

Penrose Margaret

**The Motor Girls at Lookout
Beach: or, In Quest of
the Runaways**



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CHAPTER I – SUMMER PLANS

Bess Robinson was so filled with enthusiasm that her sister Belle declared there was serious danger of “blowing-up,” unless there was some repression. Belle herself might be equally enthusiastic, but she had a way of restraining herself, while Bess just delighted in the “utmost” of everything. The two sisters were talking on the side porch of their handsome home in Chelton, a New England town, located on the Chelton river. It was a beautiful day, late in spring.

“Well, have you sufficiently quieted down, Bess?” asked Belle, after a pause, which succeeded the more quiet girl’s attempt to curb her sister’s enthusiasm – a pause that was filled with just the hint of pique.

“Quieted down? I should think any one would quiet down after such a call-down as you gave me, if you will allow the use of such slang in your presence, Miss Prim,” retorted Bess, with a little tilt to her stubby nose.

“Oh, come now, Bess – ”

“Well, don’t be so fussy, then. We have always wanted to go to a real watering place, and now, when we are really to go, Belle Robinson, you take it as solemnly as if it were a message from boarding-school, summoning us back to class. Why don’t you warm up a bit? I – I feel as if I could – yell! There, that’s out, and I don’t care! I wish I was a boy, and then – then I could do something when I felt happy, besides sitting down, and looking pleased. Boys have a way of showing their feelings. I know what I’m going to do. I’m just going to get out the car, and run over to Cora Kimball’s. She’ll know how to rejoice with me about going to Lookout Beach. Oh, Belle, isn’t it just perfectly – too lovely for anything! There, I was going to say scrumbunctious, but I won’t in your presence – Miss Prim!”

“Why, Bess – you silly,” retorted her sister. “Of course I’m glad, too. But I don’t have to go into kinks to show it. We will have a glorious time, I’m sure, for they say Lookout Beach is a perfectly ideal place.”

“‘Ideal’! Oh, there you go!” and Bess made a grimace of her pretty face. “‘Ideal’! Belle, why don’t you take a private room somewhere, just off the earth, so you can be just as perfectly proper as you wish. ‘Ideal’! Whoop! Why not sweet? Oh, I say – Burr-r-r-r! It’s going to be immense! Now there, and you can get mad if you want to,” and with this parting shot Bess hurried off to the little garage in the rear of the house.

“Is the car ready to take out, Patrick?” she asked the man of all work about the Robinson place.

“Yes, miss. I poured the gasoline in the little hole under the seat where you showed me, and I filled up the oil tank, and I give it a drink. I put in ice-water, Miss.”

“Ice-water? Why, Patrick?” for Patrick was a new acquisition, and what he didn’t know about automobiles would have made two large books of instructions to beginners. “Why ice water, Patrick?” and Bess raised her pretty eyebrows.

“Well, sure, an’ Miss Belle said the other day, as how the water b’iled on her, miss – that is, not exactly b’iled *on* her, but b’iled in the tea kettle – I mean that thing punched full of holes – in the front of the car.”

“The radiator,” suggested Bess, trying not to laugh.

“Yes, that’s it, miss, though why they calls it a radiator, when they want it to kape cool, is beyond me. Howsomever – ”

“About the ice water, Patrick.”

“Yes, miss, I’m comin’ to that. You see when Miss Belle said as how it b’iled over the other day, I thinks to myself that sure ice-water will never boil, so I filled the radiator with some as cold as I could bear me fist in it. Arrah, an’ it’s no b’ilin’ water ye’ll have th’ day, when ye takes this car out, Miss Bess.”

“Oh, Patrick, how kind of you!” exclaimed the girl. “And what a novel idea. I’m sure it will be all right,” and she placed her hand on the radiator. It was as cold as a pump handle on a frosty morning.

“I blew up the tires, too, miss,” went on the man, “an’ here’s a four leaf clover I found. Take it along.”

“What for?” asked Bess, as she accepted the emblem.

“Sure, fer good luck. Maybe ye’ll not git a puncture now. Clovers is good luck.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Bess earnestly, as she cranked up, for Patrick had not yet advanced this far in his auto-education.

Then the girl, most becomingly attired in auto hood and coat, backed the pretty little silver-colored runabout, *Flyaway*, owned by herself and her sister, “the Robinson twins,” out of the garage, and turned it on the broad drive.

“Would ye mind that now!” exclaimed Patrick, admiringly. “It’s as – as slick as a pig’s whistle, miss, savin’ yer presence.”

Bess laughed merrily.

“I’m glad to see that some one besides myself uses a bit of – I mean an expression that means something – once in a while, Patrick,” she said, as she threw in the clutch, after adjusting the lever to low speed.

“Yis, miss,” answered the man, as he looked with admiration at the trim and pretty figure in the little car. “Now I wonder what did she mane?” he asked himself, when Bess was out on the road. “Sure them is two great gurls – Miss Isabel and Miss Elizabeth – great gurls!” and Patrick went to curry the horses kept by Mr. Robinson, this being work that the genial and faithful Irishman understood perfectly well.

Isabel, meanwhile, continued to sun her splendid hair over the railing of the side porch, in spite of the almost constant danger that it might become entangled in the honeysuckle vine, or be mistaken by a wandering bee or humming bird for some nest or hive in which to nestle.

Isabel was always the “dreamer.” She had “nerves,” and she loved everything aesthetic. Bess, on the contrary, was always “on the spot,” as her boy friends declared, and, while she might be a trifle over-enthusiastic at times, there was this consolation, that she was never glum, as her personal supply of good-nature never seemed to be lacking. Not that Isabel was moody, save at such times when she was alone, and thought of many things – for, in company, she entered into the fun with a zest equal to almost anyone’s save her more volatile sister. So the Robinson twins were an interesting study – so different in disposition – so unlike in taste – but so well matched on two points – their love for motoring and a good time during vacation, and their love for their chum and companion, Cora Kimball.

While her sister was lazily dreaming away amid the honeysuckle vines, letting the gentle breeze riffle through, and dry her hair, Bess was skimming along the fine Chelton roads, her mind intent on the good times in prospect when she, with her mother and sister, were to go to a cottage at Lookout Beach.

“Oh, I just know it will be perfectly bang-up!” exclaimed Bess, half aloud, and smiling at the chance to use words that meant something, without shocking Belle. “We will have no end of good times. My! It makes me want to go fast to think about it,” and, suiting the action to the word, she

pressed her foot on the accelerator pedal, and the car shot forward, while the hand on the dial of the speedometer trembled around the twenty-five miles an hour mark.

"I don't care!" thought Bess, as she kept her foot on the pedal. "I'm going to speed for once. Belle never will let me."

As she suddenly swung around a turn in the road she was made aware of how fast the pace was, for the car skidded a bit dangerously, and, a moment later, without a warning blast of the horn, another auto, moving in the opposite direction, shot into view.

By a quick twist of the steering wheel, nearly sending the car into the ditch at the roadside, Bess avoided a collision.

"Why didn't you blow your horn?" she shot indignantly at the occupant of the car – a young man, who had also turned out quickly.

"Why didn't you blow your own?" he wanted to know, and then he smiled, for he, too, had slowed down. "I guess it's horse and horse," he added, good-naturedly, if slangily. "I was thinking of something else."

"So was I," admitted Bess with a half smile, and then, having slowed down too much to allow going ahead on high speed, she had to throw out the clutch just as she was about to proceed, and change back to low gear. Quickly she threw into second, as a preliminary to third, but she was not quick enough. The motor stalled, and the car came to a stop, amid a grinding of the gears.

"Can I help you?" asked the young man, jamming on his emergency brake.

"No, thank you," answered Bess coolly and quickly. "I can manage," and, before he could reach her car, for he had alighted from his own, she had gotten out, cranked up, and was in her seat again. Then she hurried off down the road, leaving a rather crestfallen young chap standing in the dusty highway.

"Remarkably pretty girl – that," he said, aloud. "I wish I could have helped her. But she was cool, all of a sudden. Maybe she didn't like my slang – I wish I could break myself of using it – hang the luck – there I go again," and, with a shake of his head he went back to his car.

"Adventure number one," mused Bess, as she swung along, not so fast this time. "I wonder what will come next? I guess I am getting a little too high-spirited. I must calm down. But I can't, when I think of Lookout Beach."

She had not gone a hundred rods farther when a flock of chickens crossed the road, just ahead of the machine.

"Shoo!" cried Bess. "Shoo! Scat! Get out!" and she blew the horn vigorously. "I wonder why someone doesn't invent a horn or something to scare dogs and chickens?" she went on, as the fowls showed little disposition to do more than run, fluttering and squawking, right ahead of the car. Then they darted to one side – all but one unfortunate, and the big rubber tires passed over one leg, crippling it.

"Hi, you! Stop!" commanded a woman's harsh voice, and Bess, who was running slowly now, saw an unlovely personage rushing from the yard of a dilapidated house, toward the machine. "I've got your license number," went on the woman, "and I'll make a complaint if you don't pay for my chicken. You automobile folks is allers running over 'em, and crippin' 'em so they ain't fit fer nothing."

"This is the first time I ever ran over anything," retorted Bess indignantly. "I guess I know how to drive a car!"

"Well, it won't be the last time you run over somethin' if you scoot along like I seen you just now," went on the owner of the limping fowl. "I want pay for my chicken, or I'll have th' law on ye," and she planted herself determinedly in front of the now stationary car.

"Very well," answered Bess, not wishing to argue with such a character. "Here is fifty cents. The chicken is a small one, and that's all it's worth. Besides it is hardly hurt at all."

"It's wuth seventy-five cents, ef it ain't a dollar!" stormed the woman, as she accepted the coin that the girl handed her. "I've a good notion to –"

But her further words were lost, for Bess turned on the power, threw in the clutch, shifted the gear lever, and was off down the road.

“Adventure number two,” she remarked grimly. “I hope it isn’t three times and out. Patrick’s clover works by opposite, I guess,” but she drove along, her high spirits not a whit repressed by what had happened.

For Bess was not a girl easily daunted, as those of you who have read the previous volumes of this series know. She was almost the equal of her chum, Cora Kimball, was Bess Robinson. In my first book, entitled “The Motor Girls,” Cora Kimball, the tall, handsome, dark-haired daughter of Mrs. Grace Kimball, and, likewise, the well-beloved sister of Jack Kimball, had first secured her auto. It was a four cylinder, touring machine, capable of good speed, and the color was Cora’s special choosing – a handsome maroon. The story dealt with a mystery of the road, and told how Cora successfully solved it, in spite of the efforts of Ida Giles and Sid Wilcox to make trouble. As her guests Cora had, on many runs of her car, the Robinson twins, Walter Pennington, Jack’s college chum, and Ed Foster. The latter was one of the chief figures in the road mystery, for one day he suddenly missed his wallet, containing money and negotiable securities to the amount of twenty thousand dollars. A little later the pocketbook, with the money missing, was found in the tool box of Cora’s car.

Then there followed a “whirlwind” of excitement, which did not end until those responsible for the taking of the money had been discovered and the cash and papers returned. Among other troubles Cora and her friends had to contend with the meanness of Sid Wilcox and the jealousy of Ida Giles.

In the second volume of the series, called “The Motor Girls on a Tour; or, Keeping a Strange Promise,” there was related how Cora and her friends were instrumental, after making a strange promise, in restoring to a little cripple a long-lost table, containing a will. How the hunt for the strange piece of furniture, with a secret drawer, was made, while the girls were on a tour, how the Robinson twins managed their car, which they had secured in the meanwhile, and how Jack Kimball also succeeded in getting a runabout – all this is set down in the book. Paul Hastings, a young chauffeur, and his pretty sister Hazel, also had their parts to play, and well they did.

Now it was coming on summer again, and, after much planning and discussing, the Robinson twins and their mother had decided on a seashore cottage. They hoped that Cora Kimball could be induced to go with them, and, if Cora did go, why, of course, it meant that Jack would come down, occasionally, or, perhaps, oftener. And Ed and Walter might also happen to drop in – which would be very pleasant.

“Oh, it’s just glorious,” thought Bess, as she continued to skim along. “I hope the season will be miles long and years old. We will have a gay time.”

Bess turned the *Flyaway* into the gravel road that wound up to the handsome and stately Kimball homestead. A toot of the horn brought Cora out of doors quickly, while Bess jammed on the brake and threw out the clutch, and then, as the car came to a squeaking standstill, she shoved over the spark and gasoline levers, with a ripping sound along the ratchets, and turned off the sparking device.

“Come on in and cool off,” invited Cora. “It’s very warm. Summer has almost arrived. I’m delighted to see you, Bess.”

“And I you. Indeed I am coming in. Such news – you’ll never guess in your whole life, Cora.”

“You’re going to get a new machine!”

“No, not yet, though I think we will next season. Papa is sort of softening toward a six cylinder. No, but it’s almost as good as that.”

“What is it, dear?” and Cora placed her arm around the waist of Bess, as they mounted the broad steps.

“Cora Kimball, we’re going to take a cottage at Lookout Beach! Such a delightful place – and Cora dear,” she panted on, “can you come? *Will* you come?”

“Shall I come? Should I come,” went on Cora, teasingly. “Why, my dear,” she went on, “do sit down, and catch your breath before it escapes further. The boys are around here somewhere, and they are always on the still hunt for – ”

“Cora Kimball! I’m not one bit out of breath,” panted Bess, “but I am just dying to tell you – ”

“Oh, that is it! Well, let me make you comfortable so that the death – ” She stopped, and swung back a porch chair for Bess. The latter threw aside her motor bonnet and “ripped off” her gloves.

“No, but seriously, Cora,” Bess said. “Will you go with us? We have taken a cottage, and we are, of course, going to take our car, and we do so want to take you!”

“You dear!” exclaimed Cora. “I haven’t planned for summer yet, but I do think mother is going abroad, and I honestly feared I would have to tag along. I just hate to think of Europe, so maybe I could induce mother to let me go with you. She has such confidence in Mrs. Perry Robinson.”

“Mother would take all sorts of care of you. I can assure you and your mother of that,” declared Bess. “And we have almost decided, without ever asking you, that you shall come along. What fun would we have motoring without you?”

“Without me, or without Jack?” teased Cora. “Well, never mind, Bess, perhaps we can take turns. I am sure I would rather go to Lookout Beach and camp than to go to Europe and tramp – there I have made a rhyme, and will see my beau before nine. Pray, Bess, come indoors with me while I complexion. I have been motoring all morning, in this stiff breeze, and I feel as if my face will crack if I don’t hurry to cream it. And then, that I am to see my beau – ”

The splendid color in Cora’s cheeks belied her words. Nevertheless the girls went indoors, and, while Cora removed a surprising amount of grit on each piece of cotton she daubed her cheeks with, Bess had a better chance to talk over the plans for the summer at the seaside.

Following her cream-wash Cora turned on her face the tiny spray of tepid water from her own little silver faucet in the corner, and then “feeling clean,” as she expressed it, she just touched her cheeks and nose with another piece of cotton “to pat off the shine.”

“You know I have to go out again this afternoon, and I do find that it pays to keep in order. I suppose Belle would think this sort of fixing up not half thorough enough?”

“Oh, she takes a regular Turkish when she has been out in a dusty wind,” declared Bess. “But, for my part, I prefer a thick veil, in front of a cream setting. Then I catch all the dirt in the cream and only have to wash it off instead of – ”

“Washing it on. A good idea, Bess. But I can’t breathe back of cream. It makes my lungs sticky,” and Cora put a last touch to her heavy dark hair, just as her brother’s voice was heard in the lower hallway.

“There’s Jack!” exclaimed both girls at once.

“Let’s tell him,” suggested Bess, who was not always able to conceal her interest in Cora’s handsome brother.

“Oh, no, don’t,” whispered Cora, as Jack was almost at the door of the sitting room. “It will be a joke to plan it all out, and surprise the boys!”

But Jack was actually tumbling into the room before he saw Bess. He, too, was evidently “too full of good news to keep!”

“Oh, sis!” he yelled, still unconscious of the presence of Bess, “take my hand and squeeze it, or I shall ‘bust.’ It’s too good to be true, and too good not to be true. We are going – ”

Then his eye fell upon Cora’s visitor. Instantly and in a boy’s inimitable way he “pulled himself together” and finished: “We are going down to the post-office this evening!”

“Oh, is that all you were going to say?” asked Bess, in some disappointment, for it was evident that Jack had some news.

“Well, not quite all,” he replied with an air of mystery, “only I happened to hear certain peculiar whispers and admonitions as I was coming in, and I guess girls aren’t the only ones who can keep a secret. I’ll tell if you’ll tell,” he added.

“We’ve nothing to tell; have we, Cora?” and Bess looked as innocent as possible.

“How could you ever imagine such a thing, Jack?” inquired his sister.

“Well, that’s neither here nor there, then,” was the young man’s cool answer. “But if you’re going after the stuff to make jam tarts with this winter, Cora, you’d better start,” and at this somewhat enigmatical remark, Jack began whistling a tantalizing air, while Bess winked at her chum.

CHAPTER II – AT THE STRAWBERRY PATCH

“Yes, I promised mother I would go for a crate of strawberries,” Cora said, by way of explanation. “Would you like to come along, Bess? It is a lovely ride to the berry patch.”

“Then, I think I will run back for Belle, and we, too, may fetch home a crate. Mother will be delighted to get them fresh from the pickers.”

“Suppose we meet in an hour at Smith’s Crossing?” suggested Cora. “I have some little things to attend to, and that will just about give you time to get Belle, and her belongings.”

This was agreed upon, and the girls parted for the short time. Jack insisted upon keeping his wonderful good news secret, for, try as he did, he could not coax Cora to divulge the news which he knew Bess must have brought.

“I could see it in her cheeks,” Jack insisted, “and I can almost read that signal code you two have arranged.”

“Well, when it is all settled I may – tell you,” replied his sister. “But you boys imagine that girls cannot keep anything to themselves – ”

“Wrong there, sis,” he answered, picking up his cap. “We all know perfectly well that you all can keep to yourselves exactly what we want to know,” and in leaving the room he tossed a sofa cushion at Cora’s head, hitting her squarely, and knocking her hair awry. She retaliated, however, with a floor cushion over the banister, which Jack failed to dodge.

At the appointed time, three o’clock, on a lovely June afternoon, Cora and Bess met as arranged with their autos at the cross-roads, Belle dainty as ever in her flimsy veils and airy silk coat, Bess, with her hand on the wheel, her eyes on the road ahead, and her jolly self done up simply in pongee, while Cora, correct as ever, and equally distinctive in her true green auto hood, and cloak that matched, made up a very attractive trio of auto maids.

“It’s only six miles out,” called Cora, “and this road runs straight into Squaton. They have quite a big strawberry farm out there.”

“Yes,” called back Bess, turning on more gasoline and throwing in third speed, “mother was just delighted when I told her we were going there for berries.”

Over the smooth, shaded road the cars sped, the *Whirlwind*, Cora’s machine, exactly attuned to the hum of the *Flyaway*, the car occupied by the twins. Just as two clocks, placed side by side, will soon tick in harmony, so two good engines may match each other in the hum of speed.

“I can smell the berries,” exclaimed Belle, as they neared a group of tall elms.

“We are almost there,” remarked Cora, “and I think I, too, smell something good.”

Under the trees by the roadside they espied some boys eating from a pail of berries.

“There,” said Bess, “that was what you scented. Those youngsters have been picking, I suppose, and that is their own personal allowance.”

“Berries! Five cents a quart!” called out one of the urchins, who at the same time stepped out into the road close to the slackened autos.

“Not to-day,” replied Cora, as she passed on, followed by the *Flyaway*.

“Wouldn’t you think they would want to take those home,” said Bess. “I should think they would be satisfied with their earnings at the patch.”

“Maybe they have not been picking – except for their own use,” responded Cora. “But here we are. Get out now, and we will walk over to the shanty where they crate the fruit.”

“What an ocean of green!” exclaimed Belle, the aesthetic one, looking over the strawberry patch.

“An ocean of dust, I think,” said Bess, as from the afternoon sun and breeze the grind of the picker’s feet in the dusty rows between the countless lines of green vines just reached her eyes.

"There are plenty of them," remarked Cora, wending her way along the narrow path, toward the shanty.

"And so many people picking," added Belle. "Just look at those boys! They are as brown as – their clothes. And see that poor old woman!"

"Yes, her back must ache," replied Cora. "What a shame for her to be out in this sun."

"She looks as if she could never bend again if she should straighten up," said Bess. "See how she stares at us from under her own arms."

This peculiar remark caused the other girls to smile, but Bess meant exactly what she said – that the old woman was looking up from an angle lower than her elbows.

Just then the autoists faced two of the pickers – two girls.

Both stopped their work and looked up almost insolently. Then they spoke under their breath to each other and "tittered" audibly.

"They're rude," said Belle to Bess, picking her skirts as she stepped by.

"Oh, that's just their way," exclaimed Cora. "I am going to speak to them."

So saying she turned in between the rows.

"Is it hard work?" she asked pleasantly.

"No cinch," replied the older-looking of the girls, with a toss of a very good head of auburn hair.

"Have you been out long?" persisted Cora.

"Oh, we're always out," said the younger girl with a sneer. Her voice said plainly that she had "no use" for talking with the motor girls.

"Do you work all day?" asked Bess, a little timidly. Bess was always ready to admit that she could talk to boys, but that she was afraid of strange girls.

"All day, and all night," replied the younger girl. She had hair just a tint lighter than the other, and it was evident that the pair were sisters.

"But you cannot see to work at night," Belle deigned to say.

"We have lamps – indoors," said the girl, "and Aunt Delia keeps boarders."

"Oh, you help with the housework too?" said Cora. "I should think –" then she checked herself. Why should she say what she thought – just then?

Perhaps it was the unmistakable kindness shown so plainly in the manner of the motor girls, that convinced the two little berry-pickers that the visitors would be friends – if they might. At any rate, both girls dropped the vines they were overhauling, and stood straight up, with evident stiffness of their young muscles.

"But we are not going to do this all our lives," declared the older girl. "Aunt Delia has made enough out of us."

"Have you no parents?" ventured Cora.

"No, we're orphans," replied the girl, and, as she spoke the word "orphans," the ring of sadness touched the hearts of the older girls. Cora instantly decided to know more about the girls. Their youthful faces were already serious with cares, and they each assumed that aggressive manner peculiar to those who have been oppressed. They seemed, as they looked up, and squarely faced Cora, like girls capable of better work than that in which they were engaged, and they gave the impression of belonging to the distinctive middle class – those "who have not had a chance."

"Can't you come over in the shade and rest awhile?" asked Cora. "You must have picked almost enough for to-day."

"Oh, to-day won't count, anyway," said the younger girl, with hidden meaning.

"Nellie!" called her sister, in angry tones. "What are you talking about!"

"Well, I'm not afraid to tell," she replied.

"You had better be," snapped the other.

"Oh, Rose, you're a coward," and Nellie laughed, as she kicked aside the vines. "I'm not going to work another minute, and you can go and tell Aunt Delia Ramsy if you've a mind to."

At that moment a figure emerged from the shed at the end of the long line of green rows.

“There she is now, Nellie,” said Rose. “You can tell her yourself if you like.”

Without another word the girls both again began the task so lately left off, and berry after berry fell into the little baskets. Rose had almost filled her tray, and Nellie had hers about half full of the quart boxes.

“Rose!” called the woman’s shrill voice, from under the big blue sunbonnet. “Come up here and count these tally sticks. Some of those kids are snibbying.”

With a sigh Rose picked up her tray, and made her way through the narrow paths. Cora saw that the woman had noticed her talking to Bess and Belle, and while wishing for a chance to talk to Nellie alone, she beckoned to her companions to go along up to the shed.

“Maybe I’ll see you soon again,” almost whispered Nellie, in the way which so plainly betrays the hope of youth.

“I am sure you will,” replied Cora, smiling reassuringly.

“What strange girls,” remarked Belle.

“Aren’t they?” added Bess, turning back to get another look at little Nellie in her big-brimmed hat.

“They are surely going to do something desperate,” declared Cora, “and I think now that we have found them, as the boys would say, ‘it is up to us’ to keep track of them.”

CHAPTER III – THE STRIKE

“Oh, mercy!” exclaimed Bess, as they neared the shed, “did you ever see such a hateful old woman!”

“Hush!” whispered Belle. “Do you want us to go back to Chelton without our berries?”

“If she ever looks at them they will sour – they couldn’t keep,” went on Bess, recklessly, but in lowered tones.

“We would like two crates of berries,” Cora was saying to the woman, who stood, hands on her hips, framed in the narrow doorway of the sorting shed.

“Yes,” answered the woman. “Step inside and pick ’em out. They are all fresh picked to-day. Rose, don’t you know enough to make room for the young lady?” and the woman glared at the girl who had hurried in from the patch.

“Oh, I have plenty of room,” Cora said with a smile to Rose. “What are those little sticks for?”

“Them’s the tally-sticks,” answered the woman. “They get one for every quart they pick, and then they cash ’em in. Here!” and she snapped a bunch from the trembling hands of the girl who was counting and tying up in bunches the wooden counters, “let me show ’em to the young lady.”

“Oh, I can see them,” declared Cora, without trying to hide her distaste for the woman’s rudeness to Rose. “How many tally-sticks did you get to-day?” she asked the girl.

“Oh, she don’t get any,” spoke the woman. Rose never raised her eyes. “Them two girls have me robbed with their eatin’ and drinkin’ and airs. I have to take care of them – they’re me own sister’s children,” and she raised the hem of her dirty apron to her eyes.

“But they help you,” insisted Cora. “They pick berries all day, do they not?”

“Help me?” came with a sneer. “I would like to see how! There’s shoes to be bought, clothes and all sich. Then, butter is high, and them girls must have butter on their bread.”

“When we don’t get anything else,” spoke up Rose, boldly.

“What!” called the aunt, her eyes flashing angrily. “That’s the way I’m thanked! Go up to the house, and wash them dishes, and don’t you leave the house till – I’ve talked with you,” she commanded. “It’s a hard job to bring up somebody else’s children,” and she tried to sigh, “but I am bound to do my best by ’em.”

Bess and Belle seemed actually frightened. They did not venture under the roof of the shack, but stood at the door with eyes staring. Rose passed out, and, as she did so, she winked at Belle. Belle gave a friendly little tug at the brown apron as it passed, and then Bess went inside, at Cora’s request, to select her crate.

Four very small boys slouched up the path to the shed. Their crates were full and they seemed ready to drop down from exhaustion. One, with fiery red hair, pushed his way ahead of the others and presented his tray to the woman. She surveyed it critically, then said:

“Andy, did you swipe a bunch of tallies this morning?”

“I did not!” replied the little fellow indignantly.

“How many you got?” she demanded.

He dug his dirty, brown hands down deep into his trousers pockets. Then he brought up three bunches of the tally-sticks.

“Humph! I thought so,” said the woman. “Do you mean to tell me a monkey like you can pick ten an hour?”

“He’s the best picker on the patch,” spoke up another lad, “and I was with him when he brought each tray in!”

The girls stood back, deeply interested. The woman took the tray from Andy and turned away without offering the ten little sticks which represented the gathering of ten quarts of berries.

“Where’s my tallies?” he demanded.

“You – jest – w-a-i-t,” drawled the woman.

The other boys stepped back. Evidently they were going to “stick by Andy.”

“I’ll give you your crates, and let you go, young ladies,” said the woman to Cora. “These little rowdies ain’t no fit company for customers in automobiles.”

“Oh, indeed we are enjoying looking around,” declared Cora. “Do give the boys their checks, and let them go back to the patch. They are wasting time.”

Thus cornered, the woman was obliged to go on settling with the pickers.

“Well,” she said, “I’ll give you credit, Andy, until I get a chance to look it up. Here, Narrow (to a very tall boy), gi’me yourn.”

“Nope!” replied the tall boy. “We waits fer Andy.”

“Well, I’m blowed!” exclaimed the woman. “If you kids ain’t got a cheek! I’ve a good mind to chase every one of yer.”

Andy stepped back to where she had deposited the box.

“Here!” she called, entirely forgetting the presence of the motor girls. “Git out of here!” and at that she struck the little fellow a blow on the head that caused him to reel, and then fall backward into an open crate of fresh berries!

“Now you’ve done it!” yelled the woman. “You have mashed every one of them! There!” and she dragged him to his little, bruised feet. “Do you think I can sell stuff like that! Mush! Every red berry of ’em!”

“Oh, make her stop!” pleaded Bess to Cora. “She may strike him again.”

“What will you do with that crate of berries?” asked Cora, pushing her way between the angry woman and the frightened boy.

“Make him pay fer ’em, of course,” shouted the tyrant. “And serves him right, too, for his impudence!”

Big heavy tears plowed their way through the dirty little spots on the boy’s cheeks. To pay for the crate would take all his week’s earnings.

“You did it yourself!” declared a boy who boldly faced the woman, “and Andy’s not goin’ to stand fer it, or we all strike; don’t we, fellers?”

“Sure, we do!” came a chorus, not only from those who had been waiting, but from a second group that had come up in the meantime.

“Strike, eh?” cried the woman. “Well, you kin all clear out! Do you hear! Every dirty one of ye! Git off the place or – I’ll let the dogs loose!”

“Oh, goodness me!” exclaimed Bess, clutching Cora’s sleeve. “Do come away! There will be – bloodshed!”

“We must wait,” replied Cora calmly. “I guess she is not so anxious to have her berries rot on the vines, and most of the good pickers seem to be with Andy.”

Belle was nervously walking down the path toward the autos.

The boys stood defiantly, waiting for the woman to produce Andy’s tallies.

“Give him his sticks,” called one of them, “or we’ll smash every berry in the patch!”

“You will, eh!” yelled the woman. “I’ll show you!”

“Oh, Cora!” cried Bess, but Cora was too much interested in the boys to heed.

The woman left the shed and ran toward the house.

“She’s after the dogs!” shouted one boy.

“Come ahead, fellers!” called another, and at that a dozen or more lads ran wildly through the patch; crushing the ripe luscious fruit as they went. Nellie, who was still picking berries, jumped up from her work. She saw the savage dogs tear away from their kennels, their chains rattling as the woman snapped them from the collars.

Bess and Belle ran to Cora within the shed.

“Here, Nero! Nero!” suddenly called Nellie. “Here Tige! Here Tige!”

Wonder of animal instinct! Those two dogs forgot the commands of the woman to “Sic ’em!” and eagerly they ran to Nellie. To Nellie to be patted, and caressed. To Nellie who fed them! What did they care about the woman who would strike them? Nellie was their friend and now they were hers! The woman, having let loose the dogs, ran on toward the house, some distance from the berry shed.

CHAPTER IV – ARBITRATION

Like a heroine in a drama Nellie stood there, one sunburned hand thrust through the collar of each panting dog.

The boys saw their advantage and ran like Indians through the patch of berries, tramping the ripe fruit under foot in their unreasoning anger.

“Hey! Stop that!” shouted Nellie, “or I’ll let them go!”

Instantly every boy stood still.

“Come on,” called Cora to the other two girls, “we must help Nellie.”

As quickly as they could trudge along the rough pathway, Cora, Bess and Belle hurried to where Nellie stood with the dogs.

“Call the boys back to the shed,” shouted the girl, “then I can take the dogs to their kennels.”

“Come here, boys!” called Cora. “Come back to the shed, and we will see fair play!”

The words “fair play” had a magical effect on the strikers. They now jumped between the rows, and it would be safe to say that not one of them, in the return, stepped on a single berry.

“All right, miss,” answered the lad called Narrow. “We goes back to the field, if Andy gets his tally-sticks.”

“Does this woman own the patch?” asked Cora.

“Never!” replied one of the boys. “She’s only the manager. The boss comes up every night to pay us our coin.”

“Then we should see him, I suppose,” said Cora, as Nellie walked past with the dogs close beside her, each animal wagging his appreciation for the girl that led them on.

“Aunt Delia scares easy,” whispered Nellie, almost in Cora’s ear. “Just chuck a big bluff and she wilts.”

Cora smiled. She was happily versed in the ways and manners of those who “had not had a chance.”

“I am so afraid she will – hurt Rose,” sighed Belle. “Oh dear me! What a place!”

“But I think it rather fortunate we were here,” replied Cora. “These youngsters can scarcely take their own part – prudently.”

Andy hung back near the shed. He was still trying to choke down the tears. How could he ever pay three dollars and seventy-five cents for that crate of crushed berries? And it had not been his fault.

The strikers stood around Cora, each little fellow displaying his preference for “a good honest strike” to that of hard work, in the sun, on a berry patch.

“Narrow speaks fer us,” announced a sturdy little German lad. “Eh, Narrow?”

“We all goes back, if Andy gets his sticks,” spoke Narrow, who was evidently the strike leader.

“Well, come along,” ordered Cora, feeling very much like a strike breaker, “and we will see what Mrs. Ramsy says.”

Led by the motor girls the procession wended its way back to the shed.

“Never mind, Andy,” said a boy called Skip, who really did seem to skip rather than walk, “we will see you ‘faired.’”

Andy rubbed his eyes more vigorously than before. Cora was in the shed, and Nellie hurried away with the dogs, promising to send Mrs. Ramsy down from the house. Meanwhile Cora had ample opportunity to get acquainted with her little band of strikers. They were very eager to talk, in fact all seemed anxious to talk at once. And their grievance against the woman “who ran the patch” seemed to have begun long before her present difficulty with Andy.

“She’s as mean as dirt to them two girls,” said one urchin, “and anybody kin see that them girls is all right.”

“They pick out here from the break of day until the moon is lit,” said another, “and after that they has to work in the house. There’s a couple of boarders there and the girls keeps the rooms slick.”

“Boarders?” asked Bess.

“Yep, and one old dame is a peach,” continued the boy, not coarsely but with eager enthusiasm.

“The one with the sparklers,” added another. “Hasn’t she got ’em though?” and he smacked his lips as if to relish the fact.

“There comes Ramsy,” whispered a third. “Whew! But she looks all het up!”

The woman did look that way. Her face was as red as the berries in the trays and her eyes were almost dancing out of their sockets.

Cora spoke before anyone else had a chance to do so.

“The boys are willing to arbitrate,” she said. Then she felt foolish for using that word. “They have come for terms,” she said, more plainly.

“Terms!” repeated the woman scornfully. “My terms is the same now as they was first. Andy Murry pays for that crate!”

“If the crate is paid for will it belong to him?” asked Cora.

The woman stopped, as if afraid of falling into some trap. “I don’t care who owns ’em, when he pays for ’em. But he sneaked out one bunch of tallies – ”

“He did not!” shouted a chorus. “He earned every one he’s got and the ten that you’ve got!”

“And it was you who spoiled the berries by pushing him into them,” shouted some others, “and we are here to see him faired.”

Cora was perplexed. She wanted to save more trouble, yet she did not feel it “fair” to give in to the woman.

“Your berries are spoiling in the fields now,” she suggested. “Why don’t you give in, and let the boys go back to work?”

“Me give in to a pack of kids!” shouted the enraged woman.

“She is always sour on Andy because his mother won’t do her dirty washing,” explained the German boy.

“My mother is sick – and she can’t wash,” sobbed the unfortunate Andy.

“Yep, and that money of his’n was for her, too,” put in Skip.

At this point another figure sauntered down from the house.

“There comes Mrs. Blazes!” put in Narrow. “She couldn’t miss the show.”

The woman who came down the path sent on before her the rather overpowering odor of badly mixed perfumes.

“Look at her sparklers,” whispered a boy to Cora, “that’s why we call her ‘Blazes.’”

A black lace scarf was over the woman’s head and now the “sparklers,” or diamonds that she wore, in evident flashy taste, could be seen at her throat, and on her fingers. Bess smiled to Belle, and Cora turned to the boys.

“We must finish up this business,” she said. “It is getting late, and we have to go to Chelton.”

“Go ahead!” called the urchins.

“Fork out Andy’s sticks,” shouted some others.

“What is the crate worth?” asked Cora.

“It was worth three dollars and seventy-five cents,” said the woman, “before that scamp deliberately set in it.”

Cora did not intend to argue. “Then if the berries are bought you will give the boy his tallies?” she pressed.

“Of course,” drawled the woman, beginning to see Cora’s intentions.

“He’s not goin’ to pay fer them!” interrupted Narrow. “What does she take us for?”

“Hush!” commanded Cora. “Just give the boy his sticks, Mrs. Ramsy, and I’ll attend to the rest.”

“What’ll I give him the tallies for when he owes me more than they’re worth?”

“To satisfy the boys,” demanded Cora. “I will take that crate of berries. They will suit me as well as any others.”

Seeing herself beaten, the farm woman handed the tally-sticks to Cora, who put out her hand to take them.

“Now, you boys carry that crate down to the big machine in the roadway,” she said, “and I will pay Mrs. Ramsy!”

A wild shout went up from the boys! The woman had been beaten! She had not sold but the one crate of berries! And that was the one she demanded Andy should pay for!

Cora winked at Bess and Belle and the girls understood perfectly what she meant.

“Don’t the other young ladies want any?” asked the woman. “You said two crates!”

“But we haven’t time now to stop longer,” said Cora. “We can come again, when the sun will not be so hot. Then we may have a better choice.”

It was Andy who helped Narrow carry the crate to the *Whirlwind*. “Thank you, miss,” he said, “I was almost sick. And mother expected the money to-night.”

“Yes and she gets it,” declared his companion, handing up the crate to Cora, who stood in the car. “Whew! Ain’t this a good one though!” and he looked at the splendid maroon auto. “Must have cost a lot.”

“Quite a good deal,” said Cora. “Some day, when I come again, perhaps I will give you a nice ride in it!”

“There’s Nellie,” called Bess. “She wants to speak with us, I guess.”

The girl, who had put the dogs back on their chains, was hurrying down the path.

“Good-bye,” she said, “I don’t think we will be here when you come to-morrow.”

“Where are you going?” asked Cora.

“Don’t speak so loud,” cautioned Nellie. “That old Lady Blazes is just as bad on us as Aunt Delia. And worse, for she puts her up to everything.”

“Nellie! Nellie!” shrieked the one termed “Blazes.” “Your aunt wants you right away up at the house!”

Nellie turned with a nod to Bess and Belle.

“Ain’t that a shame!” said Skip. “We will strike fer them girls next.”

CHAPTER V – TOO CONFIDENT

“Mother will be so disappointed not to get her berries,” remarked Bess, as she and Belle, in their little *Flyaway*, got out on the road, following Cora.

“But Cora did wonderfully well, I think,” replied the sister, “to get the better of that horrid woman. She was going to sell two crates, and she only actually sold the crate which she insisted Andy should pay for. It takes Cora – she is a born leader.”

“It certainly was diplomatic,” agreed Bess, “and I suppose we can come out to-morrow for the others. Mother was not particular about having them done up at once. But weren’t those girls queer? And how stage-like little Nellie looked with those fierce dogs at her side, and the boys standing around her? I declare I think that would make a play.”

“Better try your hand at it,” suggested Belle. “I always thought you had some hidden talent. It may now be discovered.”

“And do you think the girls are going to do something desperate?” asked Bess, throwing in more speed, and brushing along at a lively rate over the broad country road.

“I am sure they are going to do something very unusual, but whether it may be desperate, or simply foolish, would be impossible to surmise with any degree of certainty,” replied the judicious Belle. “I fancy they intend to – leave the strawberry patch, at least.”

Cora turned, and called to Bess to look out for the “Thank-you-ma’ams” that were so plentifully scattered over the hill they had just come upon. Some were deep and long, she said, and with the ever-increasing grade might stall an overworked engine. Following the advice, Bess changed to low gear, and crawled up and down the hills, after the pace set by Cora.

One very steep hill confronted them. The engines of both cars were fairly “gasping for breath,” and Cora, knowing that the hot radiators could cook anything from cabbage to pork and beans, realized that it was not wise to start up the hill until the engines had been cooled off. Consequently the cars stopped near a spring house at the roadside, and the girls alighted to get a refreshing drink. The door was unlocked, and a clear, clean glass stood on a small shelf, just inside the low building.

“Did you ever see anything so delightful?” exclaimed Belle, while Cora dipped the glass in the square, cement-lined pool, and brought it up filled with the coolest, and most sparkling water imaginable.

“And was it just built for – roadsters?” asked Bess, taking the proffered drink.

“Oh, no indeed,” said Cora with a laugh. “These spring houses are the farm refrigerators. In this, every evening, I suppose many, many quarts of milk are put to cool for the creamery. I have often seen a spring house just filled with the big milk cans.”

“Oh,” answered Bess, intelligently. “That’s a good idea. Just think how much money we could save on ice if we had a spring house.”

“Maybe if we had one, you would be able to cool off sometimes,” remarked her sister teasingly. “You look as if you needed a dip this very minute.”

The red cheeks of Bess certainly did look overheated, and the way she plied her handkerchief betrayed her discomfort.

“An internal dip will do nicely, thank you,” answered the girl. “I don’t see that I am any warmer than the rest of you.”

“Here comes a girl from the house,” said Cora, as down the path a girl, in generous sunbonnet, and overgenerous apron, was seen to approach.

“Do they wear their sunbonnets to bed?” asked Belle. “I am sure there is no sun now.”

“Father will be down in a minute with the team,” called out the girl, much to the surprise of the motor girls.

“Mercy!” exclaimed Belle, “are we going to be arrested?”

“I think not,” replied Cora; “however, we are trespassing, though I did think farmer folks very – liberal, especially with their spring water.”

“The girl is smiling like a ‘basket of chips,’” said Bess, almost in a whisper. “It is not likely that she is angry with us at all.”

“Did you get a nice drink?” asked the strange girl, with unmistakable friendliness.

“Oh, yes, thank you very much,” spoke up Cora, “but I am afraid we are trespassing.”

“Not at all,” said the girl. “My name is Hope – Hope Stevens,” she said, in the most delightfully simple manner. “I always like to introduce myself – ‘specially to young girls.”

“We are very glad to know you, Hope,” said Cora. “This is Miss Bess Robinson, this Miss Belle Robinson, and I am Cora Kimball.”

“Oh, I know who you are now,” declared Hope. “They call you the Motor Girls.”

“I am afraid they do,” agreed Bess. “But then we are just plain girls as well – our motors do not make us – we try to make them – go!”

“That is what father said when he saw you come over yonder hill, when he left the field to get the team. Do you know he makes more money hauling folks with automobiles up this hill, than he does on the farm? He always stops his work and gets the team ready when he sees an auto stuck out here.”

“Oh, that is what he intended to do,” said Cora. “Well, it was very good of him to be so prompt, but we are always able to make our own hills – I don’t really think we will need him.”

“Lots of folks think that way,” said Hope. “But, of course, you ought to know – best. Do you think you can get up the hill?”

“Yes. You see these are practically new machines,” explained Cora, “and we have been taught to run them carefully.”

“Pa says that girls are more careful than men,” added Hope, and Belle kept her eyes on the pretty face beneath the bonnet. She thought she had never seen such dimples, and such splendidly marked brows.

“There comes pa now,” went on the girl. “He will be – ”

“Disappointed, of course. It was too bad for him to leave the fields,” said Cora.

“Well, the rest won’t hurt his poor back,” ventured Hope. “Pa works harder than any of the hired men, and these are very bad hills to farm.”

“Are you ready, young ladies?” called the man from the road, as he backed the sturdy team of horses up close to the *Whirlwind*. “I guess this little machine can hitch behind t’other.”

“Really, we do not think we will need any help,” said Cora, rather confused. “We always take hills without trouble.”

“Never been up this one though,” declared the farmer, with a shake of his broad-brimmed hat. “I reckon you’ll not be able to fly over the top.”

“It’s awfully good of you,” put in Bess. “But suppose we try? You see we do not want to break our records.”

“Plucky, all right,” the man commented. “Well, go ahead, and I’ll stop to chat with Hope. If you get stuck just give me five quick toots, and I’ll be there.”

The girls thanked him profusely, and after cranking up both the *Flyaway* and the *Whirlwind*, said good-bye to Hope and her father, and started off, both machines on low gear.

“It is steep,” remarked Belle to Bess. “Perhaps it would have been well to have taken his offer.”

“All right?” asked Cora from ahead, as she looked back.

“Thus far,” replied Bess, clutching the wheel with nervous energy, and slightly retarding the spark.

Suddenly the *Whirlwind* stopped – but only for an instant, for directly the big four-cylinder car began to back down the steep grade, while Bess and Belle shouted in terror for Cora to turn into the gutter!

Not knowing how deep and dangerous this gutter was, Cora directed the runaway machine well into the side, vainly trying to make the brakes hold.

The next moment there was a crash!

The *Whirlwind*, with Cora in the car, was ditched – turned over on its side!

Bess tooted the horn of the *Flyaway* frantically!

Then she was able to bring her car to a standstill, and run to Cora's assistance.

CHAPTER VI – CORA’S QUEER PLIGHT

Springing to the back of one of the big field horses, Farmer Stevens responded to the frantic summons of the auto horn, and started with the pair up the hill to the assistance of Cora, and the righting of her car, that almost swung between the narrow ledge of land, and the great gulf of mountainous space that lay just beneath the banked up highway.

“Oh, I am so afraid that Cora is hurt,” wailed Belle. “We can’t see her, and she must have been tossed over into the tonneau of the car.”

“She was on the right hand forward seat,” gasped Bess, as both girls ran along to the spot where the *Whirlwind* was ditched, “but she may have sprung out to avoid being thrown down the gully.”

Although Bess was but a short distance behind Cora when the latter’s car met with the mishap, it now seemed a long space of roadway that lay between them. Of course Bess had to bring her car to a safe place, at the side of the thoroughfare, and Belle had to help some, so that it had taken a minute or two to do this, before they could run to Cora. In the meantime Mr. Stevens came along with his horses, and Hope, signalled by the tooting of the horn of the *Flyaway*, had called two of his hired men from the fields, so that the ditched auto and the danger to its driver met with ready assistance.

“Oh, if Cora should be – ” Then Belle checked herself. She had an unfortunate habit of predicting trouble.

Mr. Stevens left his horses by the rail fence through which the *Whirlwind* had passed without hesitation, and Bess was beside him just as he reached the big car.

“Oh, where is she!” wailed the girl, unable longer to restrain her fears.

There was the car, partly overturned but seemingly not damaged. Neither within nor without was there a sign of Cora!

“She must have been thrown down the embankment,” said the man anxiously. “She surely is not with the machine.”

Bess now joined Belle and ran to the edge of the cliff. Almost afraid to look, they peered over the brink.

“Where can she be?” breathed Belle, her hands clasped nervously.

“Cora! Cora, dear!” called Bess. “Where are you?”

“Here!” came what seemed to be a very faint reply.

“Where?” shouted the girls, now making their way down, step by step, over the perilous cliffs.

Farmer Stevens knew every inch of that hill. He often had to rescue from its uncertainties either a sheep or a young cow. He also knew that precisely where the machine was ditched, the hill shelved to a perfectly straight bank, so that instead of an incline the wall of earth actually seemed to run under the surface.

“If she went over there,” he told himself, “she never stopped until – she landed.”

“Oh, Cora!” called the girls again, “can’t you tell us where you are?”

“Look out there, young ladies,” cautioned Mr. Stevens, “or you may go down – double quick!”

Hope was scaling the rocks like a wild creature. The two hired men were almost jumping from cliff to cliff making straight for the clump of hemlock trees at the very edge of the stream, that, in its quiet way, defied the great hill above it.

“Here she is!” called Hope. “Here in the – bed of hemlock!”

To Bess and Belle, not acquainted with the peculiarities of the flat-branched evergreen, finding Cora in “a bed of hemlock” was rather a startling discovery, but to Hope – what nest could have been safer! Cora had fallen over the cliff into the soft branches of a tree that jutted out from the shelving earth.

“Are you hurt?” asked the girl from the farm, looking up into the branch of the big green tree.

“I don’t know – I don’t think so, but I feel queer. I must get down,” Cora managed to say.

By this time the others had reached the spot. Bess and Belle were almost hysterical lest Cora should lose her hold and again fall to a more dangerous landing. But the hired men stationed themselves under the tree, and, with their strong arms netted beneath the giant evergreen, they waited for Mr. Stevens to give an order.

“All ready?” asked Mr. Stevens.

“Yes, sir,” replied the men.

“Young lady, can you get free of the branches?” he called to Cora.

“I am directly over a great hole,” she answered timidly, “and I am afraid I cannot hold on another minute.”

“Then drop,” said the farmer. “We will catch you. Don’t be afraid. You can’t escape the arms of Sam and Frank!”

“Oh, if she should go to the bottom,” wailed Belle, covering her face with her trembling hands and uttering sighs and sobs. Bess was more courageous, but equally frightened.

Sam and Frank stood like human statues. Clapsed hand to wrist, their sunburned arms looked strong and secure.

Presently there was a fluttering in the leaves – a slide through the branches and Cora dropped – down on the human net of arms, safe, and seemingly sound, but too weak to recover herself at once from the strange position.

Gently as could a woman, these farm hands lowered their burden to the soft bed of moss at their feet. Belle and Bess leaned over the quiet form, while Hope hurried to the stream below for some water, which she quickly brought in the strong cup improvised from her stiffened sunbonnet.

“This is spring water,” she said. “Swallow a few mouthfull.”

Cora opened her lips and sipped from the strange cup. Then she turned and tried to rise, growing stronger each instant, and determined to “pull herself together.”

“Wasn’t it silly?” she asked, finally.

“Wasn’t it awful! Are you much hurt?” inquired Belle, fanning Cora with her motor hood.

“Not a bit – that I can tell,” she answered. “That natural – hammock – was a miracle.”

She attempted to rise, but fell back rather suddenly.

“I’ve got a twist somewhere,” she said. “I think my shoulder is sprained.”

Without waiting to be asked to do so Frank, the younger of the farm hands, put his arm about Cora’s waist, and brought her to her feet.

“Oh, thank you,” she stammered rather shyly. “I am sure you have helped me wonderfully. I don’t know how to thank you – all.”

“You can stand, eh?” asked Mr. Stevens, satisfaction showing in his voice, and ruddy face.

“I suppose you feel – that I should have taken your offer for the horses?” she remarked with confusion.

“Well, there is always a first time,” he replied, “but since you are no worse off you must not complain. Guess the boys had better lift you to the road. Then we will see if you can run your car.”

Again, in that straightforward way, peculiar to those who know when they’re right and then go ahead, the “boys” simply picked Cora up, she putting her arms over their shoulders, and while the three other girls wended their way over the cliff, Cora was carried safely back to the spot where still lay the helpless *Whirlwind*.

CHAPTER VII – THE CLUE AT THE SPRING HOUSE

Just how Cora did manage to run her car into Chelton, with a stiffened wrist and a twisted shoulder, she was not able to explain afterward to the anxious ones at home. Belle rode with her, and was sufficiently familiar with the machine to take a hand at the wheel now and then, but it was Cora who drove the *Whirlwind*, in spite of that.

It was now two days since the eventful afternoon at the strawberry patch, and the girls were ready again to make the trip to Squaton, in quest of the crate of berries promised to Mrs. Robinson.

Jack argued that his sister was not strong enough to run her car with ease, so he insisted on going along. Then, when his friends, Ed Foster and Walter Pennington, heard of this they declared it was a trick of Jack's to "do them out of a run with the motor girls," and they promptly arranged to go along also.

Ed rode with Walter, in the latter's runabout, and the twins were, of course, together in the *Flyaway*, while Cora was beside Jack in the *Whirlwind*, for, although the girls were speedily turning into the years that would make them young ladies, they still maintained the decorum of riding "girls with girls" and "boys with boys," except on very rare occasions.

As they rode along, an old stone house, set far back from the highway, attracted Jack's attention.

"Let's stop here," he suggested, "and look over the place. I'll bet it has an open fire place with a crane and fixings, for cooking."

Word was passed to those in the other cars, and all were glad to stop, for the afternoon was delightful, and the ride to Squaton rather short.

As no path marked the grass that led to the old house it was evident that no one had lately occupied it. The boys ran on ahead to make sure that no ghosts or other "demons" might be lurking within the moldy place, while Cora, Bess and Belle stopped to pick some particularly pretty forget-me-nots, from near the spring that trickled along through the neglected place.

Just back of the house, over the spring, the boys discovered the inevitable house for cooling milk, and here they delayed to drink from their pocket cups.

"What's in the other side?" asked Walter, peering through the broken boards into a second room or shed, for the shack was divided into two parts.

"More spring, I suppose," replied Jack, taking his third drink from the small cup.

Walter and Ed had finished drinking just as the girls came up, and Jack attended to their various degrees of thirst for pure spring water.

"What a quaint old place," remarked Belle. "What's in the other little house?"

"We are just about to find out," said Jack. "The other fellows couldn't wait, and are in there now."

Hurrying out, they all entered, through the battered door, into the "other side."

"Well, I declare!" exclaimed Ed. "What does this mean?"

"I also declare, 'what does this mean?'" added Jack, picking up from a queer sort of wooden platform in the place, the unmistakable blue bonnet of a child or young girl.

"And this!" exclaimed Cora, picking up a hat. "This is – Nellie's hat! Nellie from the strawberry patch!"

"They have run away!" gasped Bess, without further investigation, "and here are the remains of their lunch!" The fragments of a very meager meal – some crusts of dry bread – and an empty strawberry box, told the story. "Surely this had been the lunch of the runaways."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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