

Penrose Margaret

# **The Motor Girls on the Coast: or, The Waif From the Sea**



Margaret Penrose

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# Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	14
CHAPTER IV	18
CHAPTER V	22
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

# **Penrose Margaret**

## **The Motor Girls on the Coast; or, The Waif From the Sea**

### **CHAPTER I**

#### **A FLASH OF FIRE**

Filled was the room with boys and girls—yes, literally filled; for they moved about so from chair to chair, from divan to sofa, from one side of the apartment to the other, now and then changing corners after the manner of the old-fashioned game of “puss,” that what they lacked in numbers they more than made up in activity. It was a veritable moving picture of healthful, happy young persons. And the talk – !

Questions and answers flew back and forth like tennis balls in a set of doubles. Repartee mingled with delicate sarcasm, and new, and almost indefinable shades of meaning were given to old and trite expressions.

“You can depend upon it, Sis!” drawled Jack Kimball as he stretched out his foot to see how far he could reach on the Persian rug without falling off his chair; “you can depend upon it that Belle will shy at the last moment. She’s afraid of water, the plain, common or garden variety of water. And when it comes to ripples, to say nothing of waves, she – ”

“Cora, can’t you make him behave?” demanded the plump Belle in question.

“Belle’s too—er—too—tired to get up and do it herself,” scoffed Ed Foster. “May I oblige you, Belle, and tweak his nose for him?”

“Come and try it!” challenged Jack.

“Let Walter do it,” advised Bess, who, the very opposite type of her sister Belle, tall and willowy—æsthetic in a word—walked to another divan over which she proceeded to “drape herself,” as Cora expressed it.

“Well, let’s hear what Jack has to say,” proposed Walter Pennington, bringing his head of crisp brown hair a little closer to the chestnut one of Bess. “He has made a statement, and it is now—will you permit me to say it—it is now strictly up to him to prove it. Say on, rash youth, and let us hear why it is that Belle will shy at the water.”

“It’s a riddle, perhaps,” suggested Eline Carleton, a visitor from Chicago. “I love to guess riddles! Say it again, Jack, do!”

“Why is a raindrop – ” began Norton Randolph, a newcomer in Chelton. “The answer is – ”

“That you can bring water to a horse, even if you can’t make him stand still without hitching,” interrupted Walter. “Go on, Jack!”

“I don’t see much use in going on, if you fellows—and I beg your collective pardons—the ladies also—are to interrupt me all the while.”

“That’s so—let’s play the game fair,” suggested Eline. “Is it a riddle, Jack? Belle is afraid of the water because—let me see—because it can’t spoil her complexion no matter whether it’s salt or fresh—is that it?” and she glanced over at the slightly pouting Belle, whose rosy complexion was often the envy of less happily endowed girls.

“I’m not afraid of the water!” declared Belle. “I don’t see why he says so, anyhow. It—it isn’t—kind.”

“Forgive me, Belle!” and Jack “slumped” from his chair to his knees before the offended one. “I do beg your pardon, but you know that ever since we proposed this auto trip to Sandy Point Cove

you've hung back on some pretext or other. You've even tried to get us to consent to a land trip. But, in the language of the immortal Mr. Shakespeare, there is nothing doing. We are going to the coast."

"Of course I'm coming, too," said Belle. "Stop it, Jack!" she commanded, drawing her plump hand away from his brown palm. "Behave yourself! Only," she went on, as the others ceased laughing, "only sometimes the ocean seems so—so —"

"Oceany," supplied Walter.

"Now Jack—and you other boys also," said Cora in firm tones, "really it isn't fair. Belle is nervous about water, just as the rest of us are about some other particular bugbear, but she is also reasonable, and she has even promised to learn to swim."

Cora brushed from the mahogany centre table a few morsels of withered lilac petals, for, in spite of the most careful dusting and setting to rights of the room, those blooms had a persistent way of dropping off.

"Belle swim!" cried Jack, rising to his feet, since his advances had been repulsed, "why she would have to be done up in a barrel of life preservers, and then she'd insist on being anchored to shore by a ship's cable. Belle swim!"

"Indeed!" retorted his sister, "you'll soon find that the more nervous a girl is, the more persistent she is to learn to swim. She realizes the necessity of not losing her head in the water."

"If she lost her head she wouldn't swim very far," put in Ed with gentle sarcasm.

"Put him out!" ordered Walter. "But say, when are we going to get down to the horrible details, and make some definite plans? This sort of a tea party suits me all right—don't mistake me," he hastened to add, with a glance at Cora, "but if we are going, let's—go!"

"That's what I say," came from Belle. "You won't find me holding back," and she crossed the room to look out of the parlor window across the Kimball lawn.

"My! That's a stunning dress!" exclaimed Jack. "Fish-line color, isn't it?"

"He's trying to make amends. Don't you believe him," echoed Walter.

"Fish-line color!" mocked Cora. "Oh, Jack, you are hopeless! That's the newest shade of pearl."

"Well, I almost hit it," defended Jack. "Pearls are related to fishes, and fish lines are —"

"Oh, get a map!" groaned Ed. "Do you always have to make diagrams of your jokes that way, old man?"

"Let's go outside," proposed Cora. "I'm sure it's getting stuffy in here —"

"Well, I like that!" cried Belle. "After she asked us to come, she calls us stuffy! Cora Kimball!"

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way at all," protested the young hostess. "But it is close and sultry. I shouldn't wonder but what we'd have a thunder-shower."

"Don't say that!" pleaded Jack, in what Walter termed his theatrical voice. "A shower means water, and Belle and water —"

"Stop it!" commanded the pestered one. "Do come out," and she linked her arm in that of Cora. "Maybe we can talk sense if we get in the open."

The young people drifted from the room, out on the broad porch and thence down under the cedars that lined the path. It was late afternoon, and though the sky was clouding over, there shot through the masses now and then a shaft of sun that fell on the walk between the tree branches, bringing into relief the figures that "crunched" their way along the gravel, talking rapidly the while.

"Looks like a rare old reunion," spoke Jack. "I guess we'll do something worth while after all."

"Don't distress yourself too much, old man," warned Ed. "You might get a sun-stroke, you know."

"That's the time you beat him to it," chuckled Walter. "Do they do this sort of thing out your way?" and he addressed pretty Eline.

She blushed a charming pink under her coat of tan—a real biscuit brown, it had been voted by her admirers. She reminded them of a little red squirrel, for she had rather that same timid appearance, and she nearly always dressed in tan or brown, to match her complexion.

“Sometimes,” she murmured.

“Chicago – ” began Jack in rather judicial tones.

“You let Chicago alone!” advised Walter. “I’m looking after Eline. I won’t let them hurt you,” and he moved closer to her. She seemed to shrink, whereat the others laughed.

They walked about for a little while, strolling out to the Kimball garage—a rebuilt stable, where three fine machines now stood, two of them having brought the visitors. Then when they had acquired the necessary breath of air, they went back into the house.

Eline matched herself up to a Chippendale chair, while Belle, always fond of plenty of room, found it on a divan. Bess had secured one of those Roman chairs curved up at both ends, seemingly intended to prevent anyone from sitting anywhere but in the exact center. She assumed a graceful pose—everything Bess did had that attribute.

“My! it is certainly getting warmer!” complained Walter. “Maybe we should have stayed out.”

“We can talk better in here,” was Cora’s opinion. “We’ll need all the breeze that we can get on high gear if this keeps up,” said Ed, with a sigh.

“Oh, but the dust!” exclaimed Bess. “I know I’ll simply choke, and – ”

“Chew gum!” broke in Cora. “That absorbs the dust.”

“Couldn’t we chew chocolates as well?” asked Belle. “I would rather swallow half the dust of the roads from here to Sandy Point Cove and have my throat macadamized, than chew gum.”

“We’ll allow you to make yours chocolate,” conceded Jack, “though chocolates do not allow space for – ”

“Gab,” put in Norton Randolph, who seldom said anything really nice to the girls. Yet he always managed to interest them with his drawl and indifference. “We ought to get out something that would stop the talk when we get to a close turn,” he proceeded. “I’m always afraid some one will release the emergency brake on a down grade, with a rude remark.”

“He’s real bright!” chuckled Ed. “I don’t think!”

“Now, please, let’s get down to business,” suggested Cora, crisply. “The time passes so quickly, and we have a lot of matters to arrange. Bess, I put an extra wrench in your tool-box. I remembered your ability in losing those handy little articles.”

“Thanks,” drawled Bess. “But why stop at a wrench? Why not duplicate all the fixings? What I don’t lose Belle does. But then,” and she turned mocking, pleading eyes on Jack, “your brother is such a dear for fixing us up. I guess the *Flyaway* will be there at the finish.”

“Is it very far where you are going—to Sandy Point Cove?” asked Eline.

“Oh, yes,” answered Walter, “it’s miles and miles, and then more miles. But we are all going, little girl, so don’t worry,” and he struck a stiffly-heroic attitude to show his valor.

“It is a good thing you have a livery-stable-sized garage,” remarked Ed to Cora. “It holds all the cars very nicely.”

“Yes, there isn’t another in Chelton, except the public ones, so well arranged,” added Walter. “But we might have waited until morning to bring the machines here.”

“No, I thought it was best to have them here the night before we were to start,” explained Cora, who was to assume the leadership of the prospective trip. “Some of us might have been tempted to go out on a little spin this evening, and an accident might have occurred that would delay us.”

“Did the *Petrel* get off safely?” inquired Ed.

“Yes,” replied Jack. “It’s in a regular motor boat crate that the man said would stand the journey. I saw it put in the freight car myself, and well braced. It will be there waiting for us when we get to the Cove.”

“I hope it runs,” murmured Walter.

“Don’t be a pessimist—or is it an optimist? I never can tell which from what,” spoke Belle. “I mean don’t be one who’s always looking on the dark side. Look for the silver lining of the clouds.”

“Say, it’s clouding up all right,” declared Jack, as he glanced from the window.

A distant rumble was heard at that moment.

"That's thunder!" exclaimed Belle, "and we have no umbrellas." She glanced at her sister and Eline.

"Better have it rain to-night than to-morrow, when we want to start," said Cora, philosophically.

"Sit by me, Belle," pleaded Jack. "I won't let the bad thunder hurt you."

"We'll all sit by each other!" proposed Walter.

This was a signal for a general change of places, each boy pretending to protect a girl.

"Now don't let's get off the track," went on Cora, when quiet had been restored. "Are you all sure that you want to go directly to the Cove, and don't care for a little side trip before reaching there? Of course it's going to be fine at the shore, and there's enough variety so that each one can find something she or he likes—rocks, ocean, sandy beach, a lighthouse – "

"Where they do light housekeeping?" asked Ed, softly.

"Please don't," Cora begged.

"Any nice girls down there?" asked Jack, making eyes at Eline.

They all started as a particularly loud clap of thunder followed a vivid flash of lightning, and the wind rose suddenly, moaning through the trees.

"I don't believe it will amount to much," was Walter's opinion. "Probably only a wind storm."

"But I guess I'd better put down the windows on the West side," remarked Cora. "I'll be back in a moment – "

As she spoke there came a dash of rain against the side of the house, and another flash of lightning was followed by a vibrating peal.

Cora screamed.

"Oh, what is it?" demanded Bess, nervously. Jack clasped her hand.

"Look!" cried Cora. "The garage—it's on fire. I just saw a flash of flame! Our autos will be burned!"

"We've got to get 'em out!" declared Jack. "Come on, fellows!"

He made a dash for the door. Ed leaped through the low, open window. Walter followed Jack. The girls stood uncertain what to do.

"The lightning struck it!" gasped Eline.

"We must help to get out the autos!" cried Cora. "We must help the boys to fight the fire!"

"Telephone in an alarm!" suggested Bess.

"The autos first! The cars first! We must get them out!" Cora cried as she hurried out of the door, the three other girls trailing after. "If we get the cars out the barn can go!"



## CHAPTER II

### THE STRANGE WOMAN

Only for an instant had Cora Kimball hesitated. Usually she was even more prompt than her brother Jack to get into action, but the flash of fire she had seen in the garage, and the thought of the valuable cars stored there—cars in which they were to make their delightful summer trip—seemed to paralyze her for the time being. Then she was galvanized into life and action.

“Cora, there comes your car out!” cried Bess, as the *Whirlwind*, the powerful Kimball auto, was seen to poke its hood from the now blazing barn. Ed had been the first to reach the structure, and, quickly switching on the self-starter, had run the machine out.

“I guess they can get out the others!” said Belle, as Walter and Jack dashed inside.

Cora suddenly turned and ran back toward the house.

“Where are you going?” asked Eline. “Oh dear! The whole place will soon be afire!”

“That’s what I’m afraid of!” Cora called back, over her shoulder. “I’m going to get some extinguishers! Maybe the boys can’t reach the one in the barn. It’s our only chance—an extinguisher. Water is the worst thing you can put on a gasoline fire. Get some pails of sand, girls!”

“That’s right—sand!” yelled Ed, as he leaped from Cora’s car, having taken it a safe distance down the drive. He went back on the run to help Jack and Ed. The rain was now pelting down, but unmindful of it, the girls drew nearer the burning barn, while Cora sped toward the house.

“Sand—pails?” asked Belle.

“Yes!” cried Bess. “There are some pails over there!” and she pointed toward a pile of gardening tools. “The watering can will be good, too. Scoop up the sand—use your hands!”

She rushed over and picked up one of the pails, an example followed by her sister and Eline.

“Oh, why don’t those boys come out!” cried the latter. “Maybe they are—burned!” she faltered.

“Perhaps they can’t get our car started,” said Bess. “Sometimes it just won’t respond!”

Quickly they filled the pails with sand, and while this is being done, and other preparations under way to fight the fire and save the autos I will take just a moment to tell my new readers something about the characters in this story, and how they figured in previous books of the series.

The first volume, in which Cora Kimball and her chums were introduced, was entitled “The Motor Girls,” and in that they succeeded in unraveling a mystery of the road, though it was not as easy as they at first thought it might be.

Then came “The Motor Girls on a Tour; Or, Keeping a Strange Promise,” and how strange that promise was, not even Cora realized at the time. But in spite of difficulties it was kept and a restoration was made. In the third book, “The Motor Girls at Lookout Beach,” there came the quest for two runaways.

That girls—even young girls—do things on impulse was made clear to Cora and her friends when they sought after the rather foolish creatures who ran such a risk. That only good came of it was as much due to Cora as to anyone else.

“The Motor Girls Through New England” gave Cora and her companions a chance to see something of life under strange circumstances. That one of them would be captured by the gypsies never for a moment entered their heads. But it happened, and for a time it looked as though the results might be serious. But once again Cora triumphed.

The volume immediately preceding the present one is entitled “The Motor Girls on Cedar Lake; Or, The Hermit of Fern Island.” Who the hermit was, and the strange secret he kept so long, and how it was finally solved you will find set down in that book. Then came the return to normal life, but with the prospect of more adventures, on the verge of which we now find Cora and her friends.

They were ready for the summer vacation, and had voted to spend it at Sandy Point Cove—a resort on the Atlantic coast. It was the evening before the start, and they had gathered at Cora's house to arrange final details.

They were to motor to the cove, taking their time, for it was no small distance from Chelton where our friends lived. The motor boat *Petrel* sometimes just called *Pet* for short, had been shipped on ahead.

I think I have already mentioned the names of the young folks. Cora generally came first, by reason of her personality. She was a splendid girl, tall and rather dark, and had somewhat of a commanding air, though she was not at all fond of her own way, and always willing to give in to others if it could be made plain that their way was best. Her mother was a wealthy widow, and there was Jack, Cora's brother, taller than she, darker perhaps and was he handsomer? Cora had, some time before, been given a fine large touring car, and Jack owned a small runabout.

Walter Pennington was Jack's chum, both of them attending Exmouth College, where, of late, Ed Foster had taken a post-graduate course. Ed was very fond of hunting and fishing, and considered himself quite a sportsman.

The Robinson twins were daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Perry Robinson, the father being a wealthy railroad man. He had given the girls a fine car—the *Flyaway* it had been christened—while Jack called his the *Get There*. Sometimes it did, and sometimes it didn't. To go back to the girls. Belle, or Isabel, as she had been christened, was plump and rosy, and her sister Bess, tall, willowy and fair, her rather light hair contrasting with the brown locks of Belle.

Eline Carleton, from Chicago, a distant cousin of Cora had been invited to spend the summer with the Kimballs, and was to go to the Cove. Norton Randolph was a newcomer in town, said to be of a wealthy family. He had only lately made the acquaintance of Jack and his chums, but was rather well liked.

Chelton, as my previous readers know, was a most charming semi-country town, nestling in a bend of the Chelton River, a stream of picturesque beauty. The location was in New England, not so far from the New York line that the trip to the metropolis was a fatiguing one. The young people had often taken it on pleasure bent. And now, not to keep you any longer from the story, which I am afraid I interrupted at a rather critical point, I will merely remark, in passing, that other characters will be mentioned from time to time, some of whom have appeared in previous books.

In the excitement attending the fire, Bess was puffing on her way to the garage, carrying a pail of wet sand that she had scooped up from the driveway. She was followed by the other girls.

"Oh, see the smoke!" cried Eline. "That must be gasoline burning!"

"It is," assented Belle. "Oh, do hurry—somebody!"

Cora came running out of the house, carrying long tin extinguishers, one in each hand, and one under her right arm. She had just bought a new lot, and had intended hanging them in the garage, but had forgotten it.

"These will be just the thing!" she cried. "Don't be frightened! There's not much gasoline in the barn. If we can get out the cars —"

"Something must be the matter!" cried Bess. "The boys—they are in there yet—they may be overcome!"

As if to deny this startling suggestion Jack fairly shot out of the smoke in the *Flyaway*— the car of the twins.

"They have left their own car to the last!" gasped Belle.

"They had to!" Cora panted. "They could only take them as they stood, you know. They were in line. Mine was first, then yours. Oh Jack! is it very bad?"

"A mean little blaze, Sis! Did you 'phone in an alarm?" He wiped his streaming eyes, and, bringing the car up alongside the *Whirlwind*, leaped out to go back to his chums.

"Here! Take these extinguishers!" his sister cried. "I'll get the department in a minute!"

She tossed the tin tubes to Jack, who, catching them, ran back toward the barn. It was raining harder than ever now, but no one seemed to mind it. The girls were totally oblivious of their smart gowns, now badly bedraggled.

“Take this sand!” wailed Belle. “I don’t know what to do with it!”

“Grab this sand from the girls!” yelled Jack to Ed, Walter and Norton, who, at that moment came out in Jack’s car. “Throw it on the blazing gasoline! What kept you?”

“Your car wouldn’t crank!” cried Walter. “It’s all right now, though—just scorched a little in the rear!”

The three lads, Norton clinging to the run-board, got the car to safety, and then raced back, grabbed the sand from Belle, Bess and Eline, and followed Jack into the garage, which was now under a pall of smoke.

The tin tops of the extinguishers were yanked off, and the chemical powder sprinkled toward the blaze. Sand was also cast on it, but the fire had spread more than the boys had thought. The choking fumes, too, drove the amateur blaze-fighters back.

Again Cora came running from the house through the drenching rain.

“I can’t get the fire department on the wire!” she cried. “Something is wrong with the telephone!”

“It’s the storm, I guess,” answered Jack, coming to the door of the old barn that had been converted into a garage. He had to have a breath of air.

“Oh, can we help?” cried Eline.

“Better stay out,” gasped Ed, as he too, came for a little relief. “I guess we can keep it from spreading.”

By this time several men had run in from the street.

“Where’s your water?” asked one.

“Don’t want any!” cried Jack. “It’s gasoline. Get more sand if you want to—dry, if you can find it!”

He kicked one of the empty pails toward the men. A flash of lightning blazed over the structure, and the thunder rumbled as the rain came down harder than ever.

“This rain’ll put it out soon enough!” shouted one of the men helpers. The boys had gone back into the barn, leaving the girls outside.

“I can get some sand in that!” cried Belle, as she saw a pan in front of the dog’s kennel—it was used to contain his dinner. The girl began scooping up in it some of the damp gravel from the drive.

“Don’t! Don’t!” cried her sister. “Drop it. You mustn’t hold metal in a thunder storm.”

“Oh, I’m going in!” exclaimed Eline. “I can’t bear to be in the open when it lightens.”

She darted toward the garage. Instinctively the others followed. There seemed to be less smoke coming out now, and no blaze could be seen.

“I guess they can stop it,” murmured Cora. “Oh, I do hope they can!”

“Let’s go in and help!” cried Bess. “They may need us!”

Bravely the motor girls entered the garage. A shift in the wind had blown the smoke away from the door. They could see the boys and men fighting the flames that were in a far corner of the main room.

Belle suddenly ran forward and dashed on the blaze the pan of sand that she had not relinquished.

“Bravo!” cried Jack. “You’re a heroess!”

He held his hand to his smarting eyes.

“Let me take that extinguisher!” begged Belle, plucking a half-emptied one from him.

“Here’s one for me!” exclaimed Bess, picking it up off the floor. It had not been opened. She knocked off the top and, doing as the others did, she sent the powder in a sweeping motion toward

the flames. Some of the men ran out for more sand. The blaze was being well fought now. There was really no need for the fire department.

Above the place where the autos were stored were rooms formerly occupied by the coachman and his family, before Mrs. Kimball disposed of her horses. The stairs to these rooms were boxed in, a door leading directly to the path that went to the driveway.

"I can go up there and get another extinguisher!" cried Cora, indicating the stairway. "I know there's one there."

"No need to!" exclaimed Ed, who again had to get a breath of fresh air. But Cora was already in the enclosed stairway.

The next moment she shrieked:

"Oh, what is it? Oh dear! Who is it? Come quick—someone!" Everyone was startled—even the danger of the now almost extinguished fire spreading again could not detract from the import of danger they recognized in Cora's voice.

Some one seemed to answer her from the stairway.

"Don't! Please don't! I did not do it! Let me go! Please do!"

"What is it, Cora?" called Jack, preparing to go to her.

His sister had found a woman in the hallway—a strange woman who seemed much excited. Her pleading tones as she confronted Cora touched the girl's heart.

"Don't let them know I am here—not yet!" begged the stranger. "I can explain—everything. Oh, so much depends on this! Please do as I say!"

"All right!" said Cora, making a sudden resolve. "I'll let you explain."

"But keep the others back—they are coming!"

"I'll send them back." Cora took a few steps toward the door. She could hear some one running across the garage floor.

"It's all right!" cried Cora. "Go back and fight the fire, boys. I'll be there in a minute. I want to get that other extinguisher to make certain. But I thought a rat – "

She knew that would be explanation enough for her cries, and from where they were the boys, girls, and men now in the garage could not see her or the strange woman.

"A rat!" cried Jack, with a laugh, as he heard his sister's word. "The idea of being frightened at a rat in a time of fire!"

"I guess the rodents will make short tracks," was Ed's opinion. "Come on, we've got to give it a little more, Jack!"

The boys went back to the fire, Bess, Belle and Eline, who had taken shelter in the garage, watching them. It was pouring too hard to stand outside, and, now that the smoke had mostly disappeared, there was not much discomfort. The danger, too, was practically over, as a can of gasoline that had not burned had been set outside. There had been really more smoke than fire from the first.

Cora went back to the strange woman.

"You need not be afraid," spoke the girl, in a tone that gave encouragement. "We will not blame you too much—until we have heard your story. But of course I must know who you are."

"Yes—yes," answered the woman. She sank down on the stairs. The place was free of smoke, and some distance from the blaze. Suddenly the stranger arose, and clutching Cora's arm in a grip that hurt, and that showed the nervous tension under which she was laboring, she whispered:

"I know I can trust you—I can tell by your face. But the—others!" she gasped.

"Leave it to me," answered Cora. "I may be able to think of a way to help you. Go over into the kitchen, and say Miss Cora sent you. It is so dark now the others will not see you. Hurry."

With her brain in a whirl—wondering upon what strange mystery she had stumbled, Cora thrust the woman forth from the stable. Then, seeing that she advanced toward the house, the girl groped

her way up the stairs to get the extinguisher. When she came down the fire was sufficiently conquered as not to need more attention.

“Did a rat get you?” asked Jack. “Say, you do look pale, Sis,” for the electric lights, with which the garage was illuminated, had been turned on. Truly Cora seemed white.

“There are some big ones up there,” she remarked evasively, wondering if the woman would really go to the house.

With unsteady steps the stranger made her way to the kitchen, where two rather frightened maids were watching the progress made in fighting the fire.

“Miss—Miss Cora told me to come here—and wait for her,” faltered the woman. She made no effort to ascend the steps of the back porch.

“Come right in,” urged Nettie. “Or perhaps you would rather sit out here and watch. I’ll get you a chair.”

“Yes, I would—thank you.”

She walked up and sat down.

“I—I had rather be out in the air,” she went on.

Back in the garage the young people were seeing that no lingering spark remained.

“It is all out,” remarked Bess. “Oh, but we’re so soiled and—and smoky.”

“Regular bacon,” remarked Jack with a grin. He looked like a minstrel because of the grime.

“Oh, wasn’t it a narrow escape!” gasped Belle. “Could the lightning have struck?”

“It didn’t seem so,” remarked Cora, not now so nervous. But she was still puzzled over the presence of that strange woman in the garage at the time of the fire.

“It was gasoline—whatever else it was,” declared Jack. “I can tell that by the smell. Maybe some of that we used in an open pan to clean my machine exploded,” he went on to his chums.

“Could it go off by spontaneous combustion?” asked Ed. “It’s possible,” admitted Walter. “Unless some one was smoking in here—some tramp.”

“Oh, no!” protested Cora quickly. The woman did not seem a tramp—certainly she did not smoke.

“We must get the cars back in here,” said Jack. “The rain is slackening now.” This was so, for the shower, though severe, had not been of long duration. “We want them in shape for to-morrow,” he went on.

“Are we going after all this?” asked Belle.

“Certainly!” exclaimed Cora. “This fire didn’t amount to much.”

“I’m much obliged to you,” spoke Jack to the passing workmen who had come in to help. Jack passed them some money.

“We’ll help you roll the cars in,” suggested one.

“Yes, it will be better to roll them by hand than take chances on starting them up, and making sparks,” said Jack. “Come on, boys!”

“Come on, girls!” echoed Cora. “We’ll go to the house.”

While her brother, his chums and the men were putting the autos back in the garage the girls ran through the slackening rain to the rear porch. There Cora found the strange woman sitting, pathetically weary, in the chair Nettie had brought out. “Oh—some one is here!” gasped Belle, who had nearly stumbled over the figure in the darkness. Then one of the maids opened the kitchen door, and a flood of light came out on the porch.

“Wait a minute, girls,” said Cora, in a low voice. “I think I have a little surprise for you.” She motioned to the strange woman.

## CHAPTER III

### A STRANGE STORY

“Come inside,” Cora said, while the others looked on in amazement. Who could this strange, elderly woman be? Where had she come from? And Cora appeared to know her.

“One of Cora’s charity-cronies,” Ed whispered to Norton, who stood inquisitively near. “Come on. She knows how to take care of that sort.” The boys after putting back the autos had come on to the house.

Jack and Walter were evidently of Ed’s opinion, for they also passed into the house with not more than a glance at the woman. Bess lingered near Cora.

“We will go in here,” Cora said kindly, as she opened from the kitchen a door that led into a room used for special occasions, when many dishes were served. “Then I can have a chance to talk with you. Perhaps you are hungry?” she added.

The woman looked about her as if dazed. Cora saw that she had a face of rather uncommon type. Her deep-set gray eyes were faded to the very tint of her gray hair, and her cheeks, though sunken, outlined features that indicated refinement. Her clothes were very much worn, but comparatively clean and of good material. She wore no hat, nor other head covering.

“Yes, I am hungry, I think,” the woman said. “But I need not keep you from your friends. If you will just have a cup of tea sent in here to me.”

“Oh, they don’t mind,” Cora said, with a laugh. “My friends can be with me any time.” The other girls had gone to get rid of the grime of the fire, as had the boys.

“Very well,” said the woman. “You are so kind.”

Cora scarcely heard this for she was out in the kitchen giving some orders. She soon returned to the little room, and took a chair opposite her guest.

“How did you come to be in the barn?” she asked.

“I went in—to rest,” answered the woman wearily.

“Of course,” Cora said, as if that were an explanation. “But I won’t ask you to talk any more until you have had your tea. There,” as Nettie placed a tray of refreshment beside her, “let me give you your tea first, then you will feel more like talking.” The tea was poured when Jack entered. He looked at Cora questioningly.

“This woman was out in the storm,” Cora truthfully explained without making a clear statement, “and I insisted that she come in.”

“Why, of course,” assented the good-natured brother. “But say, Cora,” and he changed the subject tactfully. “Wasn’t it a good thing mother was not at home? She would have been scared to death.”

“Oh, I know we always have to get mother off first,” she replied. “When we are arranging a trip I count on—happenings.”

“This is your brother?” asked the woman, who seemed to have revived under the influence of that cup of tea.

“Yes,” Cora replied. “Have some of the ham. And some bread.”

A particularly sharp flash of lightning blazed through the room. The storm was not over yet. The three girls from the parlor threw the door of the pantry open, and stood there with very white faces. Even Belle, the rosy one, had gone pale again.

“Oh, do come in here,” wailed Belle. “I am so frightened!”

“With all the others near you?” Cora asked, smiling. Then, seeing the actual terror of her friends she did stand up to comply. “I suppose it was the fire,” apologized Eline. “We are especially nervous to-night.”

“Yes, do go,” begged the woman, “and when I have finished, I will show my gratitude by telling you all a very strange story. One forgets fear, sometimes, when a matter of deeper interest is brought up.”

“Very well,” assented Cora. “I will be back in a few minutes, and then we will all be primed for the wonderful story.”

“What is it?” whispered Jack in the passage-way, as the girls entered the library.

“Hush!” Cora cautioned. “I found her—in the barn.”

“The barn! Before the fire?” he gasped. “Did she – ?”

“After it was—going,” Cora managed to say. Then she put her finger to her lips.

The young folks, at least the girls, insisted upon huddling in the very darkest corner of the room.

“Don’t go near the phonograph,” cautioned Eline. “Musical sounds are very dangerous during a storm, I’ve heard.”

Then the absurdity of “musical sounds” from a silent phonograph occurred to her, and she laughed as quickly as did the others.

“Well it’s metal at any rate,” she amended, “and that is just as bad.” “Who’s your friend, Cora?” Ed asked, in an off-hand way.

“Oh, she is going to tell us a wonderful story,” put in Bess before Cora could reply. “Wait until she has finished her tea.”

“She looks like a deserted wife,” Belle ventured softly, in her usual strain of romance.

“What’s the indication?” asked Walter somewhat facetiously. “Now, do I look anything like a deserted lover?”

Cora got up and went out into the pantry again. She found the woman standing, waiting for her.

“I do not know if I was wise or foolish to have made that promise,” she said. “But as I have made it I will stand by it. I feel also that to talk will do me good. And, after all, what have I to fear more than I have already suffered?”

“We have no idea of insisting on your confidence,” Cora assured her. “But, of course, I would like to know why you went in *our* garage.”

“And I fully intend to tell you,” replied the woman. “Are you all young folks?”

“Just now, we are alone,” answered Cora. “We are going away to-morrow, and were finishing our arrangements when the barn caught fire.”

“I scarcely look fit to enter your—other room,” the woman demurred, with a glance at her worn clothing. “But I assure you I have been no place where there has been illness, or anything of that sort.”

“You are all right,” insisted Cora. “Come along. I am sure the girls are more frightened than ever now, for the storm is more furious.” The thunder and lightning seemed to be having “a second spasm,” as Jack put it.

A hush fell upon the little party as the strange woman entered. Even the careless one, Norton, looked serious. Somehow the presence of a gray-haired, lonely woman, in that unusually merry crowd, seemed almost a painful contrast.

“Sit here,” said Cora, pulling a chair out in a convenient position. “And won’t you take off your cape?”

“No, thank you,” replied the stranger. “I must talk while I feel like it, or I might disappoint you.” This was said with a smile, and the young folks noted that though the woman showed agitation, her eyes were now bright, and her voice firm.

“Very well,” Cora acceded. Then the woman told her strange story.

“Some time ago I was employed in an office. I had charge of the cataloging of confidential papers. I had been with the firm only a short time, when one day,” she paused abruptly, “one day I was very busy.

“A big piece of business had just been transacted, and there was a lot of ready cash in the office. It was my duty to see that the record of all finished business was entered in the books, and I was intent upon that task.”

Again she paused, and in the interval there came a flame of lightning followed by a roar of thunder.

“My, what a storm!” gasped the woman. “I’m glad I am not out in it.”

The remark seemed pathetic, and served to distract the most nervous of the girls from a fear that they otherwise would have felt.

“We are glad you are with us,” Belle ventured, as Cora hastened out into the kitchen, to make sure that all was right there.

The maids had been startled. Nettie was assuring a new girl that thunder storms were never disastrous in Chelton, but the latter had suddenly become prayerful, and would not answer the simplest questions. Assuring herself that Nettie could take care of the girl and two newly hired men, who had assembled in the kitchen, Cora went back to the library.

“Well, that day,” continued the woman, “marked my life-doom. As I worked over my books, and counted the money, I saw two men standing in the door. A young girl clerk—Nancy Ford—was nearest to them. As she saw them she screamed, and darted past them out—out somewhere in this big world, and I have never been able to find her since.”

The woman put up both hands to cover her pallid face, and sighed heavily. No one spoke. Eline had shifted her chair, unconsciously, very near the stranger, and sat with rapt attention waiting for the continuation of the story.

“Then,” went on the woman, “when Nancy Ford was gone I saw the men come toward me! I screamed, put my hand upon the cash I was counting—and then—they hit me!”

“Oh!” gasped Cora, involuntarily. “They robbed you!”

“Yes, they robbed me!” repeated the woman. “Not only of my employer’s money, but of my reputation, for the story I told afterward was not believed!”

“How dreadful!” exclaimed Bess, clasping her hands.

The boys, less demonstrative, did not interrupt with a single syllable. But they were impressed, nevertheless.

“Yes, I was discharged! I was shocked into a nervous collapse, and ever since I have been searching for Nancy Ford. Why did she run before any harm was done? Why did she flee at the sight of the men, who showed no indication of being robbers? Why did Nancy Ford not return to clear my name? I went to the hospital and was there for months. Oh, such terrible months! I was threatened with brain fever, from that mental searching for Nancy, but she never returned!”

Belle was stirred to sympathy by the recital, and, while no one saw her, brushed by the woman’s chair and slid into the gaping pocket of her cape her own little silver purse.

“My name is Margaret Raymond—Mrs. Raymond. I am a widow,” went on the woman finally, “and I am not ashamed or afraid now to have the world know who I am. I loved Nancy: she was almost like a daughter to me, and I would have trusted her with anything. But now—she has deserted me! And no one else can ever clear my name!”

“No one else?” Cora repeated.

“Some of the firm members believed my story, but it was vague and one could scarcely blame them for doubting it,” said Mrs. Raymond.

“Didn’t it look bad for the girl?” Jack asked. “She ran away?”

“Yes, it did, but a girl somehow has a better chance than an old woman,” said Mrs. Raymond sadly, though she was not so very old. “They thought she was scared into flight, and afraid to come back. Oh, when sympathy is on one’s side it is easy to make excuses! I was on my way to look for work when the storm overtook me. I went in your garage. My hat blew away.”



“We will do anything we can to assist you,” Cora declared. “Your story seems true, and we have the advantage of some leisure time.”

“And a good heart, besides brains,” the woman said emphatically. “My child, you have a great chance in life. May no misfortunes rob you of it.”

The storm had moderated somewhat. The strain of the strange story made a deep impression upon the listeners, and the young men, quick to realize this effect upon their girl friends, now proposed that they all go outside and see “what the weather looked like.”

Anxious to know the prospects for the long auto tour they were to take on the following morning, all now hurried to the side porch, leaving the woman alone.

“My, isn’t it beautiful!” exclaimed Eline. “How sweet everything smells!”

“And that little breeze,” said Ed, “will soon dry up the mud. I am glad it did not rain longer.”

“If it did,” added Walter, “we would have to load up with planks to bridge over the bad places. Can’t depend on rail fences over where we’re going.”

For some time they stood admiring the newly-made beauties of the wonderful out-doors, then Cora thought perhaps she might arrange for Mrs. Raymond to stay in the servants’ quarters over night. They had left the woman rather abruptly, she feared.

Cora asked Jack what he thought, and he agreed that the woman’s story sounded plausible, and that it was their duty to do what they could to assist her, if they could. But he did not seem very keen.

With the intention of asking Mrs. Raymond to remain, Cora left the others and went back to the library.

No one was in the room!

“Perhaps she went into the kitchen,” Cora thought, opening the door through the hallway to that room.

“Where’s Mrs. Raymond; the strange woman?” she asked Nettie.

“She did not come out here,” replied the maid. “Isn’t she with you?”

“No, we left her in the library,” Cora replied, and without further inquiry she looked down the driveway and could just see a vanishing shadow turn into the road. But it may not have been Mrs. Raymond.

“I guess she’s gone,” continued Cora to Nettie. “And I am sorry, for we wanted to keep her for the night. Well, I hope the poor creature was cheered up some. She seemed to need encouragement. We did all we could, perhaps.”

“Is she gone?” asked Bess, when they all had come in again, having satisfied themselves that fine weather was promised for the morning. “I hoped she would tell us more about the Ford girl—give us a description of her, at least. We might run across her somewhere.”

“It all seemed rather weird,” said Cora. “But really we must be on the lookout. Who knows but we may help unravel the mystery?”

“But why did the woman hurry off so?” asked Belle, as if any one present knew.

“Suppose she thought we might think she caused the fire,” Ed answered. “It looked strange for her to be in the barn at that time. But anyone could see that it was a small explosion—too much gas somewhere.”

“Well, all we know about Nancy is her name,” observed Cora. “We will have to trust to motor girls’ luck for the rest. But I love a mystery.”

“Of course,” Eline declared, “if we could have the wonderful luck to find that girl we might be able to clear the poor woman’s name. It looked to me as if the girl was in league with the robbers when she ran before they entered the room.”

“No use speculating,” Cora commented. “Better finish our arrangements. It’s getting late.”

## CHAPTER IV ON THE ROAD

There was more “finishing” to be done than even Cora had thought, and, with her usual habit of looking after matters, she had counted on much. But the thunder-shower, the fire, the finding of the strange woman, and listening to her still more strange story all combined to make the affair of getting ready for the trip in the morning no easy one.

But Cora was determined to carry out the plans as agreed on, so when her friends showed a disposition to delay, and dwell in conversation on the recent happenings, she “brought them up with a round turn,” as Jack expressed it.

“I just can’t get over that queer woman,” observed Belle, during a lull in the talk, while Cora was jotting down in a pretty red leather notebook some matters she did not want to forget. “She had such—such a patient face.”

“Maybe she was tired of waiting for a new one,” suggested Norton, who was usually flippant. “I’ve heard that ladies can get new faces at these—er—beauty parlors.”

“It’s a pity there isn’t some sort of a parlor where one can get—manners!” murmured Eline. She seemed to have taken a distinct dislike to the new young man.

Belle and Bess, who had overheard the remark, looked rather askance at Cora’s relative, but said nothing.

“Now then!” exclaimed the young hostess, “since you have all gotten rid of as much of the effects of the fire as possible, we’ll go over the main points to be sure nothing will go wrong. Oh, that’s something I almost forgot. I must send mamma our address.”

Mrs. Kimball had gone to Europe for a summer tour, leaving her daughter and son at home. When they went to the Cove the house would be in charge of a care-taker. Cora had not fully determined on her vacation plans when her mother went away, and now there was necessity for forwarding the address.

“I’ll attend to that the last thing to-night,” Cora went on. “I’ll send mother a long letter, and write again as soon as we get settled at the Cove.”

“If we ever *do* get settled,” murmured Walter. “Say, boys, am I any less—hammy?” and he sniffed at his coat about which still lingered the smell of gasoline.

“You’re of the ham—saltiest—or hammiest!” declared Ed.

“You may break, you may burn the garage if you will  
The taste of the gasoline stays with it still.”

It was Walter who mis-quoted this couplet.

“Oh, boys, please do be quiet!” begged Cora. “We will never get anything done if you don’t!”

“It strikes me we got considerable done a short time ago, when we put that fire out,” remarked Jack. Cora looked sharply at him.

“I’ll be good, Sis—don’t shoot—I’m coming down,” he exclaimed, and he “slumped” at Eline’s feet and made a fruitless endeavor to hold her slim, pretty hand.

“Stop!” she commanded with a blush.

“That’s my privilege!” called Ed, as he made a quick move, but the visitor from the Windy City escaped by getting behind Bess, who was in the Roman chair.

“If you don’t — ” began Cora determinedly, and then she changed her tone. “Please — ” she pleaded.

“After that—nothing but silence!” came from Walter. “Go easy, boys!”

Silence did reign—or, considering the shower, might one not say “rain” for a moment? Cora resumed.

“We are to start as early in the morning as possible,” she said. “I figured—or rather Jack and Ed did—that the trip to Sandy Point Cove would take about three days—perhaps four if—if anything happened like tire trouble. But we are in no hurry, and we can spend five days on the road if we like.

“My cousin, Mrs. Fordam, will go along with us as a chaperone, so that stopping at hotels will be perfectly—proper.”

“I thought it was always proper to stop at a hotel—when you had the price!” ventured Jack.

“You don’t understand,” declared his sister, giving him a look. “So Cousin Mary will be on the trip with us. I guess you all know her, except Eline and Norton. She’s jolly and funny.”

“Why can’t she go right on to the Cove with us, and chaperone there, too?” Belle wanted to know.

“Because Mamma’s aunt—Mrs. Susan Chester—is to look after us there. You’ll like Aunt Susan, I’m sure.”

“Are we to call her that?” Ed asked.

“Of course—she won’t mind,” spoke Cora. “Well, as I said, we’ll go to the Cove—taking whatever time we please. There are two bungalows there, you know, and we girls are to have the larger one, so — ”

“Well, I like that!” cried Jack, sitting up. “As if we fellows could dress in a band-box.”

“Oh, your place is plenty big enough—you know it is!” retorted his sister. “And you know when you and I went down to look at them you said you liked the smaller one best, anyhow.”

“Did I?” inquired Jack, slightly bewildered.

“You certainly did!”

“Now will you be good?” laughed Walter.

“We girls need more room anyhow,” was the opinion of Bess, calmly given.

“Nothing more to say,” declared Ed, sententiously. “I know how many dresses each of you is going to take now. Slay on, Macbeth!” and he closed his eyes resignedly.

“Everything will be ready for us at the bungalows,” went on Cora. “Aunt Susan has promised to see to that.”

“How about—er—grub—not to put too fine a point upon it?” asked Jack.

“The refreshments will be there,” Cora answered, pointedly.

“Oh my! Listen to that!” mocked Ed.

“We’ll have to put on our glad rags for dinner every night, fellows—notice that—I said dinner! Ahem!”

“Please be quiet!” begged Cora. “Now we’re at the bungalows,” and she consulted her list.

“Come out for a swim” cried Walter, imitating a seal, and barking like one.

“I mean in imagination,” added Cora. “There, I think that is all. Our trunks and suit cases are nearly packed, Cousin Mary will be here later to-night, ready to start in the morning with us. Our route is all mapped out, and I guess we can count on a good time.”

“Are the bungalows near the beach?” asked Eline.

“Almost on it,” answered Cora. “At high tide and with the wind on shore the spray comes on the porches!”

“Oh dear!” exclaimed Belle, apprehensively. “I know — ”

“You’re going to learn to swim, you promised!” cried Cora. “Can anyone think of anything else?”

They all could, and promptly proceeded to do so, a perfect babel of talk ensuing. Some forgotten points were jotted down and then, as it was getting late, the young people dispersed, promising to meet early in the morning. It had stopped raining when they went out, so there was no need to hunt up umbrellas.

“Cora,” said Jack, a bit solemnly, as he was helping her lock up for the night, “was there anything about that strange woman that you didn’t tell us?”

“Not a thing, Jack, except that I discovered her in the stairway that time I screamed, and I let you think it was a rat. Then I told her to hurry in the house without being seen. I saw she was in no condition to talk then. That was all.”

“Good for you, Sis. You managed it all right. But I would like to get at the bottom of her trouble.”

“So would I. Perhaps we may—later. Good-night,” and they separated.

The next day was all that could be wished for. The sun shone with revived and determined energy, as it always seems to after a rain, when it “has been deprived of its proper set the night before,” to quote Jack. The roads had dried up nicely, and everything pointed to a most delightful trip.

An investigation by Jack in the daytime proved that the fire had done very little damage to the barn. A close inspection seemed to indicate that spontaneous combustion of some gasoline carelessly left in an open can had caused it. Jack’s car was not enough scorched to be more than barely noticeable from the rear.

Cousin Mary had arrived on time, and helped Cora get ready. Jack ran the three cars out of the stable before his friends arrived, and had them ready for the passengers. Gasoline and oil tanks had been filled the day before, and the motors gone over to insure as perfect service as possible. Tires had also been looked after.

Jack and Ed were to go together in the former’s *Get There*, Cora, in her big maroon *Whirlwind* would have Eline as her passenger, the tonneau being taken up with luggage.

Norton Randolph, who owned a small, but powerful car, had invited Walter to go with him, Norton being included in the invitation to go “bungaloafing by the sea,” as Jack characterized it. He was really good company after one had become used to some of his mannerisms. The Robinson twins, of course, would use their own car. The girls, including Cora, were no longer amateur motorists, but could drive their machines with a skill equal to that of the boys.

Norton arrived soon after Walter and Ed, coming up in his car, which was kept in a public garage.

“Where is your cousin going to ride, Cora?” asked Belle, as they hurried the final preparations. “I don’t see how you can get her in your machine, with those trunks and things in the tonneau.”

“That’s so!” exclaimed Cora, with a tragic gesture. “I knew I had forgotten something. I had down on my notes ‘Cousin Mary—where?’ and I took it to mean where would I put her to sleep. I see now it was where should I put her to ride.”

“Let her come with us!” exclaimed Bess. “You can take one of our suit cases in your car, and that will leave plenty of room for your cousin.”

“I guess that’s all we can do now,” said Cora. “Oh, dear, I thought I had fixed everything!”

“Don’t fuss, my dear!” exclaimed Mrs. Fordam. “It will be all right. Your car is so big that I’m really afraid of it.”

So it was arranged, and when a few other forgotten matters had been settled, Cora gave the last instructions to the care-taker of the Kimball home, and blew a blast on her auto horn as a signal to start.

“At last we are off!” sighed Eline, as she sat beside Cora. “It seems as if time moves slowest of all at the end.”

“It really does,” agreed Cora. “I’m glad we are able to start. When I saw that blaze in the garage—Oh, my dear, you’ve no idea how my heart sank. It almost stopped beating.”

“I can imagine so. What a pretty suit you have,” and she glanced admiringly at Cora’s smart motoring costume. It was a light biscuit shade, of a material that would stand wear, and not show the stains of travel.

“Your own is fully as pretty—perhaps a little too nice,” returned Cora. Eline had made rather elaborate preparations for her Eastern trip, as regarded dress. But she was within good taste, for she ran much to harmonizing shades—perhaps too much so.

“Are we going at this snail’s pace all day?” cried Jack to his sister. “Can’t you move faster?”

“We want the good people of Chelton to have a chance to admire us,” called Belle.

“Shall we pass her?” asked Norton of Walter. “My car can easily get ahead of the *Whirlwind*.”

“Don’t do it,” Walter advised. “I don’t believe Cora would like it. And really, she arranged this affair, so she ought to make the pace.”

“All right,” assented the new lad, and he had the good sense to see the wisdom of the advice.

They passed the Robinson home, the twins waving and being waved at, and then the four autos turned out on the main road that led into a glorious country—a country doubly glorious this morning because of the rain of the night before.

They were really on the road at last, and as Cora glanced down it, her gloved hands firm on the steering wheel, she could not help wondering if it was this road that the strange and perhaps misunderstood woman had taken when she fled so silently from the Kimball house. Also Cora wondered if she would ever meet her again. The chances were against it and yet —

“Really so many strange things have happened to us on some of our auto trips,” she explained to Eline as they talked it over, “that I would not be surprised if we did see her again—and perhaps — ”

“Even that Nancy Ford!” supplied Eline.

“Oh, that would be too much to expect, my dear!” said Cora, with a laugh. “We turn here!” she added, “just hold out your hand, Eline.”

“Hold out my hand?” Eline asked, wonderingly, as she stretched it straight out in front of her. “What for?”

“No, I mean out at the side of the car,” explained Cora. “It is a sign to whoever is coming behind that you are going to turn. It prevents accidents.”

“Oh, I see,” and this time the Chicago girl did it properly.

## CHAPTER V

### A FLOCK OF SHEEP

“What a delightful road!”

“Isn’t it splendid!”

“Too perfect!”

It was Cora who made the first remark, Eline who answered and the Robinson twins who chorused the third. The highway was so wide, and there was so little traffic thus early in the morning, that the two cars could run side by side. On high gear with the gas throttled down they made scarcely any noise, so that conversation was possible.

“I don’t know what I have done to enjoy such pleasure,” said Mrs. Fordam.

“Are you really enjoying it, Cousin Mary?” inquired Cora.

“Indeed I am, my dear! I wouldn’t have missed it for a good deal. I never knew before how delightful it was to be chaperone to such nice girls.”

“I’m sorry I can’t stop steering long enough to pass you a chocolate candy!” exclaimed Bess. “Belle, you will have to do it for me. Such compliments!”

“No, I really mean it,” declared Mrs. Fordam, earnestly.

“Wait until the boys begin to cut up,” warned Cora.

“Oh, I know Jack of old,” returned the chaperone. “He can’t do anything very bad.”

“They seem to be hatching up some sort of a plot back there,” remarked Eline, as she looked to the rear where Jack’s gaudy red and yellow car was careening alongside the *Beetle*— that owned by Norton. It had been so christened because of its low, rakish appearance, and the fact that it was painted a dead black. It was not a pretty car, but it had speed, as Norton often boasted.

“Oh, I’ve no doubt they will do something,” conceded Belle. “But we can do things too!”

They ran on for some distance, this stretch of the road being particularly fine. They were under a perfect arch of maple trees, which, being planted on either side of the road, mingled their branches over the centre, affording a delightful shade. It was needed, too, in a measure, for the sun, creeping higher and higher in the blue sky, was sending down beams of heat, as well as light. There was gentle wind, which was accentuated by the motion of the machines.

“Is it hard to learn to drive a car?” asked Eline, as Bess and Belle combined in telling Mrs. Fordam something of the excitement of the previous night, she not having arrived until it was over.

“It is, my dear, at first,” Cora explained. “Then it all seems to come to you at once. Why you’d never believe it, but first I used to imagine I was going to hit everything on the road. I gave objects such a wide berth that everyone laughed at me. But I did not want to take chances. Now watch!”

She speeded up a little, and turning to one side seemed to be headed straight for a tree.

“Oh!” screamed Eline, and Bess and Belle echoed the cry.

“There!” cried Cora, as she skillfully passed it, far enough off for safety, as even the most careful motorist would admit, but near enough to make an amateur nervous. “You see what it is to have confidence,” she added to Eline.

“Yes,” was the somewhat doubtful comment.

“Cora, dear, I wouldn’t take those risks if I were you,” rebuked her Cousin Mary, gently.

“Oh, it wasn’t a risk at all! I had perfect control. I just wanted to show Eline what practice will do. I am going to teach her to drive.”

“I’ll never learn!” was the nervous protest.

The road narrowed about a mile farther on, but before the cars lengthened out into single file again, Belle asked:

“Where are we to lunch, Cora?”

"I planned on stopping at Mooreville. There is a nice, home-like restaurant there. We'll be in Churchton soon, and we can stop there and 'phone in to have a meal ready for a party of nine."

"That would be a good idea."

Churchton was soon reached, and Jack found he had a puncture. While he stopped to put a new inner tube into service Cora got the restaurant on the wire and made arrangements.

"Now will you please be good?" Jack begged of his car, when the tire had been pumped up again. "This is a bad beginning for you, old *Get There*."

"If it makes good you can tack on another title when we're in Chelton again," suggested Ed.

"What?"

"Call it *Get There and Back*."

"I believe I will!" laughed Jack. "Sorry to delay you," he said to the others, for they waited for him after Cora had finished telephoning.

"It's all right," spoke Walter, good-naturedly. "We have plenty of time."

Once more they were under way. The road was now not so good, and in places positively bad. But they knew they would soon be on better ground, and on a fine highway leading into Mooreville.

Later they were on a narrow thoroughfare, so narrow, and with such deep ditches on either side, that it would take no small skill to pass another vehicle in certain places. Then, as Cora made a turn, the road ahead being hidden by a thick growth of trees, she saw straggling along the highway a big flock of sheep, tended by a man and two beautiful collie dogs. The fleecy animals straggled and spread out over the whole road.

"Oh dear!" Cora cried, as she slowed down. "Isn't this provoking! We can't get past them."

"Why not?" asked Eline.

"Because they are so—so straggly. They take up the whole road, and if I tried to pass I'd be sure to run over one of them. Oh! what a shame!"

"We've got to take it slowly!" she called back to the twins, who were just behind her. "I can't take a chance of threading my way through all these animals."

"This is tough luck!" complained Jack, as he saw what the trouble was.

The herder looked up stolidly, puffing on a short pipe, and called to one of the dogs, who leaped off to drive back into the flock a sheep that showed a propensity to lag behind.

"Can't you try to pass them?" asked Eline. "I'm sure you could do it."

"I'd rather not," answered Cora.

"Don't you dare!" cautioned Bess, who heard what was said.

"But we'll be late for lunch—and it has been ordered," wailed Belle. "And I'm so hungry!"

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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