

Penrose Margaret

**The Motor Girls at Camp
Surprise: or, The Cave in
the Mountains**



Margaret Penrose

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CHAPTER I – AN UNPLEASANT AWAKENING

“Look where you are steering, Cora Kimball! You nearly ran over a chicken that time.”

“Yes, and avoiding the chicken on that side, you nearly hit a child on this side. Such a dear little boy – or was it a girl? I never can tell when they’re so young.”

“Two misses are as good as two miles,” misquoted the bronzed girl at the wheel of the automobile, as she straightened the car on the long, shaded road, where the trees met in a green archway overhead, and where the golden shadows flitted in the dust like so many little chickens running to cover, away from the fat-tired wheels.

“Why are you in such a hurry, Cora?” asked Bess Robinson, as she tucked back a straying lock of brown hair. “It’s too perfect a day to do anything in a hurry – even run a car.”

“Bess doesn’t believe in doing *anything* in a hurry,” lazily droned her sister Belle, from the rear seat. “That’s why she’s so fat.”

“Don’t dare use that objectionable word!” stormed Bess, turning about so suddenly that she sent Cora’s elbow against the plunger of the horn, thereby producing a sudden blast.

“Oh!” exclaimed Bess. “Did we run into something again?”

“Again?” demanded Cora. “Come, I like that – not! We haven’t run into *anything* yet.”

“That chicken,” murmured Belle, even more lazily. “Yes?”

“Was a good fifty feet out of danger!” declared Cora indignantly.

“And what of the child?”

“That never *was* in danger. I didn’t see him – her or it – until we had passed. But the child – gender unknown – was playing in the dust beside the road. Queer how mothers can let them.”

“Probably the mother didn’t know a thing about it,” said Bess, who had discovered that she was the sole cause of the needless alarm in regard to the horn’s blast. “One can’t be always on the lookout.”

“Don’t start a discussion,” begged Cora, as a backward glance showed some signs of Belle’s stirring up sufficiently to refute her sister’s remarks. “It’s too hot.”

“It is when you slow down,” observed Bess. “But the breeze is perfectly fascinating when you keep the car moving, Cora.”

“Well, I don’t intend to slow down right away. Have you girls any particular desire to go to any particular place?”

“Spare us all nerve-racking *particulars* on a day like this,” entreated Belle, sliding down into a more comfortable position in the big, cushioned seat she occupied all alone. “It is so warm! Summer is coming with a vengeance.”

“And it makes me wish we had set the date of our departure for Camp Surprise a week or so earlier,” remarked Cora. “I wonder if we could arrange to go any sooner.”

“I could,” declared Bess. “I haven’t a thing to do.”

“Except reduce,” put in her sister tantalizingly.

“Belle Robinson! If you don’t stop those mean, insinuating remarks, I’ll – I’ll – ”

“You won’t give me any more of those chocolates you sneaked into your bag as we were coming out,” finished Belle. “I saw you, and you know what Dr. Blake told you would happen if you didn’t stop eating sweets. You’ll get so – ”

“These aren’t sweet!” interrupted Bess. “They’re the bitter kind, and they’re delicious, too. They have them so fresh at Gordon’s.”

“It’s a wonder she wouldn’t give us a chance to decide for ourselves, instead of introducing expert testimony on her own account,” laughed Cora. “Come, Bess, out with them!”

“Certainly,” agreed the plump girl, with easy grace. “I intended to share them all along, but it was so warm – ”

“Don’t say warm again!” drawled her sister. “Your nose is as shiny now as a tin teakettle.”

“Belle Robinson! It is not!”

Instantly Bess had her little mirror and vanity box in use, and a quick dab on her rather up-turned nose did away with the condition complained of, or at least alleged, by her sister.

“There, does that satisfy you?” she asked, turning about for inspection, as Cora swung the big car around a turn in the road.

“Oh, I’m easily satisfied,” Belle murmured. “What a perfectly gorgeous view!” she cried, as she looked down from a height toward a village that lay nestled in a green valley, girt around by a winding, silvery river, glimpses of which could be had now and then between the trees that lined the shores.

“Yes, it is a good view,” agreed Cora, stopping the car. “Cheerful Chelton looks even more amiable and love-like than usual to-day. It’s cooler up here, too. Now pass over those chocolates, Bess.”

“And watch her get more and more – well, I’ll say plump – before your eyes, like that fat boy Scott tells about,” laughed Belle.

“It wasn’t Scott’s fat boy. He was in Dickens,” corrected Cora. “Nicholas Nickleby, I think.”

“Pickwick Papers!” voiced Bess. “There! I know something even if I am – plump. But, girls, I have lost five pounds in the last month.”

“Not so’s you’d notice it,” murmured Belle.

“Cease! Cease and have done!” admonished Cora. “How does that new one go – two slow and one quick to the side and then – ”

“Not slow at all!” interrupted Bess. “You’ve got to follow through or you’ll slice the ball and – ”

“What in the world are you talking about?” demanded Cora, her eyes opening wide. “Slice the ball? What’s that in? The fox trot?”

“I was speaking of golf,” murmured Bess.

“She’s taken it up to – reduce,” whispered Belle.

“I thought you meant that new three-step we tried the other night,” came from Cora.

“It’s too warm even to talk about dancing,” declared Belle. “Really we must think of getting away sooner. Do you think we could get that bungalow at Camp Surprise earlier than we had planned to take it, Cora?”

“I don’t know. Mother made all the arrangements. But I can find out. Do you really think you’d like to go sooner?”

“I certainly do,” murmured plump Bess, who seemed to feel the sudden summer heat more than did Cora, or the more svelt Belle. “Oh, by the way, Cora! why do they call it Camp Surprise?”

“I meant to ask that, too,” added Belle. “It’s such an odd name.”

“And there’s an odd story connected with it,” said Cora. “I’ll have to ask mother about it. She merely mentioned it, and something else came up so I forgot to get the particulars. I’ll find out when we go back. But if you girls are really in earnest about starting our summer vacation a little earlier this year – ”

“I most certainly am in earnest,” Bess said.

“And I,” added her sister.

“Then I’ll see what we can do,” went on the girl at the wheel. “Oh dear! I wish I hadn’t eaten those chocolates!” she exclaimed, making a wry face. “I ought to have known better. Candy always makes me thirsty, and I didn’t bring the vacuum bottle.”

Belle sat up, carefully removed, with the tip of her tongue, some brown chocolate stains from the tips of her pink, well-manicured fingers and, looking up and down the road, announced:

“That dear little tea room – Ye Olde Spinning Wheel – is only about a mile farther on. Suppose we go there? I’m dying for a cup of tea with lemon in it.”

“Oh, so am I!” added Bess. “They say lemon is thinning.”

“Then you’d better have lemonade with a leaf or two of tea in it,” said Belle.

“You – you – ” spluttered Bess, drawing back her hand in which nestled a chocolate. And then her desire to throw it was overcome by her appetite for the confection.

“Ye Olde Spinning Wheel,” repeated Cora. “That sounds most enticing. We’ll go there, if only to keep you two from bickering. What’s gotten in you sisters to-day, I never saw you so on each other’s nerves.”

“It’s the weather,” returned Belle.

“Let us hope so. Well, if you’ve admired the view enough we’ll go on.”

They had come to a pause at the crest of a shaded hill, and down below them lay the village in which the three girls lived. Cheerful Chelton it had been designated, and cheerful it was.

Cora, who had not stopped the engine, slipped the clutch in after shifting the gear and the car moved down the slope, gradually cutting off the view of the town.

“What about the boys?” asked Bess, apropos of nothing in particular.

“What boys?” demanded Cora.

“Ours, of course,” and Bess looked surprised that any others should have been thought of. “I mean your brother Jack, Walter Pennington and Paul Hastings. Didn’t you say Paul was thinking of going to camp with our boys, if they took the little bungalow near ours at Camp Surprise?”

“Yes, Paul is coming,” Cora said.

“Well, can the boys get away earlier if we do? It won’t be any fun going there alone, particularly if there’s a mystery about the place.”

“I didn’t say there was any mystery about the place,” corrected Cora. “Though there may be. Besides, we’re to have a chaperon, you know. Or at least the caretaker and his wife live in Camp Surprise, and I presume she will be a chaperon.”

“But it won’t be half the fun if the boys don’t come along,” declared Belle. “They are so jolly, and – er – well, you know what I mean,” she finished a bit lamely.

“No need to explain at all,” said Cora cheerfully. “It’s perfectly all right. If I go, that means mother can close the house so much earlier. Jack won’t stay there alone, I know, so he’s likely to tag along.”

“And if Jack goes Walter will. I guess we can count of making an earlier start on our vacation than we contemplated,” said Bess. “It will be lovely.”

“Yes,” Cora assented.

“There’s the tea room,” added Belle a little later as the car came out on a long, level stretch of road. “It’s a perfect dear of a place; isn’t it?”

“A regular gazelle,” agreed Cora mockingly.

She swung her machine into the parking place provided, and a few minutes afterward the three girls were sitting at one of the wicker tables, in wicker chairs, near a window which opened on a vine-shaded porch, while electric fans hummed and droned breezily and refreshingly behind them and in front of them stood rose-tinted plates heaped high with pale yellow cream, nestled alongside of which were delicately browned macaroons.

“Oh, what a symphony of color!” murmured Cora, as the white-capped, colored waitress set the refreshments from off her mahogany-cretonne tray.

“If it tastes half as good as it looks,” murmured Bess, “I’m going to have another plate, if I have to roll twice my usual number of times before I go to bed to-night.”

“It is good,” said Belle. “It’s delicious!”

“I could just sit here and – dream,” announced Belle, as she closed her “effective” eyes, as Jack Kimball had designated them.

“Yes, it is very soothing and restful,” agreed her sister, who had been rendered sleepy by the combination of heat, a refreshing meal and the droning of the electric fans.

“I feel sleepy myself,” Cora confessed, closing her eyes.

She opened them a moment later though, for a cry from Belle brought her and Bess to a most unpleasant awakening.

“Your car, Cora!” cried the slim Robinson twin. “Some one is taking your auto!”

CHAPTER II – THE LOST TRAIL

“My car! Some one taking my car!” repeated Cora Kimball. “Who is it, Belle?” and she hurried to the window from which the tall, willowy Robinson twin was gazing toward the spot where the auto had been left.

“Two young men. I saw them get in, and – there they go! Out into the road! We must stop them!”

Belle turned to make her exit, but her dress caught on a chair, and as Cora and Bess were behind her, they, too, were delayed.

“Oh, hurry!” begged Cora.

“I can’t tear my dress,” retorted Belle.

With a pull she loosed it from a splinter of the wicker chair, and then made for the doorway, followed by the other girls.

And while they are thus on their way to intercept those who had taken Cora’s car I will devote a few minutes to acquainting my new readers with the characters and incidents that go to make the previous volumes of this series.

“The Motor Girls,” was the title of the initial book. In that we find Cora Kimball, the daughter of a wealthy widow, with her brother Jack, living in “Cheerful Chelton,” as it has been called, a village on the Chelton river, in New England, not far from the New York boundary. Cora and Jack each had an automobile, but most of the adventures took place in or about Cora’s car, in which she and her two most intimate chums, the Robinson twins – Bess and Belle – went for many a ride.

The Robinson girls were the daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Perry Robinson, the former a rich railroad man, and I think I have already sufficiently indicated to you their characters. Bess was plump, and Belle tall and willowy, inclined to indolence which she imagined was graceful. Cora Kimball was a leader, and where she went the Robinson twins generally followed.

Jack Kimball, a student at Exmouth college, was almost as much a chum of Cora’s as were her girl friends, and the girls regarded Jack and his chums, Walter Pennington and Paul Hastings, as their especial retainers and vassals as the case demanded. Paul’s sister Hazel, a sweet girl – if you know what I mean – had been quite friendly with Cora and her chums, until her removal to another city. Hazel was expected for a visit to Cora soon, and, as has been mentioned, Paul contemplated going camping with the boys.

Soon after Cora secured her car the Robinson twins induced their father to purchase one. The Motor Girls, as they had come to be known, went on a tour, in the course of which many things happened. They had more adventures at Lookout Beach, and also when they went through New England.

In succession Cora and her friends paid a visit to Cedar Lake, down on the coast, and next they spent a summer on Crystal Bay. They had there a most delightful time, but perhaps not more so than that told of in the book immediately preceding this one.

That volume is named “The Motor Girls on Waters Blue.” I forgot to mention that the girls, after having served their apprenticeship, as it were, in automobiles, had acquired a fine, large motor boat. In this they had many good times, though it was not this boat that figured largely on the blue waters. When Mr. Robinson had been called to Porto Rico on business he had taken his daughters and Cora with him.

How the steamer on which Mr. Robinson sailed to another island was endangered, how the *Tartar* was chartered by Cora and her chums to look for the shipwrecked ones, and how Inez Ralcanto, the beautiful Spanish girl, and her father, a political refugee, were aided – all this is set down in the book preceding this present volume.

It was not until after many hardships and not a little anxiety that matters were finally straightened out, and our friends came back to Cheerful Chelton, which had never seemed so

homelike or so desirable, Cora said, as after the exciting episodes in what was practically a foreign land.

A fall and winter of gaiety had brought spring and early summer, in which delightful time of the year we now find our girl friends once more.

“It is gone! My car is gone!” exclaimed Cora, as they ran out of the tea room.

“Of course it is!” declared Belle. “Didn’t I see them take it!”

“Two young men, you say?” asked her sister.

“Yes. I didn’t see their faces, but I knew they were young by the way they moved about – so lively!”

“Say!” cried Cora, imbued by a sudden idea. “Could they have been Jack and Walter?”

“Your brother?” asked Bess.

“Yes. I heard him say he was coming over in this direction in his car. He and Walter might have driven up, and, seeing my car and guessing that we were inside, may have gone off in it just for a joke.”

“It’s *possible*,” assented Belle. “Anything is possible for Jack and Wally. But if they came here they must have left their car near by. Turn about is fair play – let’s annex theirs.”

“Let’s find it first,” said Cora.

They hurried out to the road. A quick look up and down showed no automobile in sight – not even Cora’s.

“They must have speeded up,” murmured Belle. “Oh! why weren’t we quicker?”

“It doesn’t amount to anything if those young men were really Jack and Walter,” Cora said. “But we can’t be sure of that; can we, Belle?”

“No, I can’t. I only had a glimpse of their backs, and all backs look alike to me.”

“It can’t have been Jack,” declared Bess, “or his car would be somewhere in sight. He wouldn’t know we were in the tea room until he came up close, and then there wouldn’t have been time to run his car back.”

“You can’t tell what they would do,” said Cora. “Come on, we’ll walk as far as the turn in the road, and see what’s down there.”

“Hadn’t you better report your loss to the proprietor of the tea room?” suggested Belle. “He might send a man out to look for the machine.”

“I don’t want to make too much fuss if it was Jack and Walter,” Cora objected. “Let’s take a look ourselves first.”

The girls hurried down the road, all their drowsiness gone now. They were rather alarmed in spite of the cool way in which Cora took it.

“It’s dreadfully warm walking,” complained Bess. “I shall have to have more cream after this is over.”

“You can go back and wait for us,” suggested Cora, “if you’re too – ”

“Don’t dare say I’m too stout to keep on the trail!” cried Bess. “I’ll never give up!”

They were almost at the turn when the honking of an automobile horn warned them of the approach of a car.

“There they come back!” cried Belle, in relieved tones.

But a moment later, as a machine swung into view around the curve, the girls saw that it was not Cora’s.

“But it’s Jack and Walter!” cried the former’s sister. “Wait! Stop!” she begged. “Jack – Wally – we’re in trouble! Did you take our car?”

“Take your car?” repeated Jack, bringing his machine to a stop with a screeching of brakes. “What’s the joke?”

“It isn’t a joke at all!” declared Belle. “I saw two young men making off with Cora’s car. At first we thought it might be you and Wally.”

“Not guilty!” affirmed the latter, holding up a protesting hand.

“Where did all this happen?” Jack wanted to know.

“At the Spinning Wheel tea room. We stopped there,” his sister informed him.

“Which way did they go?” asked Walter Pennington.

“Down this way,” Belle said, explaining what she had seen, and how they had come along the road thinking to meet the perpetrators of the joke.

“Come on, Wally!” cried Jack. “We’ll get after those fellows. It may have been a joke, and, again, it may not. No use taking any chances. There have been several cars stolen around here lately. Maybe there’s a regular organized gang. Go on back to your tea and cakes, girls. We’ll round up the villains. Ha! Ha!” and he struck a theatrical attitude.

“We’ll wait at the tea room for you,” Cora said. “You can trace my car in the dust, Jack, by the tire-marks. There’s a big patch, where it was vulcanized. It’s on the right forward wheel, and it makes a mark like a big Z. Look for it.”

“I will, Sis. But there isn’t much chance. Too many cars pass along this road to let the dust-marks of any particular one stay in sight long. But we’ll do the best we can.”

Jack backed and turned his car around, and was soon off down the road in a clatter of exhausts, while the three girls went back to Ye Olde Spinning Wheel.

“Who do you suppose they could be – those two fellows?” asked Bess.

“Haven’t the least idea,” her sister assured her.

“It couldn’t have been Paul Hastings, could it?”

“Of course not!” declared Cora. “Paul isn’t given to playing such jokes. Besides, he’s in the auto business you know, and he doesn’t believe in taking chances with the cars of others. It may be a joke, as Jack says, and some of our numerous friends may have tried to scare us, or it may be – ”

“Don’t say your lovely car is really *stolen!*” interrupted Bess, impulsively.

“Well, I’d have to say it if it were,” declared the practical Cora. “And the sooner we find out the better, in order to get the police after the thieves.”

Wearily they trudged back to the tea room, which they had left so suddenly.

“Let’s have some more ice cream while we’re waiting,” suggested Bess.

They had nearly finished their second plates when the honking of a horn warned them of the approach of some one. Eagerly they looked out to see Jack and Walter returning.

“We lost the trail!” Jack called. “I saw the tire marks, Cora, for a little way, then they disappeared. We’ll have to notify the police. Your car’s stolen all right.”

“Oh, Jack!”

“Might as well realize it first as last, Sis! Where’s a telephone?” he asked the waitress.

CHAPTER III – TWO STRANGE MEN

“What are you going to do, Jack?” asked Cora.

“Notify the Chelton police, and also the authorities here. They will send out a general alarm better than we can. Now who saw these chaps, and how did they look?”

“Belle saw them.”

“Then, Belle, I’ll have to call on your detective abilities. Describe these villainous characters.”

“I wouldn’t call them particularly villainous looking,” said the tall girl. “In fact we thought for a time it was you two, and – ”

“I see,” interrupted Walter. “Belle, I thank you for your good opinion.”

“Come on, get down to business!” exclaimed Jack Kimball. “I want to know how these fellows looked so I can tell the police. Were they young or old?”

“Two young men,” answered Belle. “They were about your age, Jack.”

“But, unfortunately, they did not have his angelic disposition,” mocked Walter. “Bouquets are coming your way fast, Jack.”

“I’ll dispense with them. Come on now, Belle. Anything else except that they were young?”

Belle thought for a moment. She had had such a momentary glimpse of the two that, really, it was hard to describe them adequately for the purposes of police detection.

“Why not describe the car?” asked Cora. “No matter who is in my machine they haven’t a right to it, and they should be arrested on sight.”

“Good idea!” agreed Jack. “I can describe the car right enough.”

“And give the license numbers,” said Bess.

“Of course. Good girl. Let me have them, Cora.”

They were the only ones in the tea room at this time, and the excitement was only communicated to the help. The waitress showed Jack where the telephone booth was, and while Cora, Walter and the girls explained to the girl cashier at the desk what had happened, Jack got the Chelton police over the telephone and asked them to send out an alarm, and also to be on the lookout for the thieves.

The tea room was in Pepack, the township next to Chelton, and Jack also called up the town hall and notified the authorities there, who promised to do what they could.

“But they may have taken any of half a dozen roads leading out of here,” Walter said. “They must have hurried away.”

“And you didn’t have a glimpse of them?” asked Belle.

“Not a trace,” answered Jack. “We managed to pick up the trail by means of that patch on the tire. Saw it in the dust several times. Then it was lost in the shuffle, as you might say, so we thought it better to come back. I wonder if the people here noticed anything of two strange men hanging about.”

“We’ll ask the cashier,” suggested Cora.

She knew, slightly, the girl who sat at the cash register, for Ye Olde Spinning Wheel was a popular resort for automobile parties.

“Yes, Miss Kimball,” the girl said, “there were two young men in here this morning, though whether they were the ones who took your car I can’t say.”

“How did they look?” asked Jack.

“Well, I don’t know that I can tell you. They were both of medium height, and were smooth shaven – I mean they had no beards or moustaches, though both of them would have been better for a visit to the barber’s.”

“What did they do or say?” asked Walter.

“They came in and each had a plate of cream,” went on the girl. “I didn’t exactly like their looks, for, though we try to run a place that will suit every one, we are a bit particular too. But they didn’t make any fuss, and even tipped the waitress.”

“Then they must be ‘regular fellows,’” said Walter, jokingly.

“Scuse me,” broke in the voice of the waitress – the same one who had waited on the girls – “but de dime tip dey gibbed me wasn’t any good.”

“Why not?” asked Jack.

“It was plugged. Look!” and she exhibited it.

“So it is!” exclaimed Cora’s brother. “They weren’t so regular after all.”

“I didn’t see it till after dey’d gone,” the negress went on.

“Perhaps you can describe them for me,” Jack suggested.

It developed that the waitress could give a better word-picture of the two young men than could the cashier, whose attention, naturally, was taken up with her duties at the desk.

Jack noted down the none too good distinguishing marks as described by the waitress, and went to telephone them to the police as an additional help in capturing those who had gone with Cora’s car.

There was nothing more that could be done just then, and Jack was about to suggest that, by means of a little crowding, he could take his sister and her chums back to Chelton in his car when the young woman who had charge of the tea room entered, it being her hour to go on duty.

“What’s the matter?” she asked, as she observed the group of excited young people about the cashier’s desk.

“Two strange young men went off with Miss Kimball’s auto,” was the cashier’s answer, and the circumstances were related.

“Two young men!” exclaimed the manager. “Why I remember those two who had cream in here this morning. They spoke to me as they came out on the porch, and I bought tickets of them.”

“Tickets!” exclaimed Jack. “Tickets?”

“Yes. They seemed all right – I mean respectful and all that. They said they had unexpectedly run out of funds and wanted to know if I wouldn’t buy some railroad tickets they had to New York. I said I hadn’t any use for them, and couldn’t get off to go to New York anyhow, as this was our busy season.”

“So you didn’t buy them?” asked Cora. “But I thought you said – ”

“I didn’t buy the railroad tickets,” said the young lady manager. “But I did purchase two tickets for the opera performance that is to be given at Chelton on Friday night. I’d been wanting to go, and I was going to telephone for tickets when these young men said they had two good ones they’d let me have for less than the regular price.”

“And you took them?” asked Walter.

“Yes. It seemed a bargain, and I am desirous to see the play.”

“Do you mind letting me see the tickets?” asked Jack.

“Certainly you may see them,” was the answer, and from her pocketbook, which she had left in charge of the cashier, the manager took out two slips of blue pasteboard.

“Hum! They seem regular all right,” remarked Jack. “Date and seat numbers all proper. I know where those seats are, too, right in the middle of the first row balcony. I always sit there myself when I go.”

“They said they were good seats,” declared the girl, “and I saved a dollar. They wanted the money they said, for they had spent their last for some ice cream. They seemed to be all right.”

“Maybe they were,” agreed Jack. “Of course it’s perfectly proper for persons who can’t use railroad or theatre tickets they have purchased, to sell them again. And these tickets seem to be the same as those you would get at the box office. And there’s no crime in being without cash. But it is a crime to take an automobile.”

“The only question is whether the same two fellows are involved,” suggested Walter.

“That’s it,” agreed Jack. “I wish you girls had had a better look at those who went off in the machine.”

“It all happened so suddenly,” Belle explained.

“Yes, such things generally do,” remarked Cora. “Well, there’s nothing else to do, is there?”

“I guess not,” said Jack, who had telephoned in the additional description of the young men who had sold the tickets, adding the information that there was only a suspicion that they were the same two who were responsible for the taking of the car.

“If they had only kept the theatre tickets, instead of selling them,” said Walter, “we’d have a good chance of arresting them.”

“How?” Belle demanded.

“By watching those two seats. As soon as the fellows came in to take their places we could have an officer arrest them.”

“Please don’t try it on me,” begged the young lady who had purchased the coupons. “I don’t want a scene,” and she regarded Walter smilingly.

“Of course not,” agreed Cora. “Oh, dear! My nice car, that I was counting on taking to Camp Surprise with me.”

“We’ll get it back before then!” declared Jack.

“Oh! but we’re going earlier than we planned originally,” said Belle.

“And she wants you boys to come, too!” cried Bess.

“No more than you do!” snapped Belle, her fair face flushing.

“What’s the idea?” asked Walter.

“It’s getting so unbearably warm,” said Cora, and then she explained that they might go earlier than originally planned to the bungalow camp in the mountains.

“Well, we might manage it,” Jack said. “We’ll talk it over, Wally. Have to see Paul, though I guess he’d fit in anywhere Bess went.”

“Oh! is that so?” cried the plump girl, blushing in her turn.

The tea room people promised to be on the lookout for the strange young men, and to notify Jack or the police if they came around again.

“But if they were the ones who took the car they won’t come back,” Walter declared.

By crowding, all the young people managed to get in Jack’s car. On the way back to Chelton a sharp lookout was kept for the missing machine, but no trace of it was seen, and Cora was much depressed when she reached home.

“Never mind,” whispered Jack, “you may use mine, Sis, until yours shows up. Don’t worry, we’ll get it yet.”

“I hope so,” murmured Cora.

CHAPTER IV – A CURIOUS STORY

Such measures as one might expect to have taken in a place like Chelton and the surrounding towns were taken by the authorities in an endeavor to recover Cora's stolen automobile. For stolen it certainly was, and not taken in a joke. That fact was patent when several days passed and no trace of it was found and no word received as to where it might have been taken or abandoned by the two strange young men.

"They might merely have taken it to get some place, seeing that they had no money," observed Belle, when the three girls were talking the matter over one day at Cora's house.

"They had railroad tickets, though," said Belle.

"Yes, but to New York, and perhaps they didn't want to go there."

"I should think New York would be just the place where they would want to go if they had no money," came from Cora. "There are so many chances to make money there."

"Perhaps they didn't dare go," suggested Belle.

"What do you mean?" came in a duet from the others.

"They might have done something – perhaps have taken another auto – and they knew the police would be after them," explained Belle.

"Quite dramatic," observed Cora. "But whoever they are or whatever their motive, I wish they'd send back my car. I want it."

"I don't blame you a bit," came from Bess. "Come on, we'll go out on another searching tour."

"All right," agreed Cora, and they were soon on the road again in the car of the Robinson twins. The girls had not left it all to the authorities to find the missing automobile. They had made diligent inquiries themselves on all roads leading out of Chelton and in the vicinity of the tea room. Nor had the boys been idle. Paul Hastings arrived in town on business connected with the automobile concern by which he was employed, and he, Jack and Walter, made it their business to scurry around in Jack's car, looking for clews.

But the slender ones they found proved unavailing. Automobiles are all too common to attract attention unless there is something unusual about them. And Cora's car, while it was a fine one, was not unusual enough to call for special notice.

The number on the license plates had been given to the police and constables, but it would have been a comparatively easy matter for the thieves to change the number or rub oil on and let dust accumulate until it would have been all but indecipherable. Then, too, persons seldom notice the number on a car unless there has been some accident.

"It just seems to have disappeared," declared Cora at the close of the day, when a long tour and many inquiries had resulted in nothing. "I just wish I had hold of those two fellows!"

"It *is* provoking," agreed Belle. "Let's stop at the tea room and see if they've heard anything more there."

The girl at the cash register, the young lady manager, and the colored maid who had waited on them before greeted the three pretty chums smilingly as they again entered the pleasant tea room of Ye Olde Spinning Wheel.

"Were your tickets for the play all right?" asked Cora as the manager stepped over to inquire if everything was to their liking.

"I haven't used them yet. They are for this week Friday. Oh! I'm sure they're all right. Some of my friends bought tickets from the same fellows for the same night and they are next mine."

"Those chaps must have planned for a regular theatre party," observed Belle.

"Have you had any trace of your car yet?" the cashier asked, as Cora went up to pay the check.

"No, I'm sorry to say, I haven't."

“If you don’t get it soon, Cora,” said Belle, “you’d better plan to use ours to go to Camp Surprise.”

“Oh, we’re going in the motor boat,” Cora said. “I didn’t tell you, but mother learned that the roads around the camp were so rough that it would certainly spoil a car to take it to camp, so I wouldn’t take mine, anyhow.”

“Camp Surprise,” repeated the pretty cashier. “That sounds interesting.”

“I hope we don’t find it too much so,” returned Belle.

The plans for going to live at the bungalow with the odd name, which was situated in the mountains some miles west of Chelton, had been talked over at length, and an earlier trip than the one originally decided on had been voted for.

“Going in the motor boat! How nice!” cried Bess, as they went out of the tea room. “Then it doesn’t matter about your auto, Cora – I mean, of course – oh! I don’t mean that!” she cried, blushing. “Of course you want it back – ”

“Well, I should say I do!” exclaimed Jack’s sister with mock indignation.

“I mean we won’t have to wait until you get your car back before going to Camp Surprise,” Bess went on.

“No,” agreed Cora. “That won’t delay us.”

“And now don’t you think you ought to tell us why the camp where we are going to spend most of the summer has such an odd name?” asked Belle.

“I’ve been meaning to this long while,” assented Cora, “but so many things have happened that I didn’t get to it. Come on, let’s sit out here on the porch, where it’s so nice, cool and shady, and I’ll tell you all I know.”

“You couldn’t, Cora, dear – not in the limited time at our disposal,” said Belle, languidly sinking into an easy wicker chair. “You know too much.”

“Thank you. I believe this was my treat, so now we’re even. But I meant all I know about Camp Surprise.”

“First, how did it get its name?” asked Bess.

“Because of the surprising things that happen there.”

“Happen – happen?” queried Belle. “Do you mean they still happen?”

“Well, so mother said,” observed Cora.

“Bur-r-r!” shivered Bess, with a hasty glance over her shoulder. “I’m not so sure I want to go there.”

“Nonsense!” cried Cora. “If there’s a ghost we’ll lay it – whatever that means.”

“Oh, Cora! Ghosts!”

“Oh! I don’t mean that, exactly. It isn’t so bad as that. The worst things that have happened are that things in the bungalow seem to be upset and misplaced without reason.”

“Upset? Misplaced?” murmured Belle.

“Without reason?” added her sister.

“Oh! perhaps I am making a mountain out of a molehill,” confessed Cora. “This is how the matter stands. Up in the mountains are a number of camps, cottages, bungalows – what you like – which belong to a development company. The bungalows and camps are rented, furnished, to whoever wants them. Camp Surprise, where we shall have a good-sized bungalow to live in, is one of the best of these resorts. It is about five miles in from the Towanda river, which is what the Chelton is called up state, and it was going up the river that I planned to use the motor boat.”

“How do we get over the five miles?” asked Bess.

“By buckboards over a mountain road. That’s why we won’t need the autos. Of course we could use a car, but as long as mine is still among the missing we won’t make any such plans. Camp Surprise is right on the edge of a stream which is quiet enough in dry weather, but a torrent when there’s a heavy rain. And there’s a little lake and a waterfall near the bungalow.”

“That sounds lovely,” remarked Belle.

“It is lovely,” asserted Cora. “I’ve seen pictures of it. And while our bungalow is on one side of the mountain torrent there is another one, not far off, on the other side, where the boys are going to stay.”

“How nice,” commented Bess.

“Is that other bungalow within sight or calling distance of ours?” asked Belle.

“One or the other, yes,” assented Cora. “But why so anxious?”

“Because when those ghosts, or whatever they are, get to moving things about I want a man, or at least a good-sized boy around,” was the answer.

“Nonsense!” exclaimed Cora. “It isn’t so bad as that.”

“Say it again,” begged Bess. “You told about unseen hands moving chairs and tables.”

“I didn’t mean it exactly that way,” and Cora smiled. “You see there is a man and his wife who have rooms in the bungalow, Mr. and Mrs. Floyd. They look after the place, and they’ll be our chaperons. I did think mother might be able to go with us, but she won’t. But mother knows Mrs. Floyd, and says she’s very nice.”

“I hope the ghosts will be nice,” said Belle.

Cora laughed.

“Oh, you funny girl! Why will you persist in calling them ghosts?”

“Well, aren’t they? Moving chairs about?”

“Is that what happened – or happens?” asked Bess.

“So I understand,” returned Cora. “Mr. and Mrs. Floyd don’t use the main bungalow, keeping to their own rooms. But they wrote mother that, of late, there have been some queer goings on. They said they would go out, leaving the rooms in perfect order, only to find them all upset on their return. Chairs would be misplaced, tables that had been in the middle of the room would be shoved back against the wall. Dishes would be taken out of the closets, and – ”

“Tramps!” interrupted Belle.

“What?” cried Cora, rather startled by the suddenness of the ejaculation.

“I mean tramps got in and did it.”

“No, I don’t think so,” and Cora spoke slowly. “For, though the dishes were taken from the pantry, there was no food missing. Tramps would take food.”

“Is this all that happened?” Bess demanded.

“Well, once something was taken,” Cora said. “A party had the bungalow, and when they left at the end of their stay, they forgot to take some of their silver with them. Then came one of the upsetting periods, and the furniture was misplaced and the silver taken.”

Belle and Bess looked at their chum, then the former said slowly:

“I – I don’t believe we want to go to Camp Surprise, Cora.”

CHAPTER V – COUNTERFEIT TICKETS

Cora laughed melodiously. Belle and Bess looked at her with just a shade of indignation in their eyes.

“I didn’t think you’d be such – such, well, I won’t say cowards,” Cora voiced, when the gale of merriment had passed. “But I think, Belle, that you would rise above the occasion, even if Bess – ”

“Now what is there she can do that I can’t?” demanded the plump twin truculently. “I guess if it’s a question of bravery, I’m as willing as she is to go to Camp Surprise.”

“I thought you’d be,” Cora observed.

“But is it a question of bravery?” asked Belle.

“What else?” her sister demanded.

“Well, from the way in which Cora told it, I should think it would need some members of the Society for Psychic Research to get to the bottom of all those queer manifestations. Cora Kimball!” Belle suddenly exclaimed, sitting up in her chair. “You haven’t been hoaxing us; have you? This isn’t a joke; is it? I mean all those things really did happen; didn’t they?”

“My! what a lot of questions to set off at once,” objected Cora. “But I can answer them all by saying that I have given the story to you just as it came to me. As far as I know, it’s no joke, and the way the furniture behaved, or rather, was made to act, is strictly true.”

“And you are still going to Camp Surprise?” asked Bess.

“Certainly. Why not?”

“Well – er – that is – Oh! of course I know there’s no such thing as a ghost,” said Belle. “But, at the same time, even if those things happened by human agencies – as naturally they did – it might make it very unpleasant for us up there.”

“Nonsense!” cried Cora. “It will make it all the more interesting. Think of the fun we can have, organizing ghost-detecting parties, sitting up until all hours of the night, daring the boys to sit with us. And then, after all, finding out it is only the tricks of some alleged fun-loving person, or perhaps boys of the neighborhood.”

“Do you really think so, Cora?” Belle asked.

“Why, yes.”

“I don’t know,” murmured Bess, thoughtfully.

“Come! Where has all the bravery of the Motor Girls vanished to?” demanded Cora with a silvery laugh. “We didn’t act thus timidly when we solved the secret of the red oar on Crystal Bay. And perhaps – ”

“Cora’s right!” interrupted Belle.

“She generally is,” contributed Bess.

“There’s a secret here, and we will solve it!” her sister went on. “I didn’t look at it that way before, but I see it now. We mustn’t be driven away, or kept from going just because of these rumors. We’ll go to Camp Surprise and surprise those who are making such a fuss there. I wonder some one hasn’t done it long ago.”

“Just what I was about to remark,” came from Cora. “I’m glad to see that your natural courage has come back. I thought it would. We haven’t been together on various quests for nothing. Now we’ll prove ourselves true Motor Girls, and get at the bottom of these surprising happenings. You won’t back out?”

“Never!” affirmed Bess.

“Cross my heart!” laughed her sister, with the old, familiar, childish gesture of emphasizing a statement.

“Then it’s all settled. Now let’s go home. Jack and Walter said they were going over to Meadport to-day to see if any word had been received there of my missing auto. They may have returned with some news.”

“Why was Meadport regarded so favorably?” asked Bess.

“Well, a constable there sent word to our police that there had been a number of petty robberies committed in the neighborhood. A number of thefts would take place in one night, and so far apart that the only probable theory was that the thieves used an auto. Jack thought my dear car might be used for such base purposes, so he and Wally went over there to-day.”

“Let us hope they have good news,” said Belle, as with her sister and Cora she entered the Robinson automobile and headed back for Cheerful Chelton.

“Nothing doing,” announced Jack, as his sister and her chums came in sight of the Kimball home, and saw him with Walter, sitting on the broad, shady piazza. “Absolutely nothing transpiring, as the poet saith.”

“College hasn’t improved your slang any,” observed Bess.

“No, I guess I’ll have to take a P. G. course to accomplish that. I am a bit rusty. Wally, suppose you give them a sample.”

“Spare us,” murmured Cora. “Was there really no news, Jack?”

“Not an atom, or even a molecule. Which is smaller, Wally? I forget.”

“Same here. Anyhow they hadn’t caught those Meadport thieves, so whether they have your auto or not, Cora, my dear, remains yet to be proved.”

The young people talked on, the conversation reverting naturally to Camp Surprise.

“What do you think it all means, Jack?” asked Bess.

“Kids playing tricks,” declared Jack tersely. “So it didn’t scare you girls out from going?”

“Of course not!” declared Bess indignantly. A look passed from her to Cora, from Cora to Belle – and that was all.

“That’s right!” chimed in Walter. “Don’t let a little thing like that scare you away. We’ll get at the bottom of this mystery.”

“When do you plan to go?” asked Cora of her brother.

“As soon as Wally can get his new suit that he’s ordered from that nobby tailor.”

“Don’t you believe him,” cried Walter, thumping his chum on the back. “I’m as ready as he is. He’s waiting for one of those sport shirts – ”

“Go on! I wouldn’t wear one!”

“Well, make up your minds, and we’ll all go together,” urged Cora. “We can go up in the motor boat as far as possible, and take buckboards the rest of the way. We’d like to have you boys on hand when we begin the investigation of Camp Surprise.”

“Oh, ho! Afraid?” laughed Walter. “I thought there was a mouse in the woodpile somewhere, Jack, my boy!”

“Nothing of the sort!” came from Cora. “Besides, you’re thinking of the mouse and the lion. It is an African gentleman of color who makes the woodpile his habitation.”

“That’s right,” admitted Walter. “I never was very good at dates anyhow.”

“Fig paste is more to your liking. Have a chocolate,” urged Bess.

“We want you along to bear testimony when we have routed out the mischief-makers,” said Cora, after the laughter had subsided. “Your bungalow is near ours, and we can call to you to come and hold the disturbers when we capture them.”

“Is that what you’re going to do?” asked Jack.

“Certainly,” returned Belle, as if the girls had never hesitated.

“Well, it would be a pity to disappoint you,” Walter declared. “We’ll go when they do, Jack. But – whisper – they’ll be more than a week yet. I know girls.”

“You only *think* you do,” mocked Cora. “We’ll be ready before you are.”

Then they began to talk seriously and plan for their summer outing. It was not the first time they had been away together, the boys and girls often going to the same resort and occupying adjacent bungalows or cottages. In this way they divided such work as there was, and multiplied the possible good times.

Mrs. Kimball was to go to the Thousand Islands with her sister, which left Jack and Cora free to do as they pleased. Mr. and Mrs. Robinson would, as usual, occupy their seashore cottage, but Bess and Belle would not join them there until later in the season, going first to Camp Surprise with Cora.

“Well, now it’s all settled,” declared Cora, after a season of talk. “We’ll go to Camp Surprise two weeks from to-day. I’ll tell mother, and have her write to Mrs. Floyd to have everything in readiness.”

“Even the ghosts?” demanded Walter.

“Even the ghosts,” agreed Cora, accepting the implied challenge.

“Good!” cried Jack.

A few days after this the three girls, all of whom belonged to a church home mission society, went to take some medicine and food to an old woman who was one that the society looked after. This dependent lived some distance out of Cheerful Chelton, and the Robinson twins brought their car in which to carry the baskets of food.

They had done their little errand of mercy and on the way back Cora proposed that they stop at Ye Olde Spinning Wheel for some tea or ice cream, as the girls preferred.

They had the place practically to themselves, as it was not the hour when most motorists stopped for refreshments. Cora and her chums spoke to the manager, and noticed that she seemed a bit downcast.

“What is the matter?” asked Cora.

“Oh, it’s something that happened last night. You know I told you I had two tickets for the opera. My friend gave me the money to get them, and I bought them off the two young fellows who were here one day last week.”

“Yes, it was the time my auto was taken,” Cora said.

“Of course! I ought to have remembered. Well, I bought two tickets for the opera from those men at a reduced price.”

“And couldn’t your friend go with you?” asked Belle sympathetically.

“Oh, yes. He came for me all right. But when we went to go in they wouldn’t let us.”

“Who wouldn’t let you, those two young men?” asked Cora eagerly.

“No, I only wish it had been the young men. I’d have had ’em arrested. But the doorkeeper would not let me and my friend in on those tickets.”

“Why not?” asked Bess.

“Because he said they were counterfeit. And after my friend had given me his good money for them. I was that angry I could have cried! Counterfeit tickets! What do you know about that?”

CHAPTER VI – OFF TO CAMP

“Really, were they bogus tickets?” asked Cora after a pause.

“And wouldn’t they let you in?” Bess cried.

“How could they tell they were counterfeits?” was Belle’s question.

“Cause some one else had our seats, or the seats our tickets called for,” said Miss Magin, the manager of the tea room. “This is how it was. I got all ready to go – it was my day off, you know, and I had a new dress. Had my nails manicured and went to a hair dresser, for I wanted to look nice. My friend is some swell dresser himself, and you know how it is. You want to be a credit when a person goes to the trouble to take you out.”

“I know,” Cora murmured.

“Well, I did look nice, if I do say it myself,” went on Miss Magin, “and I was quite pleased when I handed my friend back a dollar.

“What’s this for?” he asked me.

“What I saved on the tickets,” I told him, and I mentioned how I’d bought two from the fellows who were here trying to sell some railroad transportation as well. My friend was quite pleased, of course, for he has to work hard for his money. ‘This’ll do to help get a lunch after the show,’ he said, and I was glad.

“Well, we got to the opera house all right, but they wouldn’t let us in. That is, they wouldn’t give us the seats our coupons called for. We did get in, but when we went to the seats there was a couple already in them.

“My friend thought the usher had made a mistake, and there was a mix-up for a while. Then the usher got the other couple’s coupons and they were the same number as ours. They called the manager, and he said our tickets were counterfeit.

“First my friend wouldn’t believe it, but the manager showed by the other tickets taken in that ours were different. The print was the same, and so was the color of the pasteboard, but it was stiffer than the regular tickets. There was no way out of it. We had been cheated, and so had some other people who had bought tickets from those fellows. There was quite a disturbance.”

“It’s too bad!” exclaimed Cora. “Then you didn’t see the opera after all?”

“Oh, sure I did!” exclaimed Miss Magin. “My friend wouldn’t see me disappointed. He bought other tickets, though they weren’t as good as the ones I had – or thought I had.”

“And they really were counterfeit?” repeated Bess.

“Yes, but cleverly done. It was only the quality of the paper, or pasteboard, that showed,” went on the tea room manager. “If we had gotten there first we might have had our seats without any trouble, though of course when the folks came in that had the real tickets it would have been found out, I s’pose.”

“And you say others also bought the bogus tickets?” Cora asked.

“Yes, quite a few. Got them from the same fellows, too, who told the same story about being hard up for cash, and wanting to sell the tickets they’d purchased.”

“Were they the same young men?” asked Belle.

“The descriptions were the same as the two who were here, and who must have taken your auto, Miss Kimball. When I found out our tickets were worthless I told the manager about your car, though of course he had heard of it from reading the paper. Oh! I just wish I could have them arrested!”

“So do I,” agreed Cora.

“Could they find out where the tickets were printed?” asked Bess.

“Not just by looking at them,” answered Miss Magin. “The bogus ones looked for all the world like the real ones, even to the company’s name that was printed on them. But the opera house manager

kept those my friend and I turned in and said he'd make an investigation. Say! I felt pretty cheap when it turned out I'd bought bogus tickets with my friend's money."

"Oh! you couldn't help it," Cora said, her chums murmuring their agreement.

"Well, I meant all right," Miss Magin went on, "but I cost my friend more than if I hadn't a been so soft-hearted wanting to help out those fellows who told a hard-luck story."

"They'll be caught some day," declared Bess. "Printing bogus theatrical tickets isn't easily done. Care has to be used, and sooner or later those fellows will be arrested."

"The sooner the better," said Cora. "I want my car back."

The girls and the manager talked for some little time longer about the happenings of the night before. Presently a man alighted from a taxicab, or rather, one of the town's few jitney cars, and entered the tea room. He looked rather sharply at our friends – at least so Cora thought – and, taking a seat at a table not far away, ordered a cup of coffee and a sandwich.

He spoke casually to the waitress, and as Miss Magin, as was her custom, walked up to see if the service was satisfactory, he spoke also to her pleasantly, and she replied.

"Was it one of the young ladies here who recently purchased some bogus theatre tickets?" the man asked, after some casual remarks.

"I hope you haven't any more to sell!" retorted the manager, a bit sharply.

"No. I am a detective sent out by the agency which prints theatre tickets for many shows. This isn't the first time we have had trouble, and I want, if possible, to get on the track of the persons responsible. Do you mind telling me all you can of this?"

Of course Miss Magin was only too glad to do so, and, incidentally, she mentioned the loss of Cora's automobile. Naturally that brought our friends into the conversation, and the detective, who introduced himself as Mr. Boswell, went over to the girls' table. He spoke of having been for some time unsuccessfully on the trail of the bogus ticket sellers.

"Taking automobiles is a new line for their activities, though," said Mr. Boswell. "This may make it easier to catch them."

"Of course," suggested Cora, "we are not altogether certain that the same persons who sold Miss Magin the tickets took my auto."

"Very likely they were," declared the detective. "They probably realized that they had done all the illegitimate business possible in this neighborhood, and they wanted to get as far away as they could before the fact about the tickets became known. An auto offered the simplest means."

"I should have locked the ignition switch," said Cora. "I usually do when I get out. But we thought we would stay only a little while, so I didn't do it this time."

"Too bad," said Mr. Boswell. "If I get on the track of your car, Miss Kimball, I'll let you know."

He made a memorandum of the description of the two men as furnished by Miss Magin, and took his departure, promising to let Cora hear from him in case anything developed.

"More of the mystery," remarked Bess, as she and the others were on their way back in the automobile. "What with this and what may happen at Camp Surprise, I can see we are in for a busy summer."

And busy enough the girls were during the next week. There were trunks to pack, messages to send to the caretakers at the camp, dresses to have finished in time, and many odds and ends to be looked after before leaving for so long a time.

"There's a nice dancing pavilion not far away," Cora told her chums. "And of course there'll be one or two formal affairs at a neighboring hotel."

Hazel Hastings had come on to be Cora's guest and was staying at the Kimball house. She was the same sweet girl as before, though a little older, and not quite so timid as she had been.

Paul was the same jolly chap, quite engrossed in his automobile business, but not so much so that he could not enjoy the little outing in prospect.

“I’ve sent a description of your car, with the number of it, the number of the engine and other identifying marks, to all the second hand dealers,” he told Cora. “If it’s offered for sale to any one in the dealers’ association I’ll hear of it and there’s a chance that we’ll get it back for you.

“Of course there are some ‘outlaw dealers’ who do not belong to the association, and who might take a chance on buying a stolen car,” said the young automobile agent. “But we can’t help that. I think we’ll get your machine sooner or later.”

Cora was grateful for Paul’s efforts, but she had about given up hope. The police had secured no clues, and, though they professed to be active, there really was little for them to do.

The motor boat had been overhauled and put in shape for the trip up the Chelton river. Though the craft offered accommodations for sleeping on board they did not plan to use the berths on this occasion. They were to make an early start and reach Riverhead, the end of navigation on the Chelton, early in the afternoon. From Riverhead they would go to Camp Surprise in wagons of the buckboard type, made with wooden slats for springs, very comfortable to ride in over rough roads.

The boys were to go with the girls, Jack and his sister acting as chaperons for the others until camp was reached, when Mr. and Mrs. Floyd would perform this office.

Light baggage would be taken with them on the boat, the trunks being sent on ahead.

“And we’ll take lunch along, of course,” Bess said.

“Of course,” echoed her sister. “We don’t want to go hungry any more than do you.”

The day of departure came at last. Bess and Belle were early at Cora’s house, and found her, Jack, Paul and Hazel busy making the final preparations.

The valises and bundles were carried down to the motor boat, good-byes were said over and over again, various cautions were given by Mrs. Kimball and Mrs. Robinson, and then Cora, standing at the wheel of the craft, steered out into the middle of the pretty stream.

“Off for Camp Surprise!” she cried gaily.

CHAPTER VII – JACK’S BATH

Out into the sunlit Chelton river swung the smart motor boat with Cora at the wheel. The sun glinted on the water, it reflected from the polished brass rail and the white forward deck of the craft, it sparkled from the brass letters of the name —*Corbelbes*, and danced in javelins of light on the little waves.

The *Corbelbes* was the latest name of the motor boat which had been variously christened at times. The craft was owned jointly by Cora, Belle and Bess, and in accordance with their agreement they had in turn the privilege of naming it, such name to be used during a whole season.

In turn the girls had adopted various more or less classical nomenclature. Each one’s time having expired, it came to Cora again, and she confessed that she did not know what to select.

“Let me name the boat for you,” suggested Jack. “I’ve thought of a swell name.”

“Something ridiculous, I’m sure of that,” ventured Cora.

“No, something really classy. How’s this,” and Jack quickly printed on a piece of paper the name now glinting on either bow of the craft.

“*Corbelbes*,” repeated his sister. “That isn’t half bad. What is it, Spanish or Latin?”

“It’s French for curling iron and face powder,” laughed Jack.

“You mean thing!”

“No, it isn’t, Sis. Don’t you see, it’s the first part of the names of all three of you.”

“Oh, so it is.” Cora was smiling now.

“What better name could you have for a boat?” Jack demanded. “It’s something distinctive and individual.”

Cora and her chums agreed with him, and the motor boat became the *Corbelbes*, and as such had remained.

“Does she steer all right, Cora, with the new tiller ropes on?” asked Jack, as he lolled lazily on one of the cushioned lockers, which, at night, could be turned into comfortable bunks.

“A bit stiff,” responded his sister.

“Well, the ropes will stretch, after they’ve been used a bit, so it’s just as well to have them tight now. You get quicker action when you turn the wheel, though the river will not be crowded after we get up a way.”

Bess, Belle and Hazel busied themselves setting to rights their various possessions in the little cabin, and then they sat out in the wicker chairs in the after part of the craft, where Jack and Walter were. Paul seemed to find entertainment up in the bow with Cora.

“Where are the eats?” demanded Walter, when they had been under way for perhaps a half hour. “Didn’t I see you smuggling something on board, Bess?”

“Eats? Now?” cried Jack. “And if you saw Bess have anything it was a box of chocolates.”

“It was not, Jack Kimball!” retorted the pretty, plump twin. “I’ve given up chocolates.”

“For how long?” he teased.

“For ever. I’m eating lime drops and lemon drops now. Have some?”

“I knew I saw you have something,” declared Walter. “Why, they’re chocolates after all!” he went on, as he helped himself to what Bess offered.

“I know they are, but the chocolate coating is very thin,” she said. “They’re sour inside.”

“Sort of Christian Science treatment,” remarked Jack. “Bess couldn’t altogether give up her chocolate, so she takes it in homeopathic doses. Whew! they *are* sour!” he cried, as he bit into one of the candies, making a wry face.

“Fruit acids make one thin, I read,” Bess stated, “so I had these made to order.”

“Bess Robinson, you never did!” voiced her sister in surprised accents.

“Why shouldn’t I? They didn’t cost any more than the others. All the candy shop did was to dip their regular lime and lemon drops into chocolate for me.”

“Well!” exclaimed Belle. “Did you hear that, Cora?”

There was no reply from the girl at the wheel. She and Paul were busy talking.

“Let her alone,” urged Bess. “She knows about my candy. I told her.”

“Yes, don’t disturb ’em,” agreed Walter. “But I want something more substantial than candy. Didn’t you bring anything else, Bess?”

“Yes, we have a nice lunch, but I’m not going to have you spoil your appetite by eating now,” declared Belle.

“You don’t know how hard it is to spoil his appetite,” laughed Jack. “I’ve tried several times to find out just where the vanishing point is, but I haven’t succeeded. I’ve begun to believe that his appetite is like the poor – always with us – or him.”

“Base traitor!” retorted Walter, reaching out to punch Jack, but finding him too far away he did not exert himself.

The Chelton river was a busy place in the neighborhood of the town where our friends lived. On the way up the *Corbelbes* passed a number of craft, some of them slow-moving coal or grain barges, others passenger steamers, and not a few pleasure craft. Those in charge of the latter recognized the *Corbelbes* and saluted her with the regulation three whistles, which Cora returned.

“We couldn’t have had a better day,” remarked Paul, as he sat beside Cora.

“No, it’s perfect. If the weather only behaves when we get to camp we’ll be in all sorts of ways obliged to it.”

“Oh, I guess it will,” was the comment. “Look out for that fellow, Cora. He doesn’t seem to know which way he wants to go.”

“I’ve been noticing him,” and Cora looked at a man in a rowboat who was yawing from side to side as though unfamiliar with the proper method of navigation.

Cora blew the whistle sharply as the man seemed about to cross her bows, and this further confused him so that he was really in danger of being run down.

“Look out!” cried Paul again, instinctively, though he knew Cora knew how to manage the boat.

And she proved that she did by quickly reversing the propeller, while a series of sharp blasts informed any craft coming astern to look out for themselves.

“What’s the matter with you?” demanded Paul, as the *Corbelbes* passed the man in the rowboat. “You ought to take lessons before you come out on the river.”

The man looked frightened but did not answer, pulling awkwardly away.

“What are you trying to do, Cora?” demanded Jack. “Have an accident before we’re fairly started? Better let me steer.”

“I will not, indeed! It wasn’t my fault!”

“I should say not!” cried Paul. “That fellow was a dub!”

That was the only near approach to a collision, though the river was unusually crowded that morning. In a little while, however, the water traffic thinned out, and Cora did not have to devote so much attention to the wheel.

“Say, isn’t it time for lunch now?” demanded Walter, insinuatingly.

“It’s only eleven,” announced Belle, with a look at her wrist watch.

“That’s his regular feeding time – at least he’ll say so,” put in Jack, before his chum had a chance to answer.

“I had an early breakfast,” put in Walter in extenuation.

“Oh, well, give the child something,” laughed Bess, “and let us have peace!”

Sandwiches, cake and other things were brought out, set on a table which unfolded from the side of the boat, and the merry chatter was soon interspersed with periods of silence to allow a chance to eat.

“We’ll get there in good season,” Cora was saying, when the engine gave a sudden combined cough, wheeze and sneeze, and stopped.

“No gasoline!” cried Walter.

“Indeed not!” answered Cora. “Both tanks are full.”

“Ground wire broken,” suggested Paul.

A hasty look at the conductors proved this theory to be wrong.

“Then it’s the carburetor,” Jack affirmed. “The worst possible place for trouble. I’ll look after it, Sis. I’ve had the dingus apart, and if anybody knows about its insides I do. Throw that anchor overboard, Wally, and I’ll tinker with the troublemaker.”

A small anchor splashed into the river, while Jack, putting on an old jumper and overalls, kept for such emergencies, took off the carburetor and proceeded to examine it, from cork float to butterfly valve.

“Must be poor gasoline they’re serving us lately,” he said. “It’s awfully dirty. Look!” and he held up his grimy hands.

“Have you found the trouble?” Cora asked.

“Yes, it was the air intake valve. Little speck of carbon in it prevented the proper mixture. I’ll have it fixed in a jiffy.”

Jack proved the truth of his assertion by replacing the carburetor, and, a little later, by starting the engine without any trouble.

“Hurrah!” cried Paul. “That’s what it is to have a good mechanic aboard.”

“It’s a wonder you wouldn’t qualify yourself,” said Jack grimly. “Look at me! I’ll have to take a bath!” and he held up his hands, grimier than ever.

“There’s some of that mechanic’s soap – with pumice stone in it – in one of the lockers,” volunteered Cora. “Use that, Jack.”

The anchor was hauled in and the *Corbelles* started up the river once more. Jack knelt down on one side of the stern deck, and, reaching down into the river, wet his hands, rubbing on them some pasty soap, guaranteed to remove grime of all kinds and leave most of the original skin.

“Where’s the camera?” asked Bess.

“What for?” demanded her sister.

“I want a view of Jack at his bath. Doesn’t he look cute?”

“Wait until I pose for you,” Jack suggested, making a lather of the soap. “I’m a dandy when it comes to poses. Just watch me.”

He stood up on the after deck, but his foot slipped on a bit of the lather that dropped from his hands, and, a moment later, Jack plunged overboard.

CHAPTER VIII – THE STORM

“Oh, Jack!” cried Cora, as she had a hasty glimpse of her brother making a rather ungraceful dive over the side of the *Corbelbes*. “Oh!”

Her words were echoed by Bess and Belle, and while they started up, overturning the chairs on which they had been sitting, Cora, alive to the emergency, quickly threw in the reverse clutch, and a smother of foam arose under the stern of the boat as it lost way.

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