jewels, and her tiny bound feet. But the young fellow's family back in England was furious about it. Eventually, he cut loose from them entirely. Then he and his wife drifted away from the Hong-Kong region up to Amoy,

and finally dropped out of sight. I imagine he adopted the Chinese customs and habits and got to live at last very much like a native. I've never heard of him since, but I've a notion he could be hunted up if he's still alive. His name was Carringford—Jack Carringford, we used to call him.

The point, however, is that the Chinese called him by a name of their own, signifying "eminent singer," or something of that sort—very much the same kind of expression as that used on the bracelet. And after a while we all got to calling him by it—or some abbreviation of it—pretty regularly. I can't recall just what it was now, for I haven't thought of it in years. But I believe I'd recognize it if I saw it written out in Colloquial or any other English version! Get me that, and I'll soon put you on the right track!

Mightn't the little girl possibly be the daughter of Carringford?

"No, she *mightn't*!" interrupted Marcia, indignantly, at this point. "Does Cecily Marlowe look like a Chinese mandarin's daughter's daughter?" And certainly, with her golden curls and big blue eyes and the English roses in her cheeks, they had to admit that she did not!

"And besides that," added Janet, "her name isn't *Carringford*!"

"That doesn't always signify," remarked the captain. "It looks to me like a rather clear case if we find that the Chinese name agrees with the major's recollection of it. I'd go down to the ship to-day, but Lee Ching is on shore leave, and won't be back till to-morrow. I'll see him then, and find out whether he knows anything about this Romanized Colloquial. I rather doubt it myself. It's not much used outside of the missions, I understand."

"What *is* 'Romanized Colloquial,' anyway?" demanded Marcia. "It sounds very mysterious!"

"No, it isn't a bit mysterious," answered Captain Brett. "In order to understand about it, however, you must know this fact about the Chinese language. The *written* character is the same—*means* the same—all over the kingdom. But it isn't *pronounced* the same in any of the different provinces. In fact, the spoken dialects are like entirely different languages. It seems that the dialect of the Fu-kien province has been reduced to a written form by the missionaries and called Romanized Colloquial. It has been in use for a good many years, but it isn't especially recognized by official or diplomatic circles. But a good many of the Chinese boys who attend the mission-schools learn it there. It's just possible that Lee Ching may have done so, as he came from that region. We can only wait and

see. If he doesn't know it, he *may* be able to write out the Chinese equivalent in some form of English script."

The next day the captain went down to the *Empress of Oran* and returned with a beaming face and a sheet of paper written on by Lee Ching.

"He knew it all right!" he announced. "Learned it as a boy in the mission-school at *Chiang-chiu*. Here's what he wrote." And he held the sheet of paper for the girls to see. "He's put the Chinese characters at one side. They have to be read from top to bottom, you know. Next to them is the Romanized Colloquial, and alongside of that the English translation. Quite a pretty piece of work that!"

"Gracious!" cried Marcia, frowning over the queer jargon. "I can't make a thing out of it—or at least I couldn't if he hadn't put the English right alongside of the others. Oh, this must be the name!—'chok-gàk ê lâng'-'maker of melodies.' Did you *ever* hear of such heathenish sounds? Well, now we'll see what Major Goodrich has to say to that. Father, will you send it right off to him?"

"At once!" announced the captain. "I'm just about as anxious as you folks, now, to get this mystery explained."

But the singular thing was that somehow the girls could not bring themselves to tell Cecily much about these latest developments. They thought it would make her feel strange and anxious to realize that there was a possibility of her being in any way related to a Chinese mandarin's daughter.

"And besides," remarked Janet, suddenly, when they were discussing it, "that's perfectly impossible, anyway, because her mother was English, and Cecily has lived with her all these years. So this talk about mandarin's daughters and things is perfectly ridiculous!"

"That's so!" echoed Marcia, in relief. "I didn't think of it at first. But, anyway, let's not tell Cecily about it till we know more. I do wish Aunt Minerva were here! I haven't written her about all this because there's so much to explain. I'd rather wait and tell her when she gets back. She said she was only going to be gone a little while, and here it's nearly two weeks!"

In three days an answer arrived from the major, and, as luck would have it, Cecily herself brought the letter upstairs with her as she came in.

"The postman was just going to drop it in your box," she explained, "and I asked him to let me take it to you, and save you the trouble of coming down for it." And she held it out to the captain.

"Aha!" he cried, as he caught sight of the writing. "*Now* we'll hear some news! Why—what's the matter?" He had just glimpsed Marcia and Janet frantically signaling to him behind Cecily's back. "Don't you want me to open it?"

"Oh, not now," explained Marcia, as nonchalantly as she could. "I want Cecily to come out to the kitchen and help us make some fudge. Later will do." And she dragged the wondering Cecily down the hall, while the captain stared after them muttering, "Well! of all the—"

Cecily stayed rather late that afternoon. And for the first time in all their acquaintance, the girls were not sorry to have her go, so wild with anxiety were they to hear the major's letter. No sooner had the door closed upon her than they rushed back to the captain.

"What does he say?" they clamored.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE MAJOR HAS A FURTHER INSPIRATION

The captain, who was puffing at his pipe, appeared serious. "I don't like the looks of this thing at all," he muttered, reaching in his pocket for the letter.

"But what did he say? Tell us quick!" cried Marcia. "We've been nearly crazy there in the kitchen waiting to have Cecily go so we could hear what he says!"

"Well, I'm glad she did go first," acknowledged the captain, "for somehow I wouldn't care to have her hear just yet what the major has to say. He thinks—But I'll read his letter, and you can understand what I mean. Here it is:

> "About the Chinese name first. The one you sent does certainly have a familiar sound to me, especially the last two syllables. I distinctly remember that the name Jack Carringford was called by ended in *e lang*, or something that sounded amazingly like it. I wouldn't bank on that entirely, however, for the Chinese language is the most confusing and idiotic jargon ever invented by the mind of man, and there might be a dozen other words ending the same and meaning something entirely different.
>
> "Here's a fact more to the point, though. Since writing to you last I've been busy communicating with several old chums of the China days. What I've been trying to find out is, does any one know what has become of Carringford? By the third year after his unfortunate marriage he had pretty well dropped out of sight. Still, I thought I knew of one or two who might have kept some track of him even after that. One of them, Danforth Pettingill, an old chum of Jack's, is now living in New York, and I thought he'd probably know as much as any one. So I wrote him at the very start, and yesterday received this answer. It seems that Carringford and his wife lived with her father for some time—till about two years after their marriage, when a little daughter was born. Then the old mandarin, who was fearfully annoyed because the baby was not a boy (girls being of no earthly account in China, as you know!), made it so unpleasant for the couple that they finally left his establishment. It was then that they began their roaming existence, terribly hampered by the baby, of course, and never remaining long in any city.

> "At last, the wife contracted the plague and died very suddenly, and Carringford was left alone with the baby on his hands. It was at this time that he dropped completely out of sight, and Pettingill never heard from him again. He thinks, however, from very substantial rumor, that Carringford went back to England, taking the child with him. He didn't go to his own folks, though, that's certain; for Pettingill has heard from them occasionally, and they never mention him. There was another rumor afloat about him for a time, that he had taken to earning his living by singing at cheap concerts under an assumed name. All of which might be entirely likely. But what became of the child, Pettingill never knew—nor any one else, I'm afraid. Well, that's all I've ascertained up to date, but I'm still on the track, and if I hear any further news, I'll let you know at once."

When the captain stopped reading, all of them looked very serious, and no one said a word for several minutes.

"You see," he began at last, "why I don't like the looks of the thing. This seems to cover almost all the points we've been in doubt about, though of course, it *does* leave quite a little to conjecture. I somehow dislike to think of little Cecily as a mixture of Chinese and English. In fact, it's almost impossible to think of her as such. And yet it seems remarkably near the truth."

"If that man assumed a name," interrupted Marcia, "I suppose it might as easily be Marlowe as anything else."

"Just as easily," admitted Captain Brett.

"And he went back to England—just where Cecily came here from," added Janet, lugubriously.

"But then why doesn't Cecily remember something about him?" cried Marcia, hopefully.

"He may have been dead a good while, or he may have sent her off somewhere else," answered the captain, dashing this hope. "He wouldn't be likely to drag a child about in any such life as he must have had to lead."

They all sank into a depressed silence again. Suddenly Marcia had another idea.

"But look here!" she exclaimed. "Major Goodrich says that man was at Hong Kong and the bracelet says 'Amoy,' as plain as plain can be. Isn't that enough proof that it can't be the same one?"

Again the captain had to dampen her hopes. "They might have gone to Amoy to

be married," he said. "It's entirely possible. You can't tell anything about that."

"And besides," put in Janet, "you got the bracelet at Hong Kong, didn't you, Captain Brett? So if it really belonged to those people, it was still pretty near home."

"Well, it is useless to conjecture about these things," added the captain. "What bothers me most of all is the question of what earthly connection all this can have with Miss Benedict. There doesn't seem to be the least likelihood that the Carringfords were any relations of hers, and unless Cecily was simply sent there on a chance, because it was known that she was a wealthy woman and might be willing to provide for the child, I'm quite at a loss to explain it."

"I wonder if there is any way we could find out?" mused Marcia.

"I know a very good way," declared Janet. "Simply ask her."

"What? And explain all this strange business about Cecily's parents right away?" demanded Marcia.

"Oh, no! Just ask her if she ever had any connections in England named Carringford. She'll say either yes or no to that. And if she says yes, why then we'll know we are on the right track and can think what to do next."

"Janet's advice is pretty good," asserted Captain Brett. "And if I were you, I'd put the question to Miss Benedict the next time you see her. It's about the only way I can think of now to solve this riddle."

And so it was decided that the very next day, when the girls expected to go and visit Cecily, they should ask Miss Benedict the dread question.

Cecily met them at the gate the next afternoon. "Oh, I'm so glad you've come!" she cried. "I'm really very lonely. Miss Benedict is going to be away all the afternoon because she has some business to attend to. She says we can sit in the garden."

At this piece of news the girls' faces fell.

"Why, what's the matter?" questioned Cecily. "Don't you care to? I thought you'd be rather pleased."

"Indeed, it will be fine!" declared Marcia, striving to hide her disappointment at

the news that Miss Benedict would not be visible that day. She and Janet had counted so positively on having one at least, of their vexed questions settled immediately that it was difficult to feel they must wait two or three days more. For on the morrow Cecily was to visit them, as they now spent alternate days in each others' houses, and the day after, Captain Brett had promised to take the three of them on a trip up the Hudson.

All that afternoon, however, Marcia and Janet were noticeably inattentive and absent-minded. Once Marcia, who was reading aloud to the others, stopped short in the middle of a sentence, and remained for three whole minutes gazing off at nothing. And at this, Cecily could contain her wonder no longer.

"Girls, are you, by any chance—annoyed at me?" she ventured. Marcia suddenly dragged herself back to the affairs of the moment.

"Of course not, deary. How could you think such a thing?" she declared heartily.

"Then something else is the matter," insisted Cecily. "You are worrying about something. I never knew you to act so strangely. Now tell me, aren't you?"

Marcia glanced uneasily at Janet. "Well, yes, we are," she admitted reluctantly. "But please don't ask us anything about it just yet, Cecily. Something that has come up lately seems kind of queer and—and unpleasant. But it may turn out all right in the end, so we don't want to tell you till we know positively."

Cecily looked alarmed. "Is it—is it anything about me?" she faltered. "But perhaps I oughtn't to ask." Marcia looked terribly unhappy at this question, and Janet came to her rescue.

"Yes, it is, Cecily," she declared with assumed cheerfulness. "Captain Brett has stumbled across something that seems as if it might have some connection with your affairs. But we don't want you to hear about it till we are positive. Now don't worry about it, because I'm perfectly certain everything is going to turn out all right. You won't worry, will you?" She put her arm around Cecily and laid her cheek against the golden hair.

"No, I'll try not to," Cecily assured them, "and I'll promise not to ask you another thing about it till you're ready to tell me yourselves." After that she settled down quietly, but it was apparent to the girls that, in spite of her assurances, she was worried and nervous and unhappy. Presently Janet had an inspiration.

"You two sit here. I'm going out for a few moments," she announced, determined to break the tension of unrest and nervousness by some diversion. Nor would she reveal to them what her errand was to be. She returned in twenty minutes,

however, with a box of delicious French ice-cream and some dainty cakes. And for the next half-hour they had a gay time in the garden, serving and consuming the welcome treat. In the end they had temporarily quite forgotten the unhappiness of the earlier hour, and when they returned home the two girls left Cecily laughing and cheerful.

Nor did she, all through the ensuing two days, refer in any way to their conversation in the garden. If the matter worried her, she gave no sign, and the girls could not help admiring her self-control.

Three days later, Marcia and Janet went again to spend the afternoon with Cecily, and found to their relief that Miss Benedict was at home. At least, they learned the fact from Cecily. The lady herself they did not see when they entered. And indeed, there was a chance, that they might not have so much as a glimpse of her during their visit, for it frequently happened that she was not visible during an entire afternoon.

Would she speak to them that day? That was the question. And, what was even more important, would they have a chance to speak to her unobserved by Cecily? For they did not wish the girl to overhear what they had to ask, nor even to know that they were seeking an interview with her guardian.

For the major part of the afternoon it did not seem as if their wish would be granted. Miss Benedict did not appear, and so nervous and anxious were they that they could scarcely keep their thoughts on the conversation that Cecily was striving to keep up or, later, on the book they were reading. Cecily had declared that her room seemed very warm, so they were sitting once more in the garden. This also was a disappointment, for it lessened considerably their chances of seeing the lady of their hopes.

Half-past five came round, and still they had not attained their wish. Marcia had just risen, with a resigned sigh, to propose that they take their departure, when the side door opened and Miss Benedict appeared. At the sight of her the hearts of Marcia and Janet gave a delighted thump, and they greeted her with a pleasure, the warmth of which she could not entirely understand.

But now came the problem of getting Cecily out of the way for a time. It was evident that she had no intention of leaving them of her own accord. And it was Marcia's happy idea that solved this riddle.

"Cecily," she suddenly inquired, "do you happen to have finished that book I lent you last week?"

"Oh, yes! I finished it last night. I meant to return it to-day," said Cecily. "Wait a moment and I'll get it from my room. You must be anxious to finish it yourself, I know." And she hurried indoors, unconscious of the unutterable relief with which they watched her go. When she was out of sight, Marcia turned to Miss Benedict.

"Please pardon me for asking a personal question," she began hurriedly, "but it is only because we think it is something that concerns Cecily. Did you ever have, in England or anywhere, any relatives or—or even friends by the name of Carringford?" Miss Benedict was bonneted and veiled as usual, so they could not see her face. And they would have given much to have been able to read her expression when she heard this question.

But she answered, very promptly and positively: "No, I never knew of any one at all by that name. Why do you ask?"

They could hear Cecily's footsteps returning down the stairs.

"Only because we have discovered something in connection with people of that name, that seems to concern Cecily," Marcia explained hastily. "Sometime we will tell you all about it. We thought perhaps you'd know them. Please—please don't tell Cecily we've spoken about it—just yet." Miss Benedict had only time to signify that she would follow their request, when Cecily appeared in the doorway and the interview was over.

As they walked home later they both admitted to a feeling of intense relief that Miss Benedict, at least, knew nothing about any Carringfords.

"Of course, her not knowing them doesn't *prove* anything," declared Janet. "But one thing is certain. If she *had* known them, it would have been positive that all this horrid story is connected with Cecily. But as she doesn't, it gives one more chance that it has nothing to do with her."

As they entered the hall of the apartment, the captain called out to them from the living-room:

"Hurry in, girls! There's another letter from the major waiting for you!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE UNEXPECTED

The major's letter did nothing, however, to lighten the gloom. On the contrary, it only increased it tenfold. The main substance of it was in this paragraph:

> It's singular how much you can dig out about a subject, once you put your mind to it. I thought at first that I had told you all that was known about Jack Carringford and his affairs—all that could be discovered. But the deeper I go into it, the more I seem to unearth. Yesterday another friend to whom I had written, on the off-chance of getting a little information (but from whom I really didn't expect much) sent me this bit of news. It seems he heard it said that after Carringford went back to England he married again, and it is thought that he did not live very long after,—died suddenly of pneumonia, or something like it, in an obscure town in the north of England. Perhaps this will help you some in your amateur detective work. If I glean any more information, I'll let you know at once. I rather enjoy this delving into the past.

"Oh, horrors!" exclaimed Marcia. "Could anything be plainer than this is getting to be? Of course, that explains it all! Cecily didn't remember her father, and her 'mother' was really her stepmother. I wonder if she knows it. She never mentioned it, but then she seldom speaks of her mother, anyway. Though I always thought, from the way she acted, that she was very fond of her."

"It certainly grows more convincing with every added piece of news we hear," mused the captain. "I wish we *could* find some loophole for thinking that this tangle doesn't concern Cecily. But how on earth she can have any Chinese ancestry, beats me. She doesn't show a trace of it. One would certainly think she'd have almond eyes and coarse, straight hair, or a dark complexion, or *something*! It's the one thing that gives me the slightest hope that she can't be Carringford's daughter."

"But what shall we do now?" questioned Janet, bringing them back abruptly to the affairs of the moment.

"The first thing to do," declared Captain Brett, "is to question Cecily about her

father and mother, and see what *she* knows. She may recall something that will give us another clue. If this proves to be the right trail, we've got to follow it up, get into communication with the Carringfords in England, and see if they will do anything about her. They ought to be willing to provide for his daughter. But we'll have to be very sure of our facts, or they'll pay no attention, I suppose. Somehow or other we'll have to trace out Carringford's career in England after he returned. I wish I knew the name he assumed, but no one seems to be able to tell us that."

"But even *still*, we haven't the slightest clue to the reason why Cecily was sent to Miss Benedict," mused Marcia.

"Why, yes, we have something new now," interrupted Janet. "Hasn't it occurred to you that Mr. Carringford's second wife might have been some connection of the Benedicts, or known them, or something?"

"Sure enough! sure enough!" cried the captain, thumping his knee. "This puts the thing in an entirely new light. We must find out a little more about that second wife. You get what you can from Cecily, but do be careful how you question her. The child is sensitive, and was apparently very fond of the lady she called her mother. Try not to probe too deeply. And remember to explain to her that you are not asking just out of idle curiosity, which she'd be perfectly right in resenting."

It was with no very pleasant anticipations that Marcia and Janet looked forward to their interview with Cecily next afternoon. How to approach the subject without giving her a clue to the real state of affairs, they were puzzled to know. Plan after plan they formed, only to reject after thinking them over. "Suppose Cecily should ask this," or "What if Cecily should inquire why we say that?" spoiled every outline of the conversation that they could imagine. At last Janet declared:

"It's perfectly useless to think now what we'll say, or what she'll answer. Let's just wait till the time comes and say what seems best at the moment. The whole conversation may be entirely different from anything we plan."

"I guess you're right," sighed Marcia. "I'm tired out thinking about it, anyhow." And so they put it all aside till Cecily's arrival.

When she came, that afternoon, she found two very serious and thoughtful friends awaiting her. One thing at least, they had determined,—not to put off the dreaded interview till later in the day, but have it over at once and get it off their minds. So when they were all comfortably seated in Marcia's cozy room, Janet began:

"Cecily, would you mind very much if we asked you a few questions? You remember, the other day, we said that something had come up concerning you, we thought, and we would tell you about it later. Well, we aren't quite ready to tell you *all* about it yet, but it would help a great deal if you'd answer a few questions about yourself. Will you?" And she felt an immense sensation of relief, after these words were spoken, at having at least taken the first plunge.

"Why, of course!" assented Cecily, wonderingly. "That is, if I possibly can."

"And you'll remember that we aren't asking just out of curiosity, but because it may help to untangle your affairs?" interrupted Marcia, anxiously. Cecily only smiled and squeezed her hand, as if an answer to that were unnecessary.

"Well, dear," said Janet, in a hesitating voice, "could you tell us whether you know this: was your father ever married twice?"

Cecily started and flushed a little. "Oh, I—I don't know anything about such a thing!" she murmured. "I—I don't think so. You see, he died before I remember anything about him, and my mother never spoke of him to me very much."

"Then she never told you anything about that?" went on Janet.

"No," replied Cecily, very positively.

"Now, I have one more question to ask that I'm afraid may startle you, but please don't attach too much importance to it. Was the lady you called mother your real mother or your stepmother?"

This time Cecily fairly jumped. "Oh, no, no!" she cried. "I'm sure, I'm very sure she was my own mother. She would certainly have told me if she had not been. I would have known it. Why do you ask?"

"That, you know, is what we can't just explain yet," answered Janet, evidently distressed. "Were you very, very fond of her, Cecily?"

"Indeed, yes!" replied the puzzled girl. "How could I help but be? She was so lovely and sweet and good to me, and seemed to live only for my comfort and happiness. I never dreamed of such a thing as her not being my own mother." There were real tears in Cecily's eyes as she made this declaration. Marcia and Janet experienced as unpleasant a sensation as if they had been compelled to torture a helpless kitten. And yet the task must be gone through with and there were further queries to make.

"Do forgive us for all this, Cecily," begged Marcia. "It hurts us horribly to make you feel badly. We wouldn't do it for the world if there weren't a good reason.

But can you tell us this? Was there anything your mother ever said or did that would in any way suggest that she might not be—your own mother? Think hard, Cecily dear."

The girl sat a long while, chin in hand, staring out of the window at the tightly shuttered expanse of "Benedict's Folly" opposite. No one spoke, and the others made a vain pretense of working hard at their embroidery. But the hands of both shook so that the stitches were very, very crooked indeed. At last Cecily turned to them and spoke in a very subdued voice:

"These things are making me very unhappy, but I know you only mean them for my good. My mother did say one or two things that I thought nothing of at the time, but now, since your questions, seem as if they may have another meaning. One was this. We were looking in the mirror together one time, and I said how queer it was that I didn't look a bit like her. I was so fair and light-haired, and had rosy cheeks, and she was dark and her eyes were brown and her hair almost black. She smiled and said:

"'No, it isn't very strange when you think—' and then stopped very suddenly and flushed quite red. And I asked her what she meant, but she only replied: 'Oh, nothing, nothing, dear! Children often look very different from their parents, not at all like them.' And she wouldn't say any more. I thought it strange for a while, but soon forgot all about it. I can't imagine now what she meant, unless it was—that. The only other thing I remember is this. I asked her one time whether, when I was a tiny little baby, I wore pink or blue bows on my dresses. She was very busy about something at the time and she just said, sort of absent-mindedly, 'I don't know I'm sure.' And then she added, in a great hurry, 'Oh, I don't remember! Pink, I guess.' I thought it strange that she should forget how she dressed me, for she always had a very good memory. But I forgot that, too, very soon. That is all."

Marcia and Janet glanced uneasily at each other. The information seemed to confirm their worst apprehensions. But Janet went on:

"Just one more question, dear, and we'll stop this horrid inquisition. Can you tell us what was your mother's maiden name, the name of her people?"

"Yes," said Cecily. "It was Treadwell. But she hadn't any people left—they were all dead, and she was the last one of her family. But, oh! can't you tell me, girls, why you have had to ask all these questions? I have waited so patiently, and I have worried so about it all. And what you have said to-day has made me feel worse than ever."

"Dear heart, we don't want to tell you quite yet," soothed Marcia. "It wouldn't do you any good to know about it till we're positive beyond a doubt. It isn't anything so very terrible, anyhow. Nothing to worry about at all. But just something we wish might be a little different. And nothing could possibly make the least difference in the way we care for you, anyway, so just don't worry another bit. Now I'm going to play for you." And she drew her violin from its case.

Marcia gave them quite a concert that afternoon, rendering selection after selection to please them, glad indeed of the diversion and relief from the unpleasantness of their accomplished task. But she did not play the "Träumerei," for some reason not very well defined even to herself, but vaguely connected with recent disclosures. At last Cecily herself asked for it, and then, of course, Marcia could not refrain from obliging her. When it was over, Cecily took her departure, and the girls, left alone, plunged at once into the discussion of the most recent developments of the mystery.

That evening Captain Brett and the two girls held a council of war.

"There's no denying," he said, "we've discovered the most important thing yet in learning that name—Treadwell. We've something to work from now. With that to start from, I can set on foot some inquiries over in England that may establish her identity. And you must ask Miss Benedict (though I hate to be constantly troubling her in this way) if she has any recollection of some one by that name who could possibly have any claim on her. Do this as soon as possible. We're certain to get at the root of the matter very soon now."

"Do you think," asked Marcia, "that those remarks of her mother's that Cecily repeated look as if we were right in believing it to be her stepmother?"

"It certainly seems so to me," he acknowledged. "Of course, we must remember this. When you have a suspicion that certain things are so, every little circumstance and every lightest remark seem to confirm you in that belief. Often these things have absolutely no bearing on it whatever, but you *think* they have, simply because you fear that they have or want them to have. So we mustn't be misled by chance remarks. I will admit, however, that these particular ones seem singularly to bear us out in our conjectures."

"Well, do let's get some of these things settled to-morrow," sighed Marcia. "I'm losing so much sleep over it that I'm beginning to feel like an owl. I just worry and worry all night long it seems to me. Let's ask Miss Benedict about the name of Treadwell when we go there, if we can possibly manage to see her."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you about that," interrupted the captain. "But I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to remain at home to-morrow. I'm due downtown on some errands that will take me to a number of places. And at the same time, I'm expecting an important business message over the telephone. I shall have to ask you to be here without fail to take the message for me. I can't trust Eliza to get it right. So you'll have to put off your visit for another day. But don't be too much disappointed, for while I'm away I shall be making inquiries as to how we must go about tracing the name of Treadwell in England. That will be something accomplished." And with this consolation the girls had to be content.

"Now," said Janet, next morning, when the captain had gone and they had resigned themselves to a long day of waiting, "I have a plan to propose. Let's not talk or even *think* a thing about all this business to-day. If we do, we'll only make ourselves more miserable than we are. I found a perfectly fascinating new book in the library yesterday. Let's sit and read it, turn about, and see if we can't both finish those centerpieces we've been working on so long. We'll have to work like everything to do it. That ought to keep our minds off of our troubles. And we'll telephone for some French pastry for dessert at luncheon, and some candy for this afternoon."

The plan seemed to offer pleasant possibilities, and they both settled themselves comfortably in the cool living-room to pass the morning. The book was well begun and the embroidery advancing rapidly, when Eliza came in with a letter just left in the box, and deposited it on the library table.

"It's for the captain," she announced, as she turned away. Marcia jumped up and scrutinized the writing.

"Oh, Janet!" she exclaimed at once; "it's from the major!"

"It is?" cried her friend, apprehensively. "Then it's some more horrid news he's unearthed. I'm certain of it! Not a letter comes from him but it's something to worry us more. I just hate the sight of them!"

"Yes; and what's more," moaned Marcia, "we can't even know what's in this one till Father comes home this evening. Why, I feel as if I'd go crazy, having to wait all that time!"

"Well, you'll have to wait," commented Janet, philosophically, "so you might as well do it as peacefully as you can. Come, let's go on with our book."

It was all very well to speak philosophically about the matter, however, but to *act* so was a different affair. Try as they might, they could not, from that

moment, concentrate their minds on the pleasant program they had mapped out for themselves. A dozen times during the morning Marcia would stop reading and glance speculatively at the unopened letter. A dozen times Janet left her fancy-work and strolled over to inspect the superscription anew. The French pastry at luncheon failed to soothe them, and the candy in the afternoon remained uneaten.

At three o'clock they took to staring out of the window to watch for the captain's return. And as they watched they detailed to each other the various things they surmised might be in the major's letter. Marcia asserted that he had probably discovered the second wife's name to be Treadwell, thus confirming their worst fears. And Janet declared that he had no doubt ascertained just why Cecily had been sent to the Benedict home. Perhaps it was even to prevent her being sent back to China to her mandarin grandfather. Nothing they could imagine was too dreadful to fit into the scheme of things. By half past five they were the most miserable pair of girls in the big city. And at that moment, they heard the captain's key in the hall door.

"Quick! quick! quick!" they breathlessly panted at him, explaining nothing, but only waving the major's letter in his face. Asking no questions, he took it, slit it open, and glanced hurriedly through the contents. Then he gave a long, low whistle.

"Oh, tell us!" groaned Marcia. "What more that's quite horrible has he found out?"

For answer the captain sat down and laughed till the tears stood in his eyes. At last he managed to gasp: "Well, of all the dances I've ever been led, this is the worst and most foolish! But it's just like the major. He always was the most impulsive chap. You'll be delighted to know that he's made one more discovery —and that is that he has been 'barking up the wrong tree,' as they say. Here's what he writes:

> "It occurred to me yesterday, in connection with this affair, to look up some of the old diaries I used to keep in the China days. They have been stored away in the attic in a chest for years, but I got them out and have been running over them, hoping to come across an entry that might have some bearing on the matter in question. And, quite to my chagrin, I did discover this. I will quote it, just as it stands: *Today Carringford was married according to native customs. None of us invited.*
>
> "But here's the point of departure, so to speak. This entry was made on

> March 10, 1890, and you see it doesn't agree at all with the inscription on your bracelet, which is, I believe, September 25, 1889. So, of course, the only inference that can be drawn is that they were two separate and distinct affairs that have absolutely no connection. So sorry! Anything else I can do for you, I'll be delighted, etc., etc."

The captain did not finish the remainder of the letter, for the excellent reason that no one of his audience was paying the least attention to it.

When he looked up, at this point, Marcia was prone on the couch alternately sobbing and laughing and sobbing again, and Janet was staring out of the window, blinking hard to restrain the tears of relief that would insist on rolling down her cheeks.

And in the midst of this curious state of affairs, who should open the door and walk in but—Aunt Minerva! Suitcase in hand, she stared at the three in amazement for a second till, with a glad cry of recognition, they all rushed upon her and literally snowed her under with embraces.

"I couldn't let you know I was coming, because I didn't know myself till this morning," she explained. "Drusilla's sister Ellen came in unexpectedly from the West, and of course that relieved me. I just packed up in half an hour, and here I am. Whatever is the matter with you all? When I came in you looked as if you'd just attended the funeral of your last friend. I hope Eliza hasn't given you all indigestion!"

"We'll tell you after dinner, Minerva," laughed the captain. "It's a long and complicated tale. My, but we're glad to see you again!"

That evening they made her sit down and listen while they rehearsed the story. It had to begin with the description of their day on shipboard, the very day that she had gone away, and ended with the major's final letter.

She listened to it all very quietly and without any comments whatever, except for an indignant and scornful sniff once in a while.

"Well," demanded Marcia, when it was over and they were waiting for her to speak, "what do you think of it?"

"I think," she remarked cryptically, "that you needed Minerva Brett here to manage this affair for you. *She* would have given you a little better advice than to go off on a wild goose chase down to Pennsylvania on the wrong trail!"

They stared at her in open-mouthed amazement.

"You might explain yourself, Minerva," mildly suggested the captain.

"I *might*, but I'm not going to!" she replied firmly. "At least, not just at present." And with a tantalizing smile, she sweetly bade them all good night and departed to her room.

"Janet," said Marcia, that night, as she curled her arms up over her head on the pillow, "isn't it heavenly to go to sleep with that horrid weight lifted from your mind? We seem to be just as far as ever from solving the riddle about Cecily, but at least, the darling isn't the granddaughter of a mandarin! But, do you know, I can't help but wonder where that poor little granddaughter is, and what became of her. She sort of seems like a real person to me now."

"I don't wonder about her, and what's more, I don't care," sighed Janet. "As long as it wasn't Cecily. What's puzzling me is how your aunt expects to solve the riddle? What can *she* know about it?"

"Well, I don't bother about *that*," returned Marcia, "because I'm glad to let somebody else have a hand in working at it now. I'm content to leave it to Aunt Minerva!"

CHAPTER XX

AUNT MINERVA TAKES COMMAND

For an entire week thereafter Aunt Minerva went her own mysterious way, calm and unruffled herself, but keeping the rest of her family on tenter-hooks of excitement.

She wrote mysterious letters which she would allow no one but herself to mail, and received mysterious replies, the contents of which she kept a dark secret. They watched her with the feeling that they were quite outside the game now, and that she had the keys of the situation entirely in her own hands. Which was indeed the truth!

At last one day, after receiving a particularly bulky communication, she deigned to speak.

"Can you carry a message for me to Miss Benedict?" she inquired of Marcia and Janet.

"Yes!" they replied eagerly, but humbly.

"Ask her if she could possibly grant an interview in her own house to the four of us here—and one other. It's very important."

"Oh, Aunt Minerva, you *know* she never receives *any* strangers in the house!" expostulated Marcia.

"I know that, of course. And you told me the reason, which I quite appreciate. But there's bound to come a time, even in her peculiar experience, when it's expedient to break a rule like that. The time has come now, and you can tell her that I'm sure she'll be very sorry if she does not grant this request. The matter intimately concerns her, or I would not dream of intruding on her."

"Well, you may as well tell *us* what you've been concocting, Minerva," interrupted Captain Brett. "You've kept us in the dark about long enough, haven't you? And if I'm to go in there with the procession, I'd like to know a thing or two about where I'm at, instead of sitting around like a dummy! And who is this 'other one' you allude to, anyway?"

Miss Minerva laughed at his impatience. "You may well ask, Edwin! I think you

must have been about as blind as a bat not to see right along what struck *me* the very first minute after you told me what the jig-saw things on that bracelet meant! As soon as I heard the word 'Amoy' the idea jumped right into my mind. About two months ago I heard a most wonderful address by a Dr. Atwater, a medical missionary from China, whose headquarters are at the hospital in *Amoy*. And you can easily see that I thought of him at once, when—"

"By Jove!" thundered the captain, striking his knee with his fist, "what a jolly goose I've been not to have thought of the *missions* there at once!"

"I should say you were!" commented Miss Minerva, caustically. "You and the major together!"

"Well, you see I've never come in contact with them much—" began the captain, apologetically.

"Never mind that now," went on Miss Minerva. "I thought of Dr. Atwater right away. He's been there many years, and knows something about most every one in the region, I guess. Anyhow, I decided that I'd get his address (he's in this country on a year's furlough) and write to him about this queer case. And I did. And he has answered me—"

"And were you right?" they all interrupted.

"I was *so* right," she announced triumphantly, "that I've asked him to come and tell this story (which he has only outlined in his letter) in full to Miss Benedict. And I want you all to be there to hear it. And what's more, I'm not going to tell you another word about it till you hear it from him, so it's no use to tease for hints! Go right in and ask Miss Benedict when she can arrange for this interview —the sooner, the better!"

It was not an easy matter to persuade Miss Benedict to grant Aunt Minerva's request. She was shy and timid about receiving strangers, and her affection of the eyes, as well as her curious manner of living, made it hard for her to do so. She had to acknowledge that it would be even harder to see them elsewhere. Nor could she believe that the affair really concerned *her*, except very indirectly—through Cecily, perhaps. It was for Cecily's sake alone that she at last gave a reluctant consent, assigning the following Wednesday afternoon as the appointed time. And the intervening two days was spent by them all in a restless fever of

expectation—all, at least, except Aunt Minerva!

On Wednesday afternoon, Dr. Atwater arrived at the apartment and was taken in charge at once by Miss Minerva, who guarded him like a dragon lest a hint of the important secret should slip out before the appointed time. He was a tall, angular man with a gray, Vandyke beard, and his face was grave in repose. But he talked brightly and interestingly and had the jolliest laugh in the world. The girls thought him very unlike their preconceived notions of a missionary. He and the captain fraternized at once, exchanging tales of the Far East to which Janet and Marcia listened in absorbed wonder.

But at last Aunt Minerva was ready, and the "procession" (as the captain insisted on calling it) filed into the street and proceeded to the gate of "Benedict's Folly." So unusual was the sight of the little crowd waiting to be admitted, where no admittance had been granted in so many years, that every passer-by stared at them open-mouthed.

Miss Benedict opened the gate, bonneted and veiled as usual, and Marcia made the introductions as best she could, to which Miss Benedict's replies were murmured so low that no one could hear them. Then she led the way to the house and into the darkened parlor, where they all sat down, with a sensation of heavy constraint. After that, Cecily came in and was presented to Dr. Atwater. He started slightly when he saw her, and looked into her face long and scrutinizingly in the dim light.

When Miss Benedict had removed her bonnet and veil Aunt Minerva broke the silence:

"Miss Benedict, I have brought Dr. Atwater here because I have discovered that he has something to tell you—something that will be of intense interest to you. I know this may seem incredible, but I can only beg that you will do us the favor to listen."

Miss Benedict inclined her head without speaking, and Aunt Minerva continued:

"You have heard, I believe, about the curious incident of the bracelets, but I do not know whether you have heard about the translation of the strange characters on them."

Miss Benedict murmured that she had not, and Miss Minerva explained it as

briefly as she could. Then she went on:

"Dr. Atwater, here, is a medical missionary from Amoy, and I have found that he not only knew the owner of the bracelets, but has some personal recollections about them that we think will concern you. Will you listen to Dr. Atwater, if you please?"

Miss Benedict again bowed in assent, and Dr. Atwater began in an easy, conversational tone:

"Miss Brett has remarked correctly that I knew the owner of the bracelets, and all about the characters on them, and a good deal of the story connected with them. By sheer chance, or rather, perhaps, I ought to say by very good reasoning, she has hit on about the only person living now who does know anything about them! Here's the story:

"A good many years ago in Amoy—I was quite a *young* doctor then—I was thrown in with a clever young fellow who had recently landed there, having come on a sailing-ship from America. He seemed rather at loose ends, so to speak,—didn't know the language, didn't have any money, didn't know what to do with himself, didn't have any occupation, and spent most of his time wandering aimlessly about the town.

"He was a fine, upstanding, straightforward chap (he said his name was Archibald Ferris), but he evidently had something on his mind, for he was gloomy and depressed. It began to worry me for fear he'd drift into trouble if he kept on that way. So I tried to get him interested in my own work, and invited him to go around with me on some of my long tours. We didn't have any hospital then, and I had to go about from town to town doing my medical work as I went. He came with me very gladly, and was of a good deal of assistance, and we grew to be firm friends. But I realized there was something he was pining for, and after a long while he confessed to me what it was.

"He wanted a *violin*! He adored music, played well, but had lost or parted from his instrument in some way. (He didn't explain that, just then.) Well, a missionary's salary isn't munificent, so I couldn't very well grant his wish out of my own pocket, much as I wanted to. The best I could do was to get him a position in a Chinese tea-exporting house in Amoy, where he could earn the money himself. It was better for him to be regularly occupied, anyway.

"After a few months he had saved a sufficient sum, and sent off to Shanghai for his coveted treasure—he couldn't wait to get it over from America! After it came he was actually happy—for a while. He *was* a marvelous musician for his age,

I'll admit, and he could hold us spellbound an entire evening at a time with his bow. The natives adored him, and gave him the name 'Chok-gàk ê lâng' or 'maker of melodies.'

"Well, he had the musical temperament, and after his violin came he couldn't stay long in the tea-house, but got to going about with me again on my tours—always with his precious violin. He was really of the greatest assistance, because his music was almost as good as an anæsthetic in many instances—could calm the most excitable fever-case I ever came across.

"It was on one of these tours that he met young Miss Cecily Marlowe at the English mission in Sio-khé—"

At this point every one gave a little start of surprise and looked toward Cecily, who alone sat gazing, wide-eyed and absorbed, at Dr. Atwater.

"She was a wonderfully beautiful girl," he continued, "with a color like English roses in her cheeks. The Chinese called her 'Flower-maiden,' or 'Hor-lú.' She had but recently come to the mission from her home in England. Well, it was a case of love at first sight on both sides! And before many more months Ferris announced to me that he was going back into the position at the tea-house and there earn enough money to be able to marry her. But he also told me that Miss Marlowe, while very much in love with him, was still very devoted to her work there and very earnest about the cause for which she had left her home and come so far to serve. She insisted that, if they married, she must still be allowed to continue in the missionary work. To this he was perfectly willing to assent.

"So they were married in the English mission at Amoy, and on the wedding-day he gave her this pair of bracelets which he had had made after his own design. They were not an expensive gift, but he was poor, in worldly goods, and it was the best he could afford. After the honeymoon they built a little home on the island of Ko-longsu, right near the city of Amoy. He went on with his work in the tea-house, and she with her teaching in the mission-school on the island.

"It seemed an ideal arrangement, and they were ideally happy for a number of years. He never advanced very far in the tea-house, for he loved his music too well and he had no head for business. But he made enough to keep them comfortably, and more they did not want.

"Then about 1898, I think, came a change. To their great joy a little daughter was born to them. She was a beautiful baby, and for over a year there was no happier home in all China. But one day, when the baby was about a year and a half old, Ferris came to me and told me he was in trouble and wanted my advice.

"He began by telling me that the baby seemed to be drooping and that he himself was not feeling quite up to the mark. I looked them both over and found he was right. The climate was too much for them. It is for many foreigners sooner or later. I told him they ought to go home for a year or so and recuperate. He said he couldn't—didn't have any home to go to, in fact. Had long ago quarreled violently with his people, and would never go back to them. Moreover, he had his wife and baby to consider. He couldn't afford to give up and lose his position. If he did, what were they to do?

"I suggested that they go to his wife's people in England. He said there was difficulty in that direction, too. She had only a married brother and his wife, and they had not approved of her giving up all her prospects to come to China as a missionary. They heard from them only at long intervals, though recently, to be sure, they had offered to take care of the little girl if the time came that she needed change of air.

"Ferris told me that he and his wife naturally could not bear to consider such a thing, but on the other hand, the baby's welfare must be their first consideration. What should I advise them to do?

"I considered the matter carefully, and at last told him he'd better accept the offer to care for the baby for a year or so. She, at least, would be provided for, and he and his wife could then take their chances without imperiling her future. To follow this advice nearly broke their hearts, but the next missionaries who went back to England on furlough took the baby with them, and gave her into the care of the brother and his wife. It is needless to say that Cecily Ferris is the same whom we know as Cecily Marlowe. I would recognize her anywhere, for she is the image of her mother." And he looked toward the girl sitting in the dim light, held by the wonder of his story. The silence that ensued was broken first by her.

"Tell me, if you please," she half whispered, "did my father ever—ever play to me on his violin? Do you know what he played?"

"Why, I'm sure he did," smiled Dr. Atwater. "I used to stop at his house early in the evening sometimes, and I generally found him fiddling away by the side of your cradle. Mostly it was an air he called 'Träumerei,' or something like that. I'm not very good at remembering musical names."

"I knew it!—I *knew* I'd heard it somewhere, over and over again, when I was little!" she cried. "And yet I never could remember anything else about it!"

"He used to say it was his favorite," remarked Dr. Atwater.

Suddenly Miss Benedict spoke, for the first time during the recital. There was a tremble of suppressed excitement in her voice.

"Is that all the story?"

"Oh, no!" resumed Dr. Atwater. "There's not much more to tell, but I'm sorry to say, the rest is not very cheerful. After the baby's departure Ferris's health failed perceptibly. He finally gave up his position, but Mrs. Ferris kept on with her work and nursed him as well. But the strain of all this began to tell on her, and at last, in 1900, I advised her to take a holiday, and go north to Tientsin with her husband to recuperate. We missionaries raised enough among ourselves to finance this little vacation for them. Before he went, however, Ferris had a long talk with me one day, and confided to me a few things about himself and his past. To begin with, he said that Archibald Ferris was not his right name. He had assumed it at a certain period of his life because he had broken away from his family, and did not deem it best that what remained of that family should ever know he existed. They probably thought him dead—in fact he was sure that they did. And his return to existence, so far as they were concerned, would simply complicate family affairs. Only his wife knew who these relatives were. He had recently, however, sent word to his wife's brother that should anything ever happen by which Cecily would be left alone, she should be sent to America and placed in the care of this family, whose name he had given them under the seal of secrecy, if the brother and his wife were unable or unwilling to provide for her. He also sent one of the bracelets to England to be given to his little daughter, requesting that she be always allowed to keep it. The mother always wore the other one.

"He was very much depressed that day, and told me, besides, that his career had been wrecked in the beginning—that he had dreamed of being a great violinist, but had been thwarted in strange ways. However, he declared that his life in China had been happy beyond words, except for the unhappy present. Then he bade me good-by, as he was starting for Tientsin the next day."

Dr. Atwater stopped abruptly and swallowed hard, as if what he had to tell next came with an effort. He went on presently. "It was at the time of the Boxer uprising. Ferris and his wife had almost reached Tientsin when the trouble broke out there, and—they were never seen alive again!" He stopped, and there was a tense silence in the room.

At last he continued: "I have always blamed myself for having been the unwitting cause of their death. I had advised them to go to Tientsin, though of

course I could not foresee the dark days that were about to come. I wish with all my soul that I had not done so, that I had, perhaps, sent them somewhere else, but it is irrevocable now. There is no use dwelling on the past.

"Doubtless that is how the other bracelet came to be cast loose on the Oriental world. Probably it was stolen at the time, and passed from hand to hand till it came into the possession of Captain Brett. It is a strange coincidence that brought it back at last to its mate!

"It became my sad duty to notify Mr. Marlowe of the tragedy. In his reply—a frank, manly letter—he expressed his regret that a difference of opinion had ever interrupted the cordiality of his relations with his sister and her husband, and said that, as he and his wife already loved little Cecily devotedly, they would adopt her as their own. They were reluctant to have her childhood shadowed by her parents' sorrowful story, and so believed it best that she should never know that she was not indeed their daughter, Cecily Marlowe.

"Well, that is the story of the man who called himself Archibald Ferris," said Dr. Atwater. He looked about him inquiringly and added: "I hope that my telling it has given all the enlightenment that was expected?"

During his long recital every one had sat with eyes fastened upon him, and no one of his audience had a thought for the other. Now that it was over they each drew a long breath and settled back in their chairs. And then, for the first time, they noticed the curious conduct of Miss Benedict.

She was sitting far forward in her chair, her big gray eyes almost starting from her head, her hands clutching the arms of the chair till the blue veins stood out. On her forehead were great beads of perspiration, and she drew her breath in little gasps. Quite unconscious of their united gaze, she leaned forward and touched Dr. Atwater's arm with an imploring hand.

"Was there—was there no way of—of ascertaining his *real* name?" she stammered.

Dr. Atwater looked at her with compassion in his kindly eyes. "I know of but one thing that might have served as an identification," he conceded. "When I was giving him the medical examination, I noticed on his left upper arm two small initials surrounded by a tiny row of dots. They were just such a mark as small boys often tattoo themselves with in indelible ink, and of course, they are there for life. Doubtless he had so decorated himself with his initials in his boyhood days—"

"Oh, what *were* the initials?" interrupted Miss Benedict in a stifled voice.

"They were 'S. B.,'" replied Dr. Atwater.

With a little choking cry, Miss Benedict buried her face in her hands.

"Oh, it can't—it *can't* be *possible*!" they heard her murmur. Then in an instant she had collected herself and gazed about at them all, amazement and incredulity in her lovely eyes.

"My friends," she spoke very quietly, "I cannot understand what this means. My brother's name was Sydney Benedict, and I remember when, as a boy, he had tattooed those initials on his left arm, as Dr. Atwater has described them. And he performed wonderfully on the violin, and dreamed only of being a great artist some day. He longed to go abroad and study, but my father would not hear of it. He wished his only son to enter his business and continue it after him. They were both high-tempered and had many terrible quarrels about it. I—my sister and I—sided with my father. At last my father threatened to disinherit Sydney if he did not accede to his wishes. And on the following morning—it was his twenty-first birthday—we found only a note pinned to his pillow, saying he had gone away forever. He had taken with him only his violin.

"But," and here she hesitated, gazing around inquiringly on the company, "I cannot understand what follows. Two weeks later we received word from a steamer that had just arrived in Europe from New York, that a young man named Sydney Benedict had fallen or jumped overboard one night when they were two days out, and his loss was not discovered till next day. Only his violin remained in the cabin. He was certainly lost at sea. I cannot understand—" She suddenly pressed both hands to her head as if it pained her.

"Wait a moment!" cried Dr. Atwater. "I believe I can explain that. I should have told it before, but I quite forgot; there was so much to tell. He did once confide to me (apropos of some little adventure we had had together on one of my trips, when I almost lost my life) that he too had once had the narrowest kind of escape from death. He said that on leaving America he had taken a steamer for Europe, hoping to find the means to study there. They hadn't passed Sandy Hook, however, before he became violently seasick, and lay in his berth like a log for twenty-four hours. On the second night it became so stiflingly hot in his cabin that he felt he must get to the deck for air or die.

"So he struggled out and up the companionway, somehow, meeting no one, for it was very late. On the deck he crawled in behind a life-boat, and lay in a rather unprotected outer portion of the deck, so sick that he scarcely knew where he

was or how dangerous was the spot he had chosen. All of a sudden the vessel gave an unusually heavy lurch, and before he could clutch for any hold he was catapulted into the sea.

"Curiously enough, the sudden ducking dispelled his horrible sickness, and when he came to the surface he found himself striking out to swim. Useless to shout for help from the great steamer, which had already passed a boat's length beyond him. But he was a strong swimmer, the night was warm, and he resolved not to give up till he *had* to.

"All night, till dawn, he managed to keep on the surface, swimming and floating. And at daylight a sailing-vessel picked him up, numb and weary, and ready to go to the bottom at the next stroke. The ship on which he found himself was bound for China, and of course he had to 'tag along,' working his passage as a common sailor in return for his keep. It was then, I suspect, that he made up his mind to change his name. I think, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Archibald Ferris and Sydney Benedict are one and the same person!"

At this Aunt Minerva, who hadn't spoken a word since her speech of introduction, put on her glasses and swept the assembly with a triumphant gaze. The girls and Captain Brett were so absorbed that they could not utter a syllable, and Miss Benedict sat back in her chair in a stunned silence.

Only Cecily seemed unconscious enough of the strain to do the natural thing. She rose from her chair and went over to Miss Benedict, dropping down on her knees beside her, and snuggling her head on the older woman's shoulder with a confiding movement.

"I'm Cecily *Benedict* now," she said simply, "and I—I love you—Aunt Alixe! I'm glad there *was* a good reason why I was sent over here to you!"

Miss Benedict looked down at the golden head, and the terrible tension in her face relaxed.

"Sydney's child!—my little Cecily!" they heard her murmur.

But they heard no more, for at this point, Aunt Minerva arose and majestically motioned the entire company out of the room!

CHAPTER XXI

SIX MONTHS LATER

JANET DEAR:

I know you think I'm a wretch not to have written in so long! but honestly, things have been happening so fast that I don't have time to sit down and write you about one event before a brand-new one has taken place.

I've missed you horribly ever since you went back to Northam. It was a shame that you had to leave just after the grand clear-up of our mystery, for you've been missing some of the most wonderful parts—all the lovely things that have happened since.

I think I've already written you about some of the changes that have taken place in "Benedict's Folly." It's the most remarkable thing—the way Aunt Minerva has taken that place—Miss Benedict and all—completely under her wing! Miss Benedict (who, by the way, wants us both to call her Miss Alixe) seemed completely helpless for a while after the "great day," and turned to Aunt Minerva for pretty nearly everything,—principally advice! You can imagine how Aunt Minerva is enjoying herself! She just loves nothing better than managing people's affairs for them—if they want her to!

In the first place, Aunt Minerva advised her to get the house into livable condition, and find suitable servants, and get some modern clothes. And as poor Miss Alixe acted like a lost kitten in going about it, Aunt Minerva just took hold and managed the whole thing. And you'd never recognize our dilapidated old house of mystery now, it's so changed and so lovely. Miss Alixe has decided that now there is no further reason for her not using their large fortune, and everything must be the nicest possible—for Cecily's sake.

And Cecily!—what a darling she is! Of course we are simply inseparable. She has even begun to go to the high school with me, because Miss Alixe *and* Aunt Minerva have decided that it will be better for her than studying with a private tutor. She is the happiest thing I ever saw, and says she feels as if she were living in a fairy-story all the time! We are just longing for the Easter vacation to come, and your visit. Then we three can be together again in the good old way. Won't it be glorious?

But this is all aside from the other two big pieces of news I wanted to tell you. Almost from the beginning Aunt Minerva has been urging Miss Alixe to go to a first-class oculist and have her eyes examined. And at last, a few weeks ago, they went together, and what do you suppose is the result? He said that almost without a doubt her sight can be restored, with proper treatment and possibly a slight operation later. She began the treatment at once, and already her sight is much improved. She can stand a stronger light, and has those awful headaches less frequently. You see, it was years since she had had any advice about them, and they've made great strides in treatment of the eyes since then. They can almost do the impossible. We are all so happy about it!

And now for the last and biggest piece of news! Perhaps you are wondering what has become of Miss Alixe's mysterious and invisible older sister, and it is about her that I'm going to tell you. You will never in the world be able to guess what has happened.

Aunt Minerva insisted (again Aunt Minerva) that Miss Alixe must have one of the big alienists (that's what they call specialists in mental diseases, I've learned) see Miss Cornelia, the sister, and perhaps he could tell whether anything could be done for *her*. It took a long time to persuade Miss Alixe that there was any use in doing this, but at last she consented. I think she has always been very sensitive about that poor sister's losing her mind, and she never wanted any one to see her. Even after she had a number of servants in the house, she wouldn't let any one wait on Miss Cornelia but herself.

Well, the great doctor came and was there for hours and asked a terrific lot of questions—all about everything that had happened for years and years. He learned one thing that interested him more than anything else, he said. Do you remember the day last summer when we were there, sitting in the garden, and I played on my violin—how Miss Alixe came down in a great hurry and asked me to stop because it disturbed her sister? You may remember, too, that I was playing "Träumerei"—had played it twice? Well, she told the doctor that when Miss Cornelia heard that, she acted very much excited, cried, and twisted her hands and tried to speak. (She hasn't spoken an intelligible word since she had the "stroke.") Miss Alixe also told him how their favorite brother had played so much on the violin, particularly that same air.

He said this was a most hopeful sign—it indicated that conditions were now

such that there was a possibility of her reason and memory and even speech being restored, provided they could touch just the right note of association.

After he had thought the matter over a long time he decided to try an experiment. And he selected me—little, insignificant *me*—to help! He had me come in and bring my violin and sit in the room with Miss Cornelia, a little behind her, so she would not notice me particularly. Then he had Miss Alixe and Cecily also sitting there in plain sight of her, just quietly sewing or reading and not paying any particular attention to any one. He and Aunt Minerva stayed outside, watching through the partly opened door.

It was the first time I had ever seen Miss Cornelia (except that time when the shutter blew open), and, Janet, she is *magnificent* looking—entirely different from what I had imagined! She is large and stately and imposing, with white hair like Miss Alixe's, piled under a lace cap, and great black eyes. She just sat there quietly knitting, and took no notice of any one. You would not have known that there was anything the matter with her, except that her face was almost expressionless—as if she wasn't thinking of anything at all. I can't describe it any other way.

Well, there we sat, and at a given signal from the doctor outside the door I was to begin—very, very quietly and softly—to play the "Träumerei." You can just imagine how nervous I was—so much depended on my doing just the right thing! My hands shook, and my knees shook, and my heart thumped, and I thought I should never be able even to hold the bow. It seemed an age before the doctor raised his hand as a signal, but when he did I tucked the violin under my chin and fairly prayed that I shouldn't make a failure of my part, anyway!

And I played the "Träumerei" through, the very best I could—and nothing happened. Miss Cornelia went right on knitting and never noticed it at all. Then the doctor made another signal, and I began it again. This time she laid down her knitting, closed her eyes, and leaned her head against the back of the chair. And when I'd finished for the second time, what *do* you suppose happened?

She opened her eyes, looked over at Miss Alixe, and *spoke*, for the first time in nearly thirty years! And this is what she said, as simply and quietly as though all those thirty years had never elapsed:

"Sydney must have come in again; I hear him practising!"

"Sydney must have come in again; I hear him practising!"

Miss Alixe was so startled she looked ready to faint away. But she managed to say, "No, Cornelia, but I'll tell you all about it." Then the doctor in great excitement beckoned us all to come out of the room quickly and leave her alone with Miss Alixe. So we vanished, and the two were there together a long, long time. At last Miss Alixe sent for Cecily, and she was gone a long time, too.

When it was all over, the doctor said it was the most successful thing that had ever happened in all his experience. Miss Cornelia is completely restored to memory and speech. And after the first shock of learning all that had been blank to her for these past years, she rallied well, and is now resting and recuperating under the care of Miss Alixe and a trained nurse. She still finds it very hard to realize all the changes that have happened in those thirty years, and she grieves a great deal over the death of her brother, which seems very recent and terrible to her. But she is simply devoted to Cecily, and Cecily is growing almost as fond of *her* as she is of Miss Alixe. Next summer the whole family is going with us to spend two months in Northam (Aunt Minerva's[Pg 257]
[Pg 258]
[Pg 259] doings again!) because it is so lovely and restful there. And won't we have a wonderful summer together, Janet dear? I can hardly wait for the time to come!

Well, that is all the news I have to tell, and I guess you'll agree with me that it certainly is enough—and very satisfying!

One thing amuses me to pieces, Janet, every time I think of it. Do you remember how, when you first came to visit us last summer, I was explaining to you all I'd discovered about "Benedict's Folly" and flattering myself with the idea that I, or, rather, you and I, would work out the puzzle and solve the mystery—all by ourselves?

What little geese we were! A lot we *did* toward unraveling any of that tangle! Even father and Major Goodrich were way off the track. It took Aunt Minerva (the darling!) to walk right in and clear the whole thing up! Here's "Hurrah!" then, for Aunt Minerva! She certainly had the laugh on *us*!

However, I sometimes console myself with the thought that it was we (you and I) who first took an interest in that shuttered old house in the garden. If we hadn't—who knows?—we would probably never have met Cecily, and

things would be just the same as ever there, and Miss Alixe wouldn't have —

But what's the use of going into all that! The "girl next door" is our own dearest friend now, and everything is all right.

I just looked out of the window and saw a light in Cecily's room. She's also writing to you to-night. We promised each other we both would. I'm growing sleepy now, so good-night and heaps of love.

February 28, 1913.

P. S. Did I tell you this before, I wonder? Cecily has both the bracelets now. Aunt Minerva, of course insisted that she should. She has put them safely away and will never part with them again. But we take them out and look at them sometimes and think of all the strange and awful adventures they've been through and the curious chance that brought them together again.

Always, after we've looked at them, Cecily asks me to play the "Träumerei." And while I play, she sits very quietly and says nothing, and her eyes have a far-away look. But I know what she is thinking about!

THE END

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