

Chase Josephine

Patsy Carroll Under Southern Skies



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CHAPTER I

TIME TO GO WAYFARING AGAIN

“Oh, dear!” loudly sighed Patsy Carroll.

The regretful exclamation was accompanied by the energetic banging of Patsy’s French grammar upon the table.

“Stay there, tiresome old thing!” she emphasized. “I’ve had enough of you for one evening.”

“What’s the matter, Patsy?”

Beatrice Forbes raised mildly inquiring eyes from the theme she was industriously engaged in writing.

“Lots of things. I hate French verbs. The crazy old irregular ones most of all. They start out one thing and by the time you get to the future tense they’re something entirely different.”

“Is that all?” smiled Beatrice. “You ought to be used to them by this time.”

“That’s only one of my troubles,” frowned Patsy. “There are others a great deal worse. One of them is this Easter vacation business. I thought we’d surely have three weeks. It’s always been so at Yardley until this year. Two weeks is no vacation worth mentioning.”

“Well, that’s plenty of time to go home in and stay at home and see the folks for a while, isn’t it?” asked Beatrice.

“But we didn’t intend going *home*,” protested Patsy.

“Didn’t intend going home?” repeated Beatrice wonderingly. “*What* are you talking about, Patsy Carroll? I certainly expect to go home for Easter.”

“You only think you do,” Patsy assured, her troubled face relaxing into a mischievous grin. “Maybe you will, though. I don’t know. It depends upon what kind of scheme my gigantic brain can think up.

“It’s like this, Bee,” she continued, noting her friend’s expression of mystification. “Father and I made a peach of a plan. Excuse my slang, but ‘peach of a plan’ just expresses it. Well, when I was at home over Christmas, Father promised me that the Wayfarers should join him and Aunt Martha at Palm Beach for the Easter vacation. He bought some land down in Florida last fall. Orange groves and all that, you know. This land isn’t so very far from Palm Beach. He was going down there right after Christmas, but a lot of business prevented him from going. He’s down there now, though, and – ”

“You’ve been keeping all this a dead secret from your little chums,” finished Beatrice with pretended reproach.

“Of course I have,” calmly asserted Patsy. “That was to be part of the fun. I meant to spring a fine surprise on you girls. Your mother knows all about it. So does Mrs. Perry. I went around and asked them if you and Mab and Nellie could go while I was at home during the Christmas holidays. Aunt Martha liked my plan, too. Now we’ll have to give it up and go somewhere nearer home. We’d hardly get settled at Palm Beach when we’d have to come right home again. One more week’s vacation would make a lot of difference. And we can’t have it! It’s simply too mean for anything!”

“It would be wonderful to go to Palm Beach,” mused Beatrice. “It would be to me, anyway. You know I’ve never traveled as you have, Patsy. Going to the Adirondacks last summer was my first real trip away from home. Going to Florida would seem like going to fairy land.”

Readers of “Patsy Carroll at Wilderness Lodge,” are already well acquainted, not only with Patsy Carroll and Beatrice Forbes, but also with their chums, Mabel and Eleanor Perry. In this story

was narrated the adventures of the four young girls, who, chaperoned by Patsy's stately aunt, Miss Martha Carroll, spent a summer together in the Adirondacks.

Wilderness Lodge, the luxurious "camp" leased by Mr. Carroll for the summer, had formerly belonged to an eccentric old man, Ebenezer Wellington. Having died intestate the previous spring, his property and money had passed into the hands of Rupert Grandin, his worthless nephew, leaving his foster-daughter, Cecil Vane, penniless.

Hardly were the Wayfarers, as the four girls had named themselves, established at the Lodge when its owner decided, for reasons of his own, to oust them from his property. A chance meeting between Beatrice and Cecil Vane revealed the knowledge that the latter had been defrauded of her rights and was firm in the belief that her late uncle had made a will in her favor, which was tucked away in some corner of the Lodge.

The long-continued hunt for the missing will and the strange circumstances which attended the finding of it furnished the Wayfarers with a new kind of excitement, quite apart from other memorable incidents and adventures which crowded the summer.

In the end, Cecil came into her own, and the Wayfarers returned to Morton, their home town, to make ready to enter Yardley, a preparatory school, in which Mabel, Eleanor and Patsy were to put in another year of study before entering college.

When Beatrice Forbes had joined the chums on the eventful vacation in the mountains, she had fully expected on her return to Morton to become a teacher in one of the grade schools. Fortune, however, had smiled kindly on her. Her great-aunt, whom her mother had visited that summer for the first time, had exhibited a lively interest in the great-niece whom she had never seen.

Learning from Mrs. Forbes, Beatrice's longing ambition to obtain a college education, she had privately decided to accompany Beatrice's mother to the latter's home when her visit was ended, and thus view her ambitious young relative at close range.

This she had done. She had found Beatrice quite up to her expectations. She had also met Patsy Carroll and promptly fallen into the toils of that most fascinating young person. Patsy had privately advanced Beatrice's cause to so great an extent that it was not long until Beatrice was making joyful preparations to accompany Mabel, Eleanor and Patsy to Yardley, as a result of her aunt's generosity.

So it was that the congenial quartette of Wayfarers had settled down together at Yardley for a year of conscientious study. It now lacked but ten days until the beginning of the Easter vacation and, as usual, energetic Patsy was deeply concerned in the problem of how to make the best of only two weeks' recreation when she had fondly looked forward to three.

"It wouldn't do us a bit of good to ask for an extra week," mourned Patsy. "Three girls I know have tried it and been snubbed for their pains. What we must do is to get together and plan some sort of outing that won't take us so far away from here. Of course we can't be sure of anything unless Aunt Martha approves. She'll be disappointed about not going to Palm Beach. She just loves to travel around with the Wayfarers, only she won't say so right out. Come on, Bee. Let's go and see the girls. Now that the great secret has all flattened out, like a punctured tire on my good old car, I might as well tell Mab and Nellie the sad tale."

"You go, Patsy. I must finish this theme." Beatrice cast a guilty glance at the half-finished work on the table. "I must hand it in at first recitation to-morrow and it's a long way from being finished."

"Oh, bother your theme! You can finish it later. It's only eight o'clock. We'll stay just a few minutes."

"Hello, Perry children!" greeted Patsy, when five minutes afterward she and Beatrice broke in upon their chums, who roomed on the floor above Patsy and Beatrice.

"Hello, yourself," amiably responded Mabel, as she ushered them into the room. "Of course you can't read or you would have seen the 'Busy' sign on the door."

"Pleasure before business," retorted Patsy. "Kindly ask us to sit down, but not on your bed. I want a chair with a back to it. It's strictly necessary to my comfort."

“Help yourself.”

This from Eleanor who had laid aside her book and come forward.

“What’s on your mind, Patsy?” asked Mabel curiously. “Something’s happened. I can tell that by the way you look.”

“I have a heavy load on my mind,” declared Patsy with deep impressiveness.

Dramatically striking her forehead, she cried, “Ouch! That hurt!” giggled and dropped down into a nearby chair.

“You almost knocked it off,” chuckled Beatrice, seating herself on the edge of Mabel’s bed. “The load, I mean.”

“I did not. I almost knocked my forehead off. The load is still there. Now to get rid of it.”

Whereupon Patsy plunged into the subject of the great secret.

“And Mother said we could go?” asked Eleanor eagerly when Patsy had finished speaking.

“Certainly, but the powers that be, here at Yardley, say you can’t,” reminded Patsy. “Palm Beach is not for us this Easter. I’m so disgusted over this vacation business!”

“It’s a shame!” exclaimed Mabel. “I don’t want to go any place else. Why can’t we go there, anyway? It would take us two or three days to go and the same length of time to come back. We’d have a week there. That would be better than nothing.”

“I suppose it would,” concurred Patsy rather reluctantly. “It’s only that I hate being torn up by the roots and hustled back here just the very minute I’m getting used to things at the Beach. There is so much to see there. Besides, I’m simply crazy to go to the Everglades. Father promised that he’d hire a real Indian guide, to take us there on an expedition.”

“Let’s write to our people and tell them to write to the registrar, asking if we can’t have that extra week,” proposed Eleanor eagerly. “If your Aunt Martha, our mother and Bee’s mother would all write to her, it might do some good.”

“We can try it. I doubt whether it will help much,” Patsy said gloomily. “Miss Osgood is so awfully strict, you know. It’s our only chance and a slim one. I’m going straight to my room and write to Aunt Martha. Bee can write to her mother as soon as she finishes a theme she’s toiling over. You’d better write to-night, too. The sooner we find out the best or the worst, the sooner we’ll know what to do about Easter. If we can only have two weeks, Aunt Martha may want to do the Beach anyway. If she doesn’t – well, we’ll have to think up some place nearer Yardley to go to. I’m determined to have some kind of trip, if it’s only to Old Point Comfort. The Wayfarers have been cooped up all winter. It’s time they went wayfaring again.”

CHAPTER II

A HARD-HEARTED REGISTRAR

“If I were a registrar, I’d not be so horrid as Miss Osgood,” wrathfully exclaimed Patsy Carroll.

Four days had passed since the Wayfarers had despatched their letters to their home allies. The quartette were emerging from Yardley Hall as Patsy flung forth her disgruntled opinion of Miss Osgood.

They had been summoned to the registrar’s office after classes that afternoon, there to be stiffly informed by Miss Osgood that she saw no convincing reason for granting them the privilege of an extra week’s vacation.

“You wish this extra week merely on account of a pleasure trip you have planned,” she had coldly pointed out. “I have been besieged by a dozen others with similar requests, none of which I have granted. I have replied to the letters which I have received from Miss Carroll, Mrs. Forbes and Mrs. Perry, stating that it is impossible to make any exception in favor of you girls. I sent for you to come here merely to impress upon you that I shall expect you to return to Yardley, from your Easter vacation, *on time*. Any delay on your part will constitute a direct defiance of my wishes. Kindly remember this and govern yourselves accordingly.”

Such was the chilly ultimatum that had aroused Patsy’s ire.

“It’s too mean for anything,” she sputtered, as the four started across the campus. “Aunt Martha says in the letter I received from her this morning that unless we can have the extra week’s vacation it’s not worth while making the trip to Palm Beach. We can’t have it, so that settles our grand Florida expedition. If we could go down there in summer it wouldn’t matter so much about losing this trip. But we can’t. It’s too hot down there in summer time for comfort. We’ll never have a chance to go there until we are graduated from college. We’ll be old ladies then and have to go around in wheel chairs,” she ended ruefully.

“Oh, that’s only four years off. We may still be able to totter about with canes,” giggled Eleanor. “Of course, we’ll have snow-white hair and wrinkles, but then, never mind. We can sit and do embroidery or tatting and talk of the happy past when we were young and – ”

“Stop making fun of me, Nellie,” ordered Patsy severely. Nevertheless she echoed Eleanor’s giggle.

“Let’s hustle for the dormitory,” suggested practical Beatrice. “This wind is altogether too frisky to suit me. I’ve had to hang onto my hat every second since we left the Hall.”

“It’s blowing harder every minute,” panted Mabel, as a fresh gust swept whistling across the campus, caught the four girls and roughly endeavored to jerk them off their feet.

“It’s going to snow, I guess. It’s too cold for rain,” remarked Patsy, squinting up at the sky. “Easter comes awfully early this year, doesn’t it? I can’t remember when it’s ever before been in March. That’s another reason why it would be fine to spend it at Palm Beach. The weather there would be perfect.”

“Oh, well, what’s the use in thinking about it,” said Eleanor. “We might as well make the best of things and plan something else.”

“I’m going to write to Auntie the minute I get to my room,” announced Patsy, “and ask her where she thinks it would be nice for us to go for Easter. I’d like it to be near the ocean, though; Old Point Comfort, Cape May, Atlantic City, or some beach resort.”

“I hate to give up the Palm Beach plan. Still, wherever we go, well be together,” reminded Mabel. “You can’t down a strong combination like the Wayfarers.”

It being but a short walk from Yardley Hall to the large dormitory where the students of Yardley lived, the four girls were soon running up the broad stone steps, glad to reach shelter from the wind's ungentle tactics.

As a preparatory school, Yardley was famed for its excellence. It registered, however, but a limited number of pupils. These lived in one large dormitory, there being no campus houses for their accommodation.

Yardley had been at one time a select boarding school for girls. Later it had become a preparatory school to college, and had earned the reputation of being one of the best of its kind.

As the high school course which the Wayfarers had completed was not sufficiently advanced to carry them into college without additional preparation, they had, after much discussion, chosen to enter Yardley. A year of study there would fit them for entrance into any college which they might select as their Alma Mater.

The fact that Yardley occupied a somewhat isolated position of its own, the nearest town, Alden, being five miles away, did not trouble the Wayfarers. Being true Nature lovers they were never at a loss for amusement during their leisure hours. They found far greater pleasure in tramping the steep hills which rose behind Yardley than making decorous little trips to Alden in Patsy's car.

Though friendly with their classmates, the Wayfarers nevertheless hung together loyally. They were, as Patsy often declared, "a close corporation" and quite sufficient unto themselves.

As the little band entered the dormitory that blustering afternoon, they were feeling keenly the disappointment so recently meted out to them. It was decidedly hard to put away the rosy visions of Palm Beach that each girl had conjured up in her own mind.

"Come on up to our room, girls, and we'll make chocolate," proposed Patsy. "It will probably take away our appetites for dinner, but who cares? I don't believe I'd have much appetite, anyhow. I'm all upset about this vacation business."

Seated about the writing table which Patsy had cleared for the occasion, the Wayfarers were presently sipping hot chocolate and devouring sweet crackers to the accompaniment of a mournful discussion of the situation.

As a result none of them had any enthusiasm for either dinner or study that evening. Dinner over they gathered once more in Patsy's room, still too full of their recent disappointment to banish it from conversation.

"We can't make a single plan until we know what Aunt Martha wants to do," asserted Patsy with a sigh. "Oh, I forgot to write to her before dinner! I must do it now. Excuse me, Perry children. Bee will amuse you. Bee, entertain the young ladies. I'm going to be busy for a little while."

"We must go," declared Eleanor, rising. "It's half-past eight. I really ought to study a little bit. Mab, you've a whole page in Spanish to translate. You'd better come along."

"All right. Just listen to the wind!" Mabel held up her hand. "How it shrieks and whistles and wails! The banshees are out, sailing around in the air to-night, I imagine."

"I'm glad we're not out, sailing around the campus," commented Beatrice. "We'd certainly sail. We couldn't keep our feet on the ground. We'd be blown about like leaves."

"I think I'd like to go out and fight with the wind," announced valiant Patsy. "As soon as I write my letter I'm going to take it out to the mail box."

"Good-bye, then. I may never see you again," laughed Eleanor, her hand on the door. "You'll be blown into the next county if you venture out to-night."

"Then I'll turn around and let the wind blow me back again," retorted Patsy, undismayed by Eleanor's warning.

The two Perrys having bade their chums good night and departed for their own room, Patsy settled down to the writing of her letter. Though her fountain pen fled over the paper at rapid speed, it was half-past nine when she committed the product of her industry to an envelope.

“There!” she said, as she finished writing the address and affixed a stamp. “I’m going to put on my fur coat and go out to the mail box with this.”

“Why don’t you mail it in the morning?” Beatrice advised. “I wouldn’t go out in that wind if I were you.”

“But you’re not Patsy Carroll,” laughed Patsy. “You’re ever so much nicer than she is, but not half so reckless.”

“All right,” smiled Beatrice. “Go ahead and be whisked into the next county. I’ll send a search party after you in the morning.”

“Farewell, farewell!” declaimed Patsy, as she dived into a closet for her fur coat. “I sha’n’t wear a hat. The wind can’t rip off my auburn locks no matter how hard it may try.”

Once out of the dormitory, Patsy had not gone six yards before she realized that Eleanor’s prediction was likely to be fulfilled. The gale swept her along as if a great hand were at her back, forcing her relentlessly forward.

“It’s going to be worse coming back,” she muttered, when at last she had reached the mail box and dropped her letter into it. “I’m certainly going to have a real fight with this rough old wind.”

Turning, she started defiantly toward the dormitory, forging stolidly along in the teeth of the blast.

Crossing the campus diagonally she was over half way to the dormitory when of a sudden she cried out in alarm. At the shadowed rear of the building she had glimpsed something calculated to inspire fear. Rising from the structure was a thick cloud, unmistakably smoke. As she hurried on, her heart pounding wildly, she saw that which fully confirmed her fears. A long yellow tongue of flame pierced the smoke cloud and shot high above it. The dormitory was on fire!

CHAPTER III

NO LOSS WITHOUT GAIN

The few rods that lay between Patsy and the dormitory seemed miles. Flinging open the massive front door at last, she bounded into the corridor. To her dismay, no sounds of excited voices or running feet were to be heard. She could not even smell smoke.

Stopping only long enough to peer into the big living room which was deserted of occupants, she dashed down the long corridor to the heavy double doors leading into the dining room. As she swung one of them open and darted through, a strong smell of burning wood assailed her nostrils.

Instantly she turned and fled back to the corridor. Under the stairs hung a large gong. Next second it was clanging out its harsh command to fire drill. Like every other modern institution of learning, Yardley had its fire drill in which every person in the dormitory was obliged to take part.

Patsy's next act was to dart to the telephone. Though her voice quivered with excitement, as she asked Central to turn in the fire alarm, her head was clear and her mind in good working order. She hoped her classmates would show no signs of panic.

Soon the steady tramp, tramp of feet announced that the fire drill was in progress. Down the stairs and into the main corridor filed a procession of girls, some fully dressed, others with long coats thrown on over half-fitted negligees. Though a buzz of voices filled the air, the girls lined up on each side of the corridor in orderly fashion to await further developments.

By this time the matron, Mrs. Ainslee, had gained the corridor and had promptly taken charge of the situation.

"The back of the dormitory is on fire!" were Patsy's first words to the matron. "I saw it from the campus. I had gone out to mail a letter. I rang the gong and turned in an alarm to Central. It's very serious on account of the way the wind's blowing. If the Alden Hose Company doesn't get here quick the fire will spread so fast that nothing can stop it. I think we ought to get together all the buckets we can and fight it until the fire engines get here."

"A good plan," approved Mrs. Ainslee. "Girls," she called out in a clear, resonant voice, "the rear of the dormitory is on fire. First I'm going to call the roll to be sure you are all here. Next I need twenty-four girls, eight to each floor, to go after the fire buckets. I will ask the first twelve on each side at this end of the lines to go. Stop at the second floor bath room and fill up the buckets. We may be unable to get to the kitchen faucets. As soon as the buckets are filled report here for duty. The rest of you will wait until these girls have started upstairs, then file out of the house and onto the lawn."

Turning to Patsy she said: "Stay here with me, Miss Carroll. I need you for another purpose."

With this she hurried to her office on the same floor, returning with her register. The roll called and everyone responding, she directed her attention to the bucket brigade. They were soon started in good order for the stairs. As soon as the last girl had set foot on the stairs, the two lines began to move toward the door. Following, Mrs. Ainslee watched them safely outside, then returned to where Patsy stood waiting.

"You and I will investigate the fire and see what can be done," she said briefly, and started down the corridor toward the dining room. In spite of the heavy doors the smoke had now become noticeable even in the corridor. Throwing open one of the double doors, a dense cloud of smoke poured over both women, causing them to draw back in a hurry, eyes and throats smarting.

"We – can't – go – that – way," declared the matron in a choking voice, as she swung the door shut. "We'll have to fight the fire from the outside. I'm afraid we can't do much. It seems to have gained a good deal of headway in a very short time. I am going to ask you to stand in the corridor, Miss Carroll, while I go outside. As the girls come downstairs with the buckets, count them. Send

them out doors and to the rear of the dormitory. I shall be there to tell them what to do. When the last one is safely out, then join me.”

Left briefly to herself, Patsy wondered what her chums thought of her in her new position as assistant fire chief. She had seen them in the line, but had had no chance to exchange a word with them. She knew Beatrice to be one of the bucket brigade, and so waited impatiently for her return.

“Oh, Patsy, it’s terrible!” Beatrice called down to her chum, as she began the descent of the lower flight of stairs, bucket in hand. “I got this bucket at the end of the hall near a window. I looked out and saw the back of the dormitory. It’s a mass of flames! Unless the fire company comes soon the whole place will go and we’ll lose all our clothes and belongings. I managed to snatch my handbag and yours from the chiffonier. One of the girls outside is keeping them for me.”

“You dear, thoughtful thing!”

Bee had now reached the foot of the stairs. Setting down the heavy bucket, she paused just long enough to return the hug Patsy gave her. Then she picked up her bucket and hurried on.

One by one the bucket brigade appeared, only to disappear out the front door. Patsy kept careful watch until the twenty-fourth girl had vanished. By this time the smoke in the corridor was steadily growing more dense. She doubted if the brigade would be able to return for a second supply of water. It was high time for her to be moving on, she decided.

As she ran down the front steps of the dormitory and around the corner of the building toward its rear, she could well understand why the corridor had begun to fill with smoke. The rear of the dormitory was now wrapped in flames.

Lined up as close to the fiercely blazing structure as they dared stand, the members of the brigade were rapidly passing their buckets on to half a dozen girls who, under Mrs. Ainslee’s direction, were valiantly throwing the contents of the buckets on the flames.

The burning section of the dormitory was much lower than the main part of the building, being only two stories high. It might as well have been four stories for all the impression that the amateur fire fighters could make on the flames. Endeavoring to dash the water upon the conflagration from a safe distance, a large portion of it fell on the ground.

While they toiled desperately at their hopeless task, the welcome clanging of bells and the chug-chug of motors announced the arrival of the Alden Hose Company on the scene.

With thankful hearts, the bucket brigade promptly vacated their posts to make way for the firemen, who soon had a hose connected with the nearest water main and playing vigorously upon the flames.

Despite their gallant efforts, the wind was against them and the fire had gained too much headway prior to their arrival to be easily quenched.

None of the Yardley girls ever forgot that night. Drawn up in a body at one side of the campus they watched in terrified fascination the conflict raging between fire and water.

It was between half-past nine and ten o’clock when Patsy discovered the fire. It was after one in the morning when water finally reduced the fire to a state of inactivity. At least two-thirds of the dormitory had been demolished, leaving only the charred rafters. The front part was still intact, due to the unceasing toil of the gallant fire fighters. They would stick to their posts until there remained no further possibility of the fire taking on a new lease of life.

Over in Yardley Hall a weary company of homeless girls were endeavoring to make themselves comfortable for the rest of the night. Aside from money and small valuables, which the majority had had forethought enough to hastily snatch up when the gong had sounded, everything belonging to them had gone up in smoke.

The pecuniary side of their losses was not troubling them. There was hardly a girl at Yardley who had not come from a home of affluence. The discomfort they were temporarily obliged to endure was another matter. There was also much wild conjecturing going on among the castaways as to what effect the disaster would have upon the school’s routine of study.

Lounging wearily on a long oak bench in the corridor, the Wayfarers were discussing the situation amid frequent yawns.

"I guess we'll just have to stay here until morning," Patsy was ruefully informing her chums. "It's after two now and we've no other place to go. I'm awfully sleepy, too, but this bench is no place to sleep."

"Some of the girls have stretched out on the benches in the class-rooms," declared Mabel. "We might as well do the same. Where do you suppose we're going to eat breakfast? I'm hungry now."

"We're going to eat it in Alden," announced Patsy positively. "The minute daylight comes we'll hop into my car and drive to the village. I'm hungry, too. Wish it was morning now."

"This is going to make a big difference in our Easter vacation," reflectively remarked Beatrice. "We'll probably be allowed to go home to-morrow. With the dormitory gone there's no other place for us to stay until it's rebuilt. Of course it will be, and it won't take very long to do it. It isn't as though it had been burned to the ground. The frame work's there and the front of it is all right."

"How long do you suppose it will take to rebuild it?" asked Patsy eagerly. Bee's remarks had set her to thinking.

"Oh, five or six weeks," hazarded Beatrice. "A gang of skilled workmen can rebuild it very quickly."

"Five or six weeks," mused Patsy.

Of a sudden she straightened up from her lounging attitude, her gray eyes very bright.

"Girls," she said impressively, "do you know what this means to us? It means Palm Beach after all. Miss Osgood has been foiled by fire. Doesn't that sound exactly like a movie title? Anyway, there's no loss without some gain. It's not very pleasant to be driven from home in the middle of the night and have all one's clothes vanish into smoke. I'm sorry it happened, of course. But since it *did* happen, it certainly didn't happen for the worst, so far as the Wayfarers are concerned."

CHAPTER IV

GLORIOUS NEWS

Beatrice's prediction that the night's disaster would hasten by several days the beginning of a prolonged Easter vacation proved accurate. The day following the fire was a busy one for all who had suffered from the dire calamity. At a meeting held in the chapel at two o'clock on the following afternoon, Miss Osgood announced that a six weeks' leave of absence would be granted the pupils of Yardley. Those who were sufficiently provided with clothing and funds to go to their homes at once were requested to repair to her office immediately after the meeting. Those who were not were requested to meet her there at four o'clock to discuss ways and means.

As it happened, the Wayfarers were not only ready to go home, but wildly impatient to go. Early that morning they had driven to Alden in Patsy's car to purchase the few things needful for the journey. Luckily for them they had been fully dressed when the fire alarm had sounded. Beatrice, Mabel and Eleanor had wisely donned hats and coats before leaving their rooms. Patsy had put on her fur coat when she had gone out to mail a letter. She was therefore minus a hat only. An hour's shopping in the village provided the four girls with handkerchiefs, gloves and the few other articles which they required.

Four o'clock that afternoon saw them at the railway station at Alden, waiting for the four-thirty west-bound train which would land them in Morton shortly after ten o'clock that evening. Patsy had already sent her aunt a lengthy telegram, informing Miss Carroll of the fire and that the four girls would arrive in Morton that night.

Though the journey home was not a long one, it seemed interminable to the travelers. Patsy was burning to impart the glorious news to her aunt. She was very sure that Aunt Martha would reconsider her decision not to go to Palm Beach as soon as she had been informed of the new turn in the girls' affairs.

"Morton at last!" sighed Mabel thankfully, when at five minutes to ten that evening the scattered lights of the city's suburbs began to spring up in the darkness. "Our train is exactly on time."

"I hope Auntie will meet us," Patsy said. "Maybe your mother will be there, too, Perry children; and yours, Bee. I told Auntie in my telegram to send them word. I guess they'll be there, all right enough."

"It seems queer not to have any luggage, doesn't it?" remarked Eleanor.

The four girls had now begun putting on their coats, preparatory to leaving the train, which was gradually slowing down as it neared the station.

"We're lucky to be here ourselves," returned Bee seriously. "If that fire had started at dead of night it would have been a good deal worse for us."

When the train pulled into the station, however, the Wayfarers were doomed to disappointment. No friendly faces greeted their sight as they stepped from the train.

"Auntie didn't get my telegram! I just know she didn't!" Patsy cried out disappointedly. "If she's read about the fire in the evening papers, I can imagine how worried she must be by this time. It's probably the fault of the operator at Alden. He looked like a sleepy old stupid. We'd better take a taxi, children. The sooner we get home the better it will be for our worried folks."

Hailing a taxicab the Wayfarers were soon driving through the quiet streets of the little city toward the beautiful suburb in which they lived. Beatrice was the first to alight in front of the Forbes' unpretentious home. Promising to run over to see Patsy the first thing the next morning, she said "good night" and hurried up the walk.

"Coming in, girls?" asked Patsy as the taxicab finally stopped in front of the high, ornamental iron fence which enclosed the beautiful grounds of the Carroll estate.

“Not to-night. We must hustle into our own house and surprise Mother,” returned Eleanor.

“Good-night, then. See you in the morning. I’ll pay the driver.”

Patsy hopped nimbly out of the taxicab, handed the driver his fare with an additional coin for good measure, then swung open the big gate and raced up the driveway to the house.

Three sharp, successive rings of the electric bell had a potent effect upon a stately, white-haired matron who sat in the living room, making a half-hearted attempt to read. Miss Martha Carroll sprang to her feet as the sound fell upon her ears and started for the hall at a most undignified pace. There was but one person who rang the Carrolls’ bell in that fashion.

Long before the maid had time to reach the door Miss Martha had opened it and thrown her arms about the merry-faced, auburn-haired girl on the threshold.

“Patsy Carroll, you bad child!” she exclaimed as she gathered her niece closer to her. “Why didn’t you telegraph me that you were all right and coming home?”

“But I did, Auntie,” protested Patsy, as she energetically hugged her relieved relative. “I telegraphed this morning. I knew you hadn’t received the telegram the minute I got into the station. In it I asked you to meet me.”

“I never received it. Of course it will be delivered *to-morrow*,” emphasized Miss Martha disgustedly. “I sent one to you directly after I read the account of the fire in the evening paper. My nerves have been keyed up to a high pitch, waiting for a reply to it.”

“Poor, dear Auntie,” cooed Patsy. “It’s a shame. Never mind. I’m home now, so everything’s lovely again. Let’s go into the living room and I’ll tell you all about the fire and how I happened to come home to-night. Bee and Mab and Nellie came home with me. They’ll be over to see you in the morning.”

“Are you hungry, Patsy?” was her aunt’s solicitous question as the two walked slowly into the living room, arms twined about each other’s waists.

“No, Auntie. We had dinner on the train. I’m just crazy to talk. I’ve some glorious news to tell you. Let’s sit on the davenport and have a grand old talking bee.”

“To know you are safe is sufficiently good news,” tenderly rejoiced Miss Martha. “Really, Patricia, I am still trembling from the shock I received when I opened the newspaper and saw the headline, ‘Fire Sweeps Away Dormitory at Yardley.’”

“Well, it didn’t sweep me away,” laughed Patsy, snuggling into the circle of her aunt’s arm. The two had now seated themselves on the big leather davenport. “Part of the dormitory is still there. We lost all our stuff except the clothing we were wearing when the fire broke out.”

“What started it?” questioned Miss Martha rather severely. “The paper didn’t state the cause. A dormitory like the one at Yardley ought to be fireproof. I am sorry that I did not visit Yardley before allowing you to enter the school. I should certainly never countenance your living in a place that in any way looked like a fire-trap.”

“The fire started in the basement. The regular janitor was sick and a new one took his place. They say it was through his carelessness that it started. He was seen to go into the basement smoking a pipe. Something he’d been forbidden to do. Of course, no one can be really sure that it was his fault, though. I was the one who gave the alarm.”

Patsy went on to recount the incidents of the eventful night.

“Not a single girl acted scared or panicky,” she proudly boasted. “We’d had fire drill so often that we knew just what to do when the fire really came. But I haven’t told you the glorious news yet. We’re going to have *six weeks’* vacation. Just think of it, Aunt Martha! Isn’t that perfectly gorgeous? Now we can go to Palm Beach, can’t we?”

“So that is the glorious news,” commented Miss Carroll.

For an instant she silently surveyed Patsy, a half-smile touching her firm lips.

“What is it, Auntie?”

Patsy was not slow to read peculiar significance in both tone and smile. Something unusual was in the wind.

“Would you care very much if we didn’t go to Palm Beach?” was Miss Martha’s enigmatic question.

“Of course I should,” Patsy cried out, her bright face clouding over. “You’re not going to say that we can’t! You mustn’t! I’ve set my heart on the Florida trip. All the way home I’ve been planning for it.”

“I received a letter from your father this morning,” pursued Miss Carroll, ignoring Patsy’s protest. “I also received another from Miss Osgood in which she refused my request for the extra week of vacation. I had written your father several days ago regarding the making of arrangements for us to go to Palm Beach. You can read for yourself what he has to say.”

Rising, Miss Martha went over to a small mahogany writing desk. Opening it she took a letter from one of the pigeon holes.

“Here is Robert’s letter,” she said. Handing it to her niece she reseated herself beside the latter. Very eagerly Patsy took it from its envelope and read:

“Dear Martha:

“Your letter came to me this morning and I would be quick to reserve rooms for yourself and the girls at one of the Palm Beach hotels, except that I have a better plan. How would you like to spend three weeks in a real southern mansion? There is such a house on the estate I recently bought.

“It is a curiously beautiful house, built after the Spanish style of architecture, with an inner court and many balconies. The agent from whom I purchased it informs me that it was formerly the property of an elderly Spaniard, Manuel de Ferreda. After his death, several months ago, the property descended to his granddaughter, who was anxious to sell it.

“It is completely furnished, much in the fashion of houses I saw when in Mexico. The girls will rave over it and I am very anxious that they shall spend their holiday in it. It is not many miles from Palm Beach and I have found a good Indian guide who will take us on the Everglades expedition which Patsy has set her mind on making.

“Of course, if you prefer Palm Beach for the girls, then so be it. If you come to Las Golondrinas (The Swallows), that is the name of the old house, you will not need to bring so many trunks, as you will see very little of society, except when you make an occasional trip to the Beach. I can secure a good car for your use while here which Patsy can drive to her heart’s content.

“Let me know at once what you think of my plan. If you decide immediately to take it up, wire me and I will be on the lookout for you. I believe you will enjoy this little adventure as much as I shall. I know now what Patsy will say. As the girls are to have only three weeks’ vacation, better arrange to start as soon as possible.

“Affectionately,

“Robert.”

“Aunt Martha, the Wayfarers are the luckiest girls in the whole world,” was Patsy’s solemn assertion as she looked up from the letter. “First they go through a fire and come out as safely as can be. Next they get six weeks’ vacation. After that, Daddy plays good fairy, and finds them a wonderful palace in the land of flowers. All they have to do is to hurry up and take possession. *When* are we going to start for Florida?”

“As soon as we can make ready,” was the prompt reply. “Since your father seems very anxious for us to take this trip, I feel that we ought not disappoint him. I dare say we may find this old house he describes somewhat interesting.”

This calm statement filled Patsy with inward amusement. She knew it to be an indirect admission that her aunt was as anxious as she to carry out the plan her father had made for them.

“We won’t need a lot of new gowns,” argued Patsy. “We all have evening frocks and plenty of wash dresses from last summer. We can wear our corduroy suits and high boots to tramp around in. We ought to have some of those Palm Beach hats the stores are showing, and new white shoes, and a few other things. It isn’t as if we were going to stay at a large hotel. We’ll be away from society and living outdoors most of the time. This is Friday. I think we ought to start south not later than next Wednesday morning. We can’t afford to use up more than one of our precious weeks in getting ready and going down to Las – Las – What’s the name of our new home?”

Patsy hastily consulted her father’s letter.

“Las Gol-on-drinas,” she pronounced slowly. “I suppose that’s not the way to pronounce it. I’ll have to ask Mab about it. She’s taking Spanish this year. It’s very necessary to know how to say the name of our new southern home,” she added with a chuckle. “Won’t the girls be surprised when they hear about this splendid plan of Father’s? Have you spoken to Mrs. Perry about it yet, Auntie?”

“No, my dear. You must remember that I received Miss Osgood’s letter, refusing my request at the same time that I received your father’s letter. They arrived in the first mail this morning. I intended writing Robert this evening, explaining that it would be impossible for us to go to Florida. Then I read about the fire in the paper and it completely upset my nerves. I will call on the Perrys to-morrow morning to talk things over. We must also call on Mrs. Forbes.”

“Bee isn’t sure that her mother will let her accept another trip from us,” confided Patsy. “That’s the only thing I worried about after I knew we were to have the six weeks’ vacation. She said she was sure her mother wouldn’t feel right about letting us pay her expenses at a fashionable resort like Palm Beach. But it’s all different now. Mrs. Forbes can’t very well refuse to let Bee accept an invitation to a house party, can she? You must make her see it in that light, Aunt Martha, or she won’t let Bee go with us. She’s awfully proud, you know. We simply must have Bee along. I wouldn’t care much about the trip if she had to stay at home.”

“Beatrice will go with us,” assured Miss Martha in a tone that indicated the intention to have her own way in the matter. Patsy knew from long experience that her dignified aunt was a person not to be easily overruled, and rejoiced accordingly.

“I told Bee that I knew you could fix things beautifully with her mother,” she declared happily. “We’re going to have a wonderful time in that quaint old house. Wouldn’t it be great if it were haunted, or had some kind of a mystery about it? I’ve read lots of queer stories about those old southern mansions.”

“Now, Patsy,” Miss Martha made an attempt at looking extremely severe, “once and for all you may put such foolish notions out of your head. That affair of the missing will at Wilderness Lodge was, of course, quite remarkable. Nevertheless, it was very annoying in many respects.”

Miss Martha had not forgotten her enforced hike over hill and dale on the memorable afternoon when John, the rascally chauffeur, had set her down in an unfamiliar territory and left her to return to the Lodge as best she might.

“We are going down South for recreation. Bear that in mind,” she continued. “The majority of these tales about haunted houses down there originate with the negroes, who are very ignorant and superstitious. There is no such thing as a *haunted* house. I have never yet met a person who had actually *seen* a ghost. Undoubtedly we shall hear a number of such silly tales while we are in Florida. I am told that the natives are very fond of relating such yarns. You girls may listen to them if you like, but you must not take them seriously. You are not apt ever again to run into another mystery like that of Wilderness Lodge.”

CHAPTER V

THE LAND OF FLOWERS

“No wonder the Spaniards named this beautiful land ‘Florida’!” rapturously exclaimed Beatrice Forbes. “I never dreamed it *could* be quite so wonderful as this.”

“I suppose when first they saw it, they must have felt about it as we do now,” returned Eleanor. “According to history they landed here on Easter Sunday. We’re seeing Florida at about the same time of year as they first saw it. It’s almost as wonderful to us as it was to them. Not quite, of course, because they underwent all sorts of hardships before they landed here. So they must have thought it like Heaven.”

Exactly one week had elapsed since the Wayfarers had arrived in Morton with the pleasing prospect ahead of them of a six weeks’ vacation. Three days of hurried preparation had followed. Then had come the long, rather tiresome railway journey to Florida. They had arrived at Palm Beach late in the afternoon of the sixth day, had been met by Mr. Carroll and had spent the night at one of Palm Beach’s most fashionable hotels.

Wearied from the long railway trip, the travelers had resisted the lure of a water fête, to be given that evening on Lake Worth, and retired early.

“I can secure a boat, if you girls are anxious to take in the fête,” Mr. Carroll had informed his flock at dinner that evening. “This fête will be nothing very remarkable, however. Later on, I understand, a big Venetian fête is to be given. Why not wait and go to that? We can easily run up to the Beach in the car from Las Golondrinas. I would suggest going to bed in good season to-night. Then we can make an early start in the morning for our new home.”

This program being approved by all, the Wayfarers had dutifully settled down early for the night. It was now a little after ten o’clock on the following morning and the big touring car, driven by Mr. Carroll, was bowling due south over a palm-lined country road, toward its objective, Las Golondrinas.

It was a particularly balmy morning, even for southern Florida, where a perpetual state of fine weather may be expected to hold sway during the winter months. Southward under tall palms, past villa after villa, embowered in gorgeously colored, flowering vines, the touring car glided with its load of enthusiastic beauty-worshippers.

Seated between Miss Martha and Eleanor in the tonneau of the machine, Beatrice was perhaps the most ardent worshipper of them all. Love of Nature was almost a religion with her. She was a true child of the great outdoors.

“It’s so beautiful it makes me feel almost like crying,” she confided to her companions as she drew in a deep breath of the exquisitely scented morning air. “It’s so different from the Adirondacks. Up there I felt exhilarated; as though I’d like to stand up and sing an anthem to the mountains. But all this fragrance and color and sunlight and warm, sweet air makes me feel – well – sentimental,” finished Bee rather timidly.

“It seems more like an enchanted land out of a fairy-tale than a real one,” mused Eleanor. “No wonder the birds begin to fly south the minute it grows chilly up north. They know what’s waiting for them down here.”

“That’s more than we know,” smiled Beatrice, her brown eyes dreamy. “We’re explorers, once more, setting foot in a strange, new country. Something perfectly amazing may be waiting for us just around the corner.”

“I hope it won’t be a horrid big snake,” shuddered practical Mabel, who sat opposite the trio on one of the small seats. “There are plenty of poisonous snakes down here, you know. Moccasins and diamond-back rattlers, coral snakes and a good many other varieties that aren’t poisonous, but horrible, just the same.”

“Why break the spell by mentioning anything so disagreeable as snakes, Mab?” asked Eleanor reproachfully. “I’d forgotten that there were such hateful, wriggly things. How do you happen to be so well up on the snakology of Florida?”

“There’s no such word as snakology,” retorted Mabel. “You mean *herpetology*.”

“Snakology’s a fine word, even if old Noah Webster did forget to put it in the dictionary,” laughed Eleanor. “Isn’t it, Miss Martha?”

“I can’t say that I specially admire any word pertaining to snakes,” dryly answered Miss Carroll. “While we are on the subject, however, I may as well say that nothing can induce me to go on any wild expeditions into these swamps down here. I daresay these jungles are full of poisonous snakes. I greatly doubt the advisability of allowing you girls to trail around in such dangerous places.”

“Oh, we’ll be all right with a real Indian guide to show us the way,” declared Beatrice confidently. “White Heron is the name of our Indian guide. Mr. Carroll was telling me about him last night. He is a Seminole and a great hunter.”

“I have no confidence in Indians,” disparaged Miss Martha. “I sincerely hope Robert is not mistaken in this one. I shall have to see him for myself in order to judge whether he is a fit person to act as guide on this foolhardy expedition that Patsy is so set on making.”

This dampening assertion warned the trio of girls that it was high time to discuss something else. They remembered Patsy’s difficulties of the previous summer in wringing a reluctant permission from Miss Martha to go camping in the mountains. Now it seemed she had again posted herself on the wrong side of the fence. It therefore behooved them to drop the subject where it stood, leaving the winning over of Miss Martha to wily Patsy and her father.

Seated beside her father, who, knowing the road to Las Golondrinas, was driving the car, Patsy was keeping up a running fire of delighted exclamation over the tropical beauty of the country through which they were passing.

“I’m so glad you bought this splendid place, Dad,” she rattled along in her quick, eager fashion. “After I’m through college maybe we can come down to Florida and spend a whole winter.”

“I had that idea in mind when I bought it,” returned her father. “It will take considerable time to put Las Golondrinas in good condition again. Old Fereda let it run down. There are some fine orange groves on the estate, but they need attention. The house is in good condition. It’s one of those old-timers and solidly built. The grounds were in bad shape, though. I’ve had a gang of darkies working on them ever since I bought the place. They’re a lazy lot. Still they’ve done quite a little toward getting the lawns smooth again and thinning the trees and shrubs.”

“Who was this Manuel de Fereda, anyway?” questioned Patsy curiously. “I know he was Spanish and died, and that’s all.”

“I know very little about him, my dear. Mr. Haynes, the agent who sold me the property, had never seen him. In fact, had never heard of him until Fereda’s granddaughter put the place in his hands for sale. She told Haynes that her grandfather was crazy. Haynes said she seemed very anxious to get rid of the property and get away from it.”

“There’s just enough about the whole thing to arouse one’s curiosity,” sighed Patsy. “I’d love to know more about this queer, crazy old Spaniard. Maybe we’ll meet some people living near the estate who will be able to tell us more about him.”

“Oh, you’ll probably run across someone who knows the history of the Feredas,” lightly assured her father. “Neither the old mammy I engaged as cook, nor the two maids can help you out, though. They come from Miami and know no one in the vicinity. I’m still hunting for a good, trustworthy man for general work. We shall need one while we’re here, to run errands, see to the horses and make himself useful.”

“You must have worked awfully hard to get things ready for us, Dad.”

Patsy slipped an affectionately grateful hand into her father’s arm.

"I could have done better if I had known from the start that you were really coming," he returned. "I had to hustle around considerably. At least you're here now and your aunt can be depended upon to do the rest. I hope she will get along nicely with her darkie help. They're usually as hard to manage as a lot of unruly children."

"Oh, she will," predicted Patsy. "She always makes everybody except Patsy do as she says. Patsy likes to have her own way, you know."

"So I've understood," smiled Mr. Carroll. "Patsy usually gets it, too, I'm sorry to say."

"You're not a bit sorry and you know it," flatly contradicted Patsy. "You'd hate to have me for a daughter if I were a meek, quiet Patsy who never had an opinion of her own."

"I can't imagine such a thing," laughed her father. "I'm so used to being bullied by a certain self-willed young person that I rather like it."

"You're a dear," gaily approved Patsy. "I don't ever really bully you, you know. I just tell you what you have to do and then you go and do it. That's not bullying, is it?"

"Not in our family," satirically assured Mr. Carroll.

Whereupon they both laughed.

Meanwhile, as they continued to talk in the half-jesting, intimate fashion of two persons who thoroughly understand each other, the big black car ate up the miles that lay between Palm Beach and Las Golondrinas. As the party drew nearer their destination the highly ornamental villas which had lined both sides of the road began to grow fewer and farther apart. They saw less of color and riotous bloom and more of the vivid but monotonous green of the tropics.

They turned at last from the main highway and due east into a white sandy road which ran through a natural park of stately green pines. Under the shadow of the pines the car continued for a mile or so, then broke out into the open and the sunlight again.

"Oh, look!"

Half rising in the seat, Patsy pointed. Ahead of them and dazzlingly blue in the morning sunshine lay the sea.

"How near is our new home to the ocean, Dad?" she asked eagerly.

"There it is yonder."

Taking a hand briefly from the wheel, Mr. Carroll indicated a point some distance ahead and to the right where the red-tiled roof of a house showed in patches among the wealth of surrounding greenery.

"Why, it's only a little way from the sea!" Patsy cried out. "Not more than half a mile, I should judge."

"About three quarters," corrected her father. "The bathing beach is excellent and there's an old boathouse, too."

"Are there any boats?" was the quick question.

"A couple of dinghys. Both leaky. I gave them to one of my black fellows. Old Fereda was evidently not a sea dog. The boathouse was full of odds and ends of rubbish. I had it cleared up and repainted inside and out. It will make you a good bath house. It's a trim looking little shack now."

Presently rounding a curve in the white, ribbon-like road, the travelers found themselves again riding southward. To their left, picturesque masses of jungle sloped down to the ocean below.

Soon to their right, however, a high iron fence appeared, running parallel with the road. It formed the eastern boundary of Las Golondrinas. Behind it lay the estate itself, stretching levelly toward the red-roofed house in the distance. Long neglected by its former owner, the once carefully kept lawns and hedges had put forth rank, jungle-like growth. Broad-fronded palms and palmettos drooped graceful leaves over seemingly impenetrable thickets of tangled green. Bush and hedge, once carefully pruned, now flung forth riotous untamed masses of gorgeous bloom.

"It looks more like a wilderness than a private estate," was Patsy's opinion as her quick eyes roved from point to point in passing.

“It looked a good deal more like a jungle a few weeks ago,” returned Mr. Carroll. “Wait until you pass the gates; then you’ll begin to notice a difference. The improvements my black boys have made don’t show from the road.”

For a distance of half a mile, the car continued on the sandy highway. At last Mr. Carroll brought it to a stop before the tall, wrought-iron gates of the main entrance to the estate. Springing from the automobile, he went forward to open them.

“Every man his own gate-opener,” he called out jovially. “Drive ahead, Patsy girl.”

Patsy had already slipped into the driver’s seat, hands on the wheel. Immediately her father called out, she drove the machine slowly forward and through the now wide-open gateway.

“Do let me drive the rest of the way, Dad,” she implored as Mr. Carroll regained the car.

“All right. Follow this trail wherever it goes and you’ll finally bring up at the house,” was the good-humored injunction.

By “trail” Mr. Carroll meant the drive, which, flanked by hedges of perfumed oleander, wound through the grounds, describing a sweeping curve as it approached the quaint, grayish-white building that had for generations sheltered the Feredas. A little beyond the house and to its rear, they glimpsed rank upon rank of orange trees, on which golden fruit and creamy blossoms hung together amongst the glossy green of foliage.

A light land breeze, freighted with the fragrance of many flowers, blew softly upon the Wayfarers. Its scented sweetness filled them with fresh delight and appreciation of their new home.

Patsy brought the car to a stop on the drive, directly in front of an arched doorway, situated at the center of the facade. Before the travelers had time to step out of the automobile the massive double doors were swung open by a stout, turbaned mammy, the true southern type of negro, fast vanishing from the latter day, modernized South. Her fat, black face radiant with good will, she showed two rows of strong white teeth in a broad smile. Beside her stood two young colored girls who stared rather shyly at the newcomers.

“I done see yoh comin’, Massa Carroll!” she exclaimed. “I see yoh way down de road. So I done tell Celia an’ Em’ly here, y’all come along now, right smart, an’ show Massa Carroll’s folks yoh got some manners.”

“Thank you, Mammy Luce,” gallantly responded Mr. Carroll, his blue eyes twinkling with amusement. Whereupon he gravely presented the gratified old servant to his “folks.” A courtesy which she acknowledged with an even greater display of teeth and many bobbing bows.

Headed by Mr. Carroll, the travelers stepped over the threshold of Las Golondrinas and into the coolness of a short stone passageway which ended in the patio or square stone court, common to houses of Spanish architecture.

In the center of the court a fountain sent up graceful sprays of water, which fell sparkling into the ancient stone bowl built to receive the silvery deluge. Above the court on three sides ranged the inevitable balconies. Looking far upward one glimpsed, through the square opening, a patch of blue sunlit sky.

“Welcome to Las Golondrinas, girls! It’s rather different from anything you’ve ever seen before, now isn’t it?”

Mr. Carroll addressed the question to his flock in general, who had stopped in the center of the court to take stock of their new environment.

“It’s positively romantic!” declared Patsy fervently. “I feel as though I’d stepped into the middle of an old Spanish tale. I’m sure Las Golondrinas must have a wonderful history of its own. When you stop to remember how many different Feredas have lived here, you can’t help feeling that a lot of interesting, perhaps tragic things may have happened to them. I only wish I knew more about them.”

“Let the poor dead and gone Feredas rest in peace, Patsy,” laughingly admonished Eleanor. “We came down here to enjoy ourselves, not to dig up the tragic history of a lot of Spanish Dons and Donnas.”

“A very sensible remark, Eleanor,” broke in Miss Martha emphatically. “There is no reason that I can see why you, Patsy, should immediately jump to the conclusion that this old house has a tragic history. It’s pure nonsense, and I don’t approve of your filling your head with such ideas. I dare say the history of these Feredas contains nothing either startling or tragic. Don’t let such ridiculous notions influence you to spend what ought to be a pleasant period of relaxation in trying to conjure up a mystery that never existed.”

“Now, Auntie, you know perfectly well that if we happened to stumble upon something simply amazing in this curious old house, you’d be just as excited over it as any of us,” gaily declared Patsy.

“Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,” loftily quoted Miss Martha, refusing to commit herself. “It will take something very amazing indeed to impress me.”

CHAPTER VI

THE BEGINNING OF ADVENTURE

“The time has come, O Wayfarers, to think of many things,” gaily declaimed Patsy, bursting into the somber, high-ceilinged, dark-paneled sitting-room where Miss Martha, Beatrice, Mabel and Eleanor sat around a massive mahogany table, busily engaged in writing letters.

“Go away, Patsy,” laughingly admonished Mabel, pen suspended in mid-air over her note paper. “You’re a disturber. You’ve made me forget what I was going to write next. If you won’t be a letter-writer, don’t be a nuisance.”

“I can’t be what I never have been and could never possibly become,” retorted Patsy. “I’ll promise to keep quiet, though, if you’ll all hustle and finish your letters. I’m dying to go over to the orange groves and it’s no fun going alone. Any old person will do for company.”

“Then we *won’t* do,” emphasized Beatrice. “We are very distinguished persons who don’t belong in the ‘any old’ class.”

“Glad you told me,” chuckled Patsy. “I’ll give you ten minutes to wind up your letters. If you’re not done then – well – I’ll give you ten more. I am always considerate. I’m going to leave you now, but I shall return. I’ll come buzzing around again, like a pestiferous fly, in exactly ten minutes by my wrist watch. I’m only going as far as the gallery to pay my respects to the dead and gone Feredas.”

With this announcement Patsy turned and strolled from the room. The gallery to which she referred was in the nature of a short corridor, extending between the second-floor sitting-room and ending at the corridor on which were situated sleeping rooms which the Wayfarers occupied. It had evidently served as a picture gallery for several generations of Feredas. Its walls were lined with a heterogeneous collection of oil paintings, largely landscape and studies in still life. At least half of one side of it, however, was devoted strictly to portraits. It was before this particular section that Patsy halted.

Two days had elapsed since the Wayfarers had made port at Las Golondrinas. On the evening of their arrival, a storm had come up, bursting over the old house in all its tropical fury. Following it, rain had set in and for two days had continued to fall in a steady, discouraging downpour that made out-door excursions impossible for the time being.

Now, on the third morning since their arrival, the sun again shone gloriously, in skies of cerulean blue, and the air was heavy with the sweetness of rain-washed blossoms. It was an ideal morning to spend out of doors, and Patsy was impatient to start on an exploring tour of the estate.

During the two days in which the Wayfarers had been kept indoors by the rain, they had become thoroughly acquainted with the old house. They had wandered about it from cellar to roof, marveling at its utter unlikeness to any other house in which they had ever set foot. Its somber, spacious rooms with their highly polished floors and queer, elaborately carved, foreign-looking furniture of a by-gone period, evoked volleys of wondering comment and speculation. The cool patio with its silver-spraying fountain, the long windows opening out onto picturesque balconies and the dim stone corridors, all held for them the very acme of romance. It was like being set down in a world which they had known only in fiction.

Each girl had found some one particular object on which to fix her special admiration. Eleanor went into ecstasies over a huge, carved-leather chest that stood in the sitting-room. Beatrice was enthusiastic over a heavy mahogany book-case filled with old Spanish volumes, bound in boards and parchment. She loudly deplored her inability to read Spanish and announced her intention of tackling the fascinating volumes with the aid of a Spanish-English dictionary which Mabel had brought along. Mabel was vastly impressed by a high, frowning old desk with many drawers and pigeon-holes. She

was perfectly sure, she declared, that it must contain a secret drawer, and in consequence spent the great part of an afternoon in an unavailing hunt for it.

Patsy found unending delight in the portrait section of the picture gallery. The dark-eyed, tight-lipped men and women who stared down at her from the wall filled her with an intense curiosity regarding who they were and how long it had been since they had lived and played their parts in the history of the Feredas.

Undoubtedly they were all Feredas. Of unmistakably Spanish cast of countenance, they bore a decided family resemblance to one another. The difference in the style of dress worn by the pictured folk proclaimed them to be of many generations. How far removed from the present day, she did not know. She was of the opinion that some of them must have lived at least two hundred years ago. She was very sure that one portrait, that of a man, must have been painted even earlier than that.

It was this portrait in particular which most fascinated her. Hung in the center of the section and framed in tarnished gilt, it depicted the full length figure of a Spanish cavalier. Patsy thought he might easily have been one of the intrepid, Latin adventurers who accompanied Ponce de Leon on his unsuccessful quest into Florida for the fabled Fountain of Youth.

As a gallant of long ago, the man in the picture instantly arrested her attention. The thin, sinister face above the high Spanish ruff repelled her, however. The bright, bird-like eyes, the long, aquiline nose and the narrow lips, touched with a mocking smile, combined to make a countenance of such intense cruelty as filled her with a curious sense of terror. It was as if the sharp, black eyes followed her, as she moved along from picture to picture. There was a peculiar, life-like quality about the painting which gave her the uncomfortable feeling that the sinister cavalier might step down from the canvas at any moment.

Nevertheless she could not refrain from stopping to look at him every time she passed through the corridor. She was convinced that he must have been the first Fereda who landed in the New World and that he had a record which might well match his malevolently smiling face. It piqued her not a little to reflect, that, who he was and what he had been would in all probability ever remain a mystery to her.

Strolling into the corridor that morning to study again the provoking object of her curiosity, Patsy wondered how the granddaughter of old Manuel de Fereda could ever have been content to turn over the contents of Las Golondrinas to strangers. She wondered what had become of her. She was undoubtedly the only one who knew the identity of the painted cavalier. Patsy decided that she would ask her father to write Mr. Haynes, the agent, from whom he had purchased the property, asking him for Eulalie Fereda's address. Once she had obtained it, Patsy fully intended to write to the Spanish girl for information concerning the painted cavalier.

Wrapped in meditation, she did not hear Beatrice's light approaching footsteps until her friend had traversed half of the corridor.

"Oh, Bee!" she hailed, as the latter paused beside her. "I'm going to try to get Eulalie Fereda's address from Mr. Haynes, and then write her about this picture. It seems queer that she allowed all these portraits of her family to be sold with the house, now doesn't it? I certainly shouldn't care to see the pictures of my respected ancestors pass into the hands of strangers."

"Perhaps she'd lived here so long with her grandfather that she'd grown tired of him and all the rest of the Fereda tribe," hazarded Bee. "Imagine how lonely it would be for a young girl in this gloomy old house. It *is* gloomy, you know. We don't mind it because there are a crowd of us. It all seems just quaint and romantic to us."

"All except Auntie," reminded Patsy, smiling. "She says that the whole house ought to be done over from top to bottom and that she intends to come down here next fall and see to it herself. I think she only half means it, though. She likes it the way it is, just as much as we do, but she won't admit it. Aunt Martha has a real love for the romantic, but she tries hard not to let any one know it."

"The furniture in this house must be really valuable," Bee said seriously. "Most of it is antique. Goodness knows how old that desk in the sitting-room is; and that carved-leather chest and the book-case. Why, those books alone must be worth a good deal. A book collector would rave over them. I wish I knew something about rare volumes and first editions. If I were your father I'd send for an expert and have the collection valued."

"I'll tell him about it," nodded Patsy. "Only he won't bother to do it while we're here. He's more interested in having the grounds put in order than anything else. He says the orange groves are not worth much because they've been neglected for so long. With care, he thinks they'll do better next year. We've come down here too late for the real fruit season, you know. We should have been here in January or February for that. Anyway, he didn't buy this place as a money-making venture. He thought it would be a nice winter home for us."

"I'm lucky to have the chance to see it," congratulated Beatrice. "If ever I become a writer, I shall put Las Golondrinas into a story. That's a pretty name; Las Golondrinas."

"Isn't it, though. I suppose it was named on account of the tree swallows," mused Patsy. "Dad says there are flocks of them here. They have blue backs and white breasts. I'm sure I saw some this morning. Oh, dear! I wish the girls would hurry. I want to start out and see the sights. Come on. Let's remind them that time is flying."

Catching Bee by the hand, Patsy pulled her, a willing captive, toward the sitting-room.

"Time's up and more than up!" she announced, poking her auburn head into the big room.

"I'm ready," responded Eleanor, rising from her chair.

"So am I – in another minute."

Hastily addressing an envelope to her mother, Mabel tucked her letter into it, sealed and stamped it.

"There!" she ejaculated as she laid it on the little pile of letters which represented the fruits of the morning's labor. "That's off my mind."

"What about you, Auntie?" questioned Patsy, noting that her dignified relative was still engaged in letter-writing. "Don't you want to join the explorers?"

"You girls can get along very well without me," placidly returned Miss Carroll. "I am not through with my writing. Besides, I don't feel inclined to go exploring this morning. I warn all of you to be careful where you set foot. This old place may be infested with snakes."

"Oh, we'll be careful. We'll each carry a good stout stick," assured Beatrice. "That's the way tourists do in the tropics, you know. On some of the South Sea Islands, I've read that tourists always carry what they call 'snake sticks' when they go calling. At night the coolies go ahead of a calling party and beat the long grass aside."

"Very fine, Bee. I hereby appoint you chief grass-beater of the realm," teased Mabel.

"I decline the high office," retorted Bee. "Every Wayfarer will have to do her own bit of trail beating. As I am *very* brave, I don't mind walking ahead, though."

"I will walk with you, Bee," graciously offered Patsy. "Woe be to the wriggly, jiggly sarpint that crosses our path."

In this light strain the four girls left Miss Martha to her writing and sallied forth from the coolness of the old house into the bright sunlight.

"Where shall we go first?" queried Patsy, as they paused on the drive in front of the house. "Shall we get acquainted with our numerous acres of front yard, or shall we make a bee-line for the orange groves?"

"Let's do the groves first," suggested Eleanor. "I'm awfully anxious to get close to real orange trees with real oranges growing on them."

"Come on, then."

Seizing Beatrice by the arm, Patsy piloted her around a corner of the house, Mabel and Eleanor following.

Crossing a comparatively smooth bit of lawn, at the rear of the house, the Wayfarers halted by common consent before proceeding further. Between them and the orange groves lay a wide stretch of ground, fairly overrun with tangled bush and vine. Magnificent live oak, cedar and palmetto trees, spread their noble branches over thickets of bright bloom and living green. It was extremely picturesque, but “very snaky,” as Mabel declared with a little shudder.

“There’s a darkie over yonder, clipping away that thicket!” Eleanor pointed to where an ancient, bare-footed, overalled African, wearing a huge, tattered straw hat, was industriously cutting away at a thick patch of sprawling green growth.

“Hey, there, Uncle!” called out undignified Patsy. “Come here a minute, please.”

The old man straightened up at the hail and looked rather blankly about him. Catching sight of the group of white-clad girls, he ambled slowly toward them through the long grass.

“Mornin’, young ladies,” he saluted, pulling off his ragged headgear and disclosing a thick crop of snow-white wool. “Ah reckon mebbe yoh wants Uncle Jemmy t’ tell yoh suthin’?”

“Yes, we do, Uncle,” beamed Patsy. “We wish you’d show us a path to the orange groves, if there is one. We’d like to have some good, stout sticks, too, in case we see any snakes. Aren’t you afraid to walk around in that jungle in your bare feet?”

“Laws, Missie, I’ve used to it, I is. Th’ ain’t no snakes round heah what mounts to much. I done see a big black snake this mornin’, but that fella ain’t out to do me no damage. He am a useful snake, he am.”

“We’ll be just as well satisfied not to meet his snakeship, even if he is so useful,” muttered Eleanor in Patsy’s ear.

“Ef yoh all young ladies’ll come along now, I’ve gwine to show yoh the way to git to the orange groves,” continued Uncle Jemmy. “There am a path ovah heah.”

So saying, the old man took the lead and trotted along the clipped lawn where it skirted the high grass for a distance of perhaps twenty yards. The girls followed him, single file, every pair of bright eyes intent on trying to catch a glimpse of the path.

Pausing at last, Uncle Jemmy proceeded to lop off several low-growing branches from a nearby tree. These he deftly stripped clear of twigs and foliage and, trimming them smooth with a huge, sharp-bladed pocket knife, presented one to each of the four explorers.

“Heah am yoh snake sticks, young ladies,” he declared, showing a vast expanse of white teeth in a genial grin. “Now I’ve gwine to take yoh a little fuder an’ yoh’ll see de path.”

A few steps and they came abreast of a giant oak tree and here the path began, a narrow trail, but beaten hard by the passing of countless feet.

“Yoh jes’ follow de path wherever he goes and yoh-all gwine come af’er while to de groves,” he directed.

“Thank you, Uncle Jemmy.” Patsy nodded radiant thanks. Seized by a sudden thought she asked: “Do you live around here?”

“No, Missie. I comes from Tampa, I does. Soon’s I git through this job for Massa Carroll I gwine to git right back to Tampa again. It am de bes’ place for Uncle Jemmy.”

“Oh!” Patsy’s face fell. Then she tried again. “Do any of these boys working with you live around here?”

“No, Missie. They done come from Miami. We am all strangahs heah.”

“I see. Thank you ever so much for helping us.”

With a kindly nod to the old man, Patsy turned to her chums who had stood listening in silence to the questions she had asked.

“Are you ready for the great adventure?” she queried. “Come along, then. One, two, three and away we go, Indian fashion!”

Bidding a smiling good-bye to Uncle Jemmy, who had now turned to go, the three girls filed into the trail behind their energetic leader. And thus the Wayfarers started off on what really was the beginning of a greater adventure than they dreamed.

CHAPTER VII

THE COTTAGE IN THE PALM GROVE

Greatly to their relief, the Wayfarers were not called upon to do battle with their stout snake sticks. For a quarter of a mile they followed the narrow path. It wound in and out of the tall, coarse grass and around wide-spreading trees and ragged clumps of bushes. At length they reached the point for which they had been aiming.

"It's simply splendiferous!" exclaimed Eleanor, as the quartette halted well inside the first grove to breathe in the fragrance of orange blossoms and feast their eyes on the beauty of the tropical scene spread out before them.

"Why, it isn't just an orange grove!" Beatrice cried out. "Look, girls! There are *lemons* on that tree over yonder!"

"Yes, and see the tangerines!" Patsy pointed out. "Those stiff, funny bushes there have kumquats on them. And I do believe – yes, sir – that ragged old tree there is a banana tree. This is what I call a mixed-up old grove. I supposed oranges grew in one grove and lemons in another, etc., etc."

"I guess we don't know very much about it," laughed Eleanor. "We'll have to get busy and learn what's what and why. Let's walk on through this grove and see what's in the next one. There seems to be a pretty good path down through it."

Amid many admiring exclamations, the Wayfarers strolled on, seeing new wonders with every step they took. The brown, woody litter which covered the ground under the trees was plentifully starred with the white of fallen blossoms. To quote Mabel, "Why, we're actually walking on flowers!"

Late in the season as it was they found considerable fruit growing within easy reach of their hands. Eager to avail themselves of the pleasure of "actually picking oranges from the trees," the girls gathered a modest quantity of oranges and tangerines.

Warned by Mr. Carroll always to be on the watch for spiders, scorpions and wood-ticks before sitting down on the ground, Beatrice and Patsy energetically swept a place clear with a huge fallen palmetto leaf, and the four seated themselves on the dry, clean-swept space to enjoy their spoils.

All of them had yet to become adepts in the art of out-door orange eating as it is done in Florida. In consequence, they had a very delightful but exceedingly messy feast. Picking oranges at random also resulted in their finding some of the fruit sour enough to set their teeth on edge. These they promptly flung from them and went on to others more palatable.

"No more oranges for me this morning," finally declared Eleanor, pitching the half-eaten one in her hand across the grove. "I'm soaked in juice from head to foot. Look at my skirt."

"I've had enough." Bee sprang to her feet, drying her hands on her handkerchief. "We ought to pick a few oranges to take to Miss Martha."

"Let's get them when we come back," proposed Patsy. "What's the use in lugging them around with us. I want to walk all the way through these groves to the end of the estate. Dad says it's not more than a mile from the house to the west end of Las Golondrinas."

"All right. Lead on, my dear Miss Carroll," agreed Bee with a low bow. "Be sure you know where you're going, though."

"I know just as much about where I'm going as you do," merrily flung back Patsy over her shoulder.

Headed by their intrepid leader, the little procession once more took the trail, wandering happily along under the scented sweetness of the orange trees. Overhead, bright-plumaged birds flew about among the gently stirring foliage. Huge golden and black butterflies fluttered past them. Among the white and gold of blossom, bees hummed a deep, steady song as they pursued their endless task of honey-gathering.

On and on they went, passing through one grove after another until they glimpsed ahead the high, wrought-iron fence which shut in the estate on all four sides. Reaching it, they could look through to a small grassy open space beyond. Behind it rose a natural grove of tall palms. Set down fairly in the middle of the grove was a squat, weather-stained cottage of grayish stone.

“Oh, see that funny little house!” was Mabel’s interested exclamation. “I wonder whom it belongs to!”

“Let’s go over and pay it a visit,” instantly proposed Patsy. “Perhaps someone lives there who can tell us about old Manuel Fereda and Eulalie, his granddaughter. It doesn’t look as though darkies lived there. Their houses are mostly tumble-down wooden shacks. Still it may be deserted. Anyway, we might as well go over and take a look at it.”

“How are we going to get out of here?” asked Eleanor. “I don’t see a gate.”

“There must be one somewhere along the west end,” declared Bee. “Let’s start here and follow the fence. Maybe we’ll come to one.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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