

Morrison Gertrude W.

The Girls of Central High on Track and Field



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Gertrude W. Morrison

The Girls of Central High on Track and Field Or The Champions of the School League

CHAPTER I – THE GIRL ON THE STONE FENCE

The roads were muddy, but the uplands and the winding sheep-paths across them had dried out under the caressing rays of the Spring sun and, with the budding things of so many delicate shades of green, the groves and pastures – all nature, indeed – were garbed in loveliness.

The group of girls had toiled up the ascent to an overhanging rock on the summit of a long ridge. Below – in view from this spot for some rods – wound the brown ribbon of road which they had been following until the upland paths invited their feet to firmer tread.

There were seven of the girls and every one of the seven – in her way – was attractive. But the briskest, and most eager, and most energetic, was really the smaller – a black-eyed, be-curved, laughing miss who seemed bubbling over with high spirits.

“Sit down – do, Bobby! It makes me simply *ache* to see you flitting around like a robin. And I’m tired to death!” begged one girl, who had dropped in weariness on the huge, gray rock.

“How can you expect to dance half the night, Jess Morse, and then start off on a regular walking ‘tower?’” demanded the girl addressed. “I didn’t go to Mabel Boyd’s party last night. As Gee Gee says, ‘I conserved my energies.’”

“I don’t believe anything ever tires you, Bobs,” said the girl who sat next to Jess – a vigorous, good looking maid with a very direct gaze, who was attractively gowned in a brown walking dress. “You are next door to perpetual motion.”

“How’d you know who I was next door to?” laughed Clara Hargrew, whom her friends insisted on calling “Bobby” because her father, Tom Hargrew, had nicknamed her that when she was little, desiring a boy in the family when only girls had been vouchsafed to him.

“And it is a fact that that French family who have moved into the little house next us are just as lively as fleas. They could be called ‘perpetual motion,’ all right.

“And oh, say!” cried the lively Bobby, “we had the greatest joke the other night on Lil Pendleton. You know, she thinks she’s some French scholar – and she *does* speak high school French pretty glibly – ”

“How’s that, young lady?” interposed the girl in brown. “Put away your hammer. Do you *dare* knock anything taught in Central High?”

“That’s all right, Mother Wit,” drawled Bobby Hargrew. “But any brand of French that one learns out of a book is bound to sound queer in the ears of the Parisian born – believe me! And these Sourat people are the real thing.”

“But what about Lily Pendleton?” demanded one of the two girls who were dressed exactly alike and looked so much alike that one might have been the mirrored reflection of the other.

“Why,” replied Bobby, thus urged by one of the Lockwood twins, “Lil had some of us over to her house the other evening, and she is forever getting new people around her – like her mother, you know. Mrs. Pendleton has the very *queerest* folk to some of her afternoons-long-haired pianists, and long-haired Anarchists, and once she had a short-haired pugilist – only he was reformed, I believe, and called himself a physical instructor, or a piano-mover, or something – ”

“Stop, stop!” cried Jess Morse, making a grab at Bobby. “You’re running on like Tennyson’s brook. You’re a born gossip.”

“You’re another! Don’t you want to hear about these Sourats?”

"I don't think any of us will hear the end of your story if you don't stick to the text a little better, Bobby," remarked a quiet, graceful girl, who stood upright, gazing off over the hillside and wooded valley below, to the misty outlines of the city so far away.

"Then keep 'em still, will you, Nell?" demanded Bobby, of the last speaker. "Listen: The Sourats were invited with the rest of us over to Lily's, and Lil sang us some songs in American French. Afterward I heard Hester Grimes ask the young man, Andrea Sourat, if the songs did not make him homesick, and with his very politest bow, he said:

"No, Mademoiselle! Only seek."

"I don't suppose the poor fellow knew how it sounded in English, but it certainly was an awful slap at Lil," giggled Bobby.

"Well, I wish they wouldn't give us languages at High," sighed Nellie Agnew, Dr. Arthur Agnew's daughter, when the laugh had subsided, and still looking off over the prospect. "I know my German is dreadful."

"Let's petition to do away with Latin and Greek, too," suggested Bobby, who was always deficient in those studies. "Dead languages' – what's the good of 'em if they are deceased, anyway? I've got a good mind to ask Old Dimple a question next time."

"What's the question, Bobby?" asked Jess, lazily.

"Why, if they're 'dead languages,' who killed 'em? He ought to have a monument, whoever he was – and if he'd only buried them good and deep he might have had *two* monuments."

"If you gave a little more time to studying books and less time to studying mischief – " began the girl in brown, when suddenly Nellie startled them all by exclaiming:

"Look there! See that girl down there? What do you suppose she is doing?"

Some of them jumped up to look over the edge of the rock on which they rested; but Jess Morse refused to be aroused.

"What's the girl doing?" she drawled. "It's got to be something awfully funny to get me on my feet again – "

"Hush!" commanded the girl in brown.

"Can she hear us, 'way down there, Laura Belding?" asked Nellie Agnew, anxiously. "See here! Something's chasing her – eh?"

The girl who had attracted their attention was quite unknown to any of the walking party. And she was, at first sight, an odd-looking person. She wore no hat, and her black hair streamed behind her in a wild tangle as she ran along the muddy road. She had a vivid yellow handkerchief tied loosely about her throat, and her skirt was green – a combination of colors bound to attract attention at a distance.

When the girls first saw this fugitive – for such she seemed to be – she was running from the thick covert of pine and spruce which masked the road to the west, and now she leaped upon the stone fence which bordered the upper edge of the highway as far as the spectators above could trace its course.

The stone wall was old, and broken in places. It must have offered very insecure footing; but the oddly dressed girl ran along it with the confidence of a chipmunk.

"Did you ever see anything like that?" gasped Bobby. "I'd like to have her balance."

"And her feet!" agreed Jess, struggling to her knees the better to see the running girl.

"She's bound to fall!" gasped Nellie.

"Not she!" said Eve Sitz, the largest and quietest girl of the group. "Those Gypsies run like dogs and are just as sure-footed as – as chamois," added the Swiss girl, harking back to a childhood memory of her own mountainous country.

"A Gypsy!" asked Bobby, in a hushed voice. "You don't mean it?"

"She's dressed like one," said Eve.

"And see how brown she is," added Laura Belding, otherwise "Mother Wit."

“There! she almost fell,” gasped one of the twins who stood now, with arms entwined, looking at the flying girl with nervous expectancy. It did not seem as though she could run the length of the stone fence without coming to grief.

But it was a quick journey. With a flying leap the girl in the green skirt and yellow scarf disappeared in a clump of brush which masked the wall at its easterly end, just where the road dipped toward the noisy brook which curved around that shoulder of the ridge and, later, fell over a ledge into a broad pool – the murmur of the cascade being faintly audible to the spectators on the summit of the ridge.

“She’s gone!” spoke Bobby, finally, breaking the silence.

“But who’s that coming after her?” demanded Nellie, looking back toward the West. “There! down in the shadow of the trees. Isn’t that a figure moving, too?”

CHAPTER II – HIDE AND SEEK

“It’s a man!”

Dora Lockwood said it so tragically that Bobby was highly amused.

“My goodness me!” she chortled. “You said that with all the horrified emphasis of a spinster lady.”

“It *is* a man – isn’t it?” whispered the other twin.

“I – I guess so,” Laura Belding said, slowly.

“It is,” declared Jess. “And he’s a tough looking character.”

“And he is acting quite as oddly as the girl did,” remarked Bobby. “What do you suppose it means?”

“He’s a Gypsy, too, I believe,” put in Eve Sitz, suddenly.

“Say! this is getting melodramatic,” laughed Laura Belding.

“Just like ‘The Gypsy’s Warning,’ or something quite as hair-raising, eh?” agreed Bobby.

“There! he’s coming out,” gasped Jess.

The man appeared for half a minute in the clearer space of the open road. He was staring all about, up and down the road, along the edge of the woods, and even into the air. The seven girls were behind the fringe of bushes that edged the huge rock, and he could not see them.

“What an evil-faced fellow he is!” whispered Dora Lockwood.

“And see the big gold rings in his ears,” added her twin, Dorothy.

“Do you suppose he is really after that girl?” observed Laura, thoughtfully.

“Whether he is, or not, it’s none of our business, I suppose,” returned Jess, who was Mother Wit’s closest chum.

“I’m not so sure of that.”

“My goodness! if they’re Gypsies, we don’t want to have anything to do with them,” exclaimed Dorothy.

“Oh, the Romany people aren’t so bad,” said Eve Sitz, easily. “They have customs of their own, and live a different life from we folk – ”

“Or ‘us folk?’” suggested Nellie, smiling.

“From other folk, anyway!” returned the big girl, cheerfully. “They come through this section every Spring – and sometimes later in the year, too. We have often had them at the house,” she added, for Eve’s father had a large farm, and from that farm the seven girls had started on this long walk early in the morning.

It was the Easter vacation at Central High and these friends were all members of the junior class. Centerport, the spires and tall buildings of which they could now see in the distance, was a wealthy and lively city of some hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants, situated on the southern shore of Lake Luna, a body of water of considerable size.

At either end of the lake was another large town – namely Lumberport and Keyport. In each of these latter cities was a well conducted high school, and in Centerport there were three – the East and West Highs, and Central High, the newest and largest.

For a year now the girls of all these five high schools had been deeply interested in athletics, including the games usually played upon the Girls’ Branch Athletic League grounds – canoeing, rowing, ski running, and lastly, but not least in value according to the estimation of their instructors, walking. Usually the physical instructor of Central High, Mrs. Case, accompanied her pupils on their walking tours; but this vacation the seven friends who now stood upon the summit of this big, gray rock, had determined to indulge in a long walk by themselves, and they had come over to Eve Sitz’s house the night before so as to get an early start on the mountain road to Fielding, twenty miles away.

From that place they would take the train back to Centerport, and Eve was to remain all night with Laura at the Belding home.

These girls, although of strongly marked and contrasting characters, were intimate friends. They had been enthusiastic members of the girls' athletic association from its establishment; and they had, individually and together, taken an important part in the athletic activities of Central High.

For instance, in the first volume of this series, entitled, "The Girls of Central High; Or, Rivals for All Honors," Laura Belding was able to interest one of the wealthiest men of Centerport, Colonel Richard Swayne, in the girls' athletic association, then newly formed, so that he gave a large sum of money toward a proper athletic field and gymnasium building for their sole use.

In "The Girls of Central High on Lake Luna; Or, the Crew That Won," the second story of the series, the girls were mainly centering their attention upon aquatic sports; and the Lockwood twins – Dora and Dorothy – were particularly active in this branch of athletics. They won honorable mention if not the prize in the canoe event, and were likewise members of the Central High girls' crew that won the cup in the contest of eight-oared shells.

The third volume of the series, named "The Girls of Central High at Basketball; Or, The Great Gymnasium Mystery," particularly related the fortunes of the representative basketball team of Central High, and of which each girl now gathered here on the ridge was a member.

Not long previous to this day in the Spring vacation when the seven were tramping toward Fielding, Jess Morse had made a great hit with her school friends and instructors, as well. She had written a play, which was performed by members of the girls' secret society of the school and some of their boy friends, and so good was it that it not only won a prize of two hundred dollars for which many of the girls of Central High had competed, but it attracted the attention of a professional theatrical producer, who had made a contract with Mrs. Morse, Jess's mother, for the use of the play in a revised form upon the professional stage. The details of all this are to be found in the fourth volume of the series, entitled, "The Girls of Central High on the Stage; Or, The Play That Took the Prize."

"There! the fellow's going back," said Jess Morse, suddenly calling attention to the dark man on the road below.

"If he was after the girl he has given up the chase. I am glad of that," added her chum.

"But where did the girl go?" demanded Bobby Hargrew, craning her neck to peer toward the bushes on the easterly side of the rock.

"There she is!" ejaculated Dora Lockwood, grabbing Bobby by the arm.

She pointed down the side of the ridge, where the rough pasture land dropped to the verge of the brook. The other girls came running and gazed in the direction she pointed out.

The green skirt and the yellow scarf appeared. The girl was wading in the stream, and she passed swiftly along, seen by the spectators at every opening in the fringe of trees and brush that bordered the brook.

"In the water at this time of the year!" gasped Jess.

"And in her shoes and stockings! She wouldn't have had time to stop to take them off and get so far up stream," declared Bobby, almost dancing up and down in her eagerness.

"What do you suppose it means?" cried Nellie.

"She is running away from the man, I guess," admitted Laura, slowly.

"And trying to hide her trail," added Eve.

"Hide her trail! Is this the Indian country? Are the Gypsies savages?" demanded Nellie. "Has she got to run along the top of a stone fence and then take to a running stream to throw off pursuit?"

"That is her hope, I expect," Laura said.

"But *why*?" cried Bobby. "You can't tell me that even Gypsies are as keen on a trail as all that –"

"Hark!" commanded Laura. "Listen."

"It's dogs," spoke Bobby, in a moment.

"O – o – o – o! sounds like a wolf," shuddered Dora.

“It is worse,” said Eve Sitz, her face flushing. “That is the bay of a bloodhound. I remember that we saw one of the great, lop-eared animals in leash when that party of Romanys went past our place last week.”

“You don’t mean that, Eve?” Jess cried. “A bloodhound?”

“And they have put him on the trail of that girl – sure as you live!” declared the farmer’s daughter, with decision.

CHAPTER III – THE GYPSY CAMP

“Why! I think this is outrageous,” said Nellie Agnew. “We ought to find a constable and have such a thing stopped. Think of chasing that poor girl with a mad dog – ”

“I guess he isn’t mad,” ventured Eve, soberly.

Bobby laughed. “Even if he’s only vexed I wouldn’t want a bloodhound tearing after me over these hills.”

“You know what I mean,” persisted Nellie, still wrathfully. “It is a desperate shame! The dog will hurt her – ”

“No, no!” said Eve. “It is trained. And the man has it in leash – ”

“Hush! here they are!” warned Laura, and the girls hid themselves behind the fringe of bushes.

The dog gave tongue just as it came in sight, and the sound sent a shiver over the watchers. The baying of a bloodhound is a very terrifying sound indeed.

With the dogs were three men – one of them the same the girls of Central High had seen before. The other two were fully as rough-looking.

“I hope they don’t find her!” exclaimed Bobby.

“They’ll find you if you don’t keep still,” warned Jess.

But it appeared to the girls that the Gypsies were having considerable difficulty in following the trail of the girl who had fled along the top of the old stone wall. The dog searched from side to side of the road. He leaped the wall, dragging one of the men after him, and ran about the lower field. That she had traversed the stone fence, like a fox, never seemed to enter the men’s minds, nor the dog’s either.

For some time the party of hunters were in sight; but finally they went off in an easterly direction along the road, passing over the brook in which the strange girl had left her “water trail,” and the girls of Central High believed that the fugitive was safe – for the time being, at least.

“I wish we knew where she was going,” said Nellie. “I’d help her, for one.”

“Me, too,” agreed Bobby Hargrew.

“If she should get as far as our house, mother would take her in,” said Eve, in her placid way. “But the Romany folk are peculiar people, and they have laws of their own and do not like to be brought under those of other countries.”

“Why, they’re just tramps, aren’t they? Sort of sublimated tramps, perhaps,” said Jess.

“Not the real Gypsies,” said Laura. “They are very jealous, I have read, of their customs, their laws, and their language. They claim descent in direct line from early Egyptian times. The name of Stanley alone, which is common with them, dates back to William the Conqueror.”

“Well, come on!” sighed Jess. “We don’t care anything about the Gypsies, and we can’t help that girl – just now. If we tried to follow her up stream we would only give those men the idea of the direction in which we went. Let’s get on, or we’ll never get to Fielding.”

“All right,” agreed Laura.

“Forward, march!” sang out Bobby. “How’s the way, Eve? Right down this hill?”

“Keep parallel with the road. We’ll strike another path later,” said the Swiss girl, who had rambled all over these hills with her brother.

“Oh, these shoes!” groaned Jess.

“I told you so,” exclaimed Laura.

“Bah! what good does it do to repeat *that*?” snapped her chum. “I hate those old mud-scows of mine that Mrs. Case makes me wear when she goes walking with us.”

“Well, you certainly wore a fine pair to-day,” scoffed Bobby. “I guess it doesn’t do to do what Mrs. Case advises against.”

“Not if we want to make points for Central High,” said Laura, laughing.

“That’s so! Where would Jess be to-day if this was a regular scheduled walk, to count for our school in June?” cried Dora.

“Now, rub it in! rub it in!” exclaimed Jess. “Don’t you suppose I know I’ve been a chump without you all telling me so?”

“I do believe it will rain,” burst out Dorothy, suddenly. “Doesn’t that look like a rain-cloud to you, Laura?”

“Pooh!” said Eve. “Don’t be afraid of a little April shower. It won’t drown us, that’s sure.”

“That’s all right,” agreed Dora, the other twin. “But we don’t want to get soaked. If it should start to rain, is there any shelter near?”

“The Gypsy camp, maybe,” laughed Bobby, and then went on ahead, singing:

“‘April showers bring May flowers
And sometimes more than that;
For the unexpected downpour
Often ruins the Easter hat.’

“Say, girls, we *would* be in a mess if it should start to rain hard.”

“And that cloud looks threatening,” admitted Nellie Agnew.

“I believe I felt a drop then,” gasped Dora.

“What’s the matter, Chicken Little?” laughed Laura. “Is the sky falling?”

“You can laugh! Maybe it will be a regular flood,” said Jess, ruefully.

“By the way, what caused the flood?” asked Bobby, soberly.

“Folks were so wicked – all but Noah,” replied Dora.

“No,” said Bobby.

“It’s one of Bobby’s ‘burns,’” declared Jess. “What *did* cause the flood, then?”

“It rained,” said the irrepressible one.

“Come on under this tree, girls!” cried Eve, striding ahead down the hill. “It will only be a passing shower.”

They ran for cover, and the broad branching limbs of the huge cedar Eve had selected faithfully covered them as the brief spring shower went drumming by.

Meanwhile Laura was saying, more thoughtfully:

“We’ve got to give our best attention to the inter-class and inter-school athletics when school opens again, girls, if we want Central High to stand first at the end of the year. You know we are being beaten right along by the East High and Keyport Just think! Central High only Number 3 in points that count when the June field day comes. We can’t stand for that, can we?”

“I should say not!” cried Bobby. “But we beat ‘em last year on the water.”

“And we stand first in basketball,” added Dora Lockwood.

“But the fact remains we haven’t got the championship of the League cinched by any manner of means,” returned Laura. “Eve is going to win, I believe, in the shot-putting contests. Mrs. Case says that is on the doubtful list of girls’ athletics. But throwing weights isn’t going to hurt Eve, or Hester Grimes, that’s sure. And look at that girl at Vassar! She put the shot thirty-two feet and three-quarters of an inch when she was only sixteen. Eve can do almost as well.”

“I don’t know about that, Mother Wit,” said the big girl, laughing. “But I’ll do my best.”

“And your best will beat them all, I believe.”

“She’ll beat Magdeline Spink, of Lumberport, I know,” cried Bobby. “And *she* did all the big ‘throws’ last year – baseball, basketball, putting the shot, and all of ‘em.”

“I hope you are right, Bobby,” returned the country girl, smiling. She was proud of her strength and physique. Her outdoor life since she was a little child, and what she had inherited from a long line of peasant ancestors was coming into play now for the benefit of Central High’s athletic score.

“Now, don’t sit down there on the damp ground, Jess. You’ll get a case of rheumatism – and a bad case, too.”

“Oh, I hope not!” cried Jess, jumping up. “I shouldn’t know what to do for it.”

“You’d have to take mud baths,” giggled Dorothy.

“That road below is in fine shape for that purpose, then,” said Jess, looking through the pouring rain at the puddles in the roadway.

“You’d have to wear flannels,” said Dora.

“Hah!” cried Bobby. “That’s it. Flannels are a sure cure. You know,

“Although it caused within his home
A very serious schism,
He still insisted flannel-cakes
Were good for rheumatism.”

“Go on!” exclaimed Jess, laughing. “You sound like ‘Alice in Wonderland.’”

“Say, rather, ‘Bobby in Blunderland,’” added Laura. “But to get back to athletics – ”

“To return to our muttuns,” quoth Bobby, unreprieved.

“We have a chance to win the championship – our school has – if we can bring the relay teams up to the mark, and win the jumping events. It is on field and track that we have got to gain the points. No doubt of that.”

“Then our track teams need strengthening – much,” said Nellie Agnew, thoughtfully.

“I should say so!” exclaimed Bobby. “I could put on one of Lil Pendleton’s peg-top skirts and beat most of the junior runners right now!”

“If it’s as bad as that, we have all got to go into the track athletics, and pull up our score,” declared Laura.

“Hurrah!” cried Dorothy, suddenly. “It’s stopped raining.”

“That little shower didn’t even wet under the bushes,” said Eve, with satisfaction.

“Let’s get along, then, before another comes and washes us away,” said Bobby. “Straight ahead, Evangeline?”

“Yes. Right down to that dead oak you see on the lower hillside.”

“Good! A mark is set before me, and if my luck holds good I’ll reach it. But why prate of ‘luck’? Is there such a thing?”

“Give it up. What’s the answer?” asked Dora Lockwood, directly behind her.

“Luck is a foolish thing – or a belief in it is,” complained Bobby. “List to my tale of woe:

“Why wear a rabbit foot for luck
Or nail a horseshoe on the sill?
For if upon the ice you slip
You’ll surely get a spill.

“Why cross your fingers in the dark
To keep the witches from your track,
When if, in getting out of bed,
You step upon a tack?”

“Don’t sing us any more doggerel, but lead on!” commanded Laura.

Bobby was first at the dead tree. There she stopped, not for breath, but because, below her, in a sheltered hollow, where a spring drifted away across a grassy lawn, there was an encampment. She held up her hand and motioned for silence.

There were three large, covered wagons such as Gypsies usually drive. A dozen horses were tethered where the young grass was particularly lush. A fire over which a big kettle of some savory stew bubbled, burned in the midst of the encampment. There were two gaudily painted canvas tents staked on the green, too, although from the opened doors of the wagons it was evident that the Gypsies, at this time of year, mainly lived within their vehicles.

“Oh!” exclaimed Bobby, when the other girls were crowding about her, and looking as hard as she was at the camp. “This is what the girl we saw, ran away from.”

CHAPTER IV – THE GYPSY QUEEN

“Isn’t that romantic?” cried Jess, under her breath. “Wouldn’t you like to live in the open like that, Laura?”

“Sometimes. Then again I might want a steam-heated house,” laughed Mother Wit.

“And see that darling little baby!” gasped Nellie Agnew, as a little fellow in gay apparel ran out of one of the tents.

A young woman followed him. She had black hair, and very black eyes, and wore a necklace, and earrings, and bracelets galore. When she ran after the crowing little one the tinkling of these ornaments was audible to the group of girls on the hillside.

This gaily dressed woman caught up the laughing child, and as she turned her gaze went over his head and struck full upon the seven girls.

She set the little boy down quietly, said something to him, and he ran to cover like a frightened chicken. She spoke another word – aloud – and two men and three other women appeared from the wagons, or tents. They all gazed up at the half-frightened girls.

“Come down, pretty young ladies,” said the gaily bedecked Gypsy woman, in a wheedling tone. “We will not harm you. If you cross our palms with silver we may be able to tell you something pleasant.”

She spoke English well enough; but her address mainly was a formula used; to attract trade.

“What’ll we do?” gasped Dorothy Lockwood, clinging to her twin’s hand.

“Keep your courage, Dorry,” said her sister.

“Don’t let them see we’re afraid of them,” Nellie advised, but in a shaking voice.

“And why should we be afraid?” asked Laura, quite calmly.

“Oh, I’ve seen that woman before,” said Eve. “She’s one of the Vareys. They are English Gypsies, like the Stanleys. She was at our place last summer.”

She started down the steep hillside into the camp. The first Gypsy woman said something in the Romany dialect to the others, and the men drifted away, only the woman awaiting the coming of the girls of Central High.

As the seven friends approached they saw that the Varey woman was very handsome, in her bold, dark way. Silver ornaments were entwined in her coarse, blue-black hair; her dress, though garish in color, was neat and of rich material. The bangle, bracelets, necklace and all were either of silver or gold – no sham about them, as Laura Belding very well knew, her father being a jeweler and she knowing something about good jewelry.

“She’s queen of the tribe,” whispered Eve to Laura. “And her husband, Jim Varey, is leader of this clan. He is a horse trader, and sells oilcloth and tinware, while the women sell baskets, and the like, and pick up a quarter now and then telling fortunes.”

“Oh, Eve!” whispered Jess, behind, “did you ever have your fortune told?”

“Yes. It’s silly,” replied Eve, flushing.

“It would be lots of fun,” said Bobby, quite as eager as Jess.

“Let’s all do it,” urged Nellie. “If we give them a little money they probably will not molest us.”

“They wouldn’t dare trouble us, anyway,” said Eve. “And why should they?”

But the other girls, who were not so well acquainted with the Romany people, felt that the adventure in the Gypsy camp promised much excitement. In a minute they were all on the greensward in front of the tent of the Gypsy queen.

“Cross the poor Gypsy’s palm with silver,” whined Grace Varey, in a wheedling tone, “and each of you shall learn what the future has in store for you.”

“Suppose you can’t tell us anything pleasant?” said Bobby Hargrew, boldly. “Then we’d rather not know it.”

“But such pretty little ladies are bound to have pretty fortunes,” replied the Romany woman. “Come! for a shilling – two shillings, in your American money – I will tell you each what you want to know most.”

“You will?”

“Yes, indeed, for but two shillings in your American money.”

“She means a quarter,” said Eve.

“You try it first, Mother Wit,” urged Nellie, nudging Laura.

At the words Grace Varey looked sharply at Laura Belding’s earnest face and thoughtful gray eyes. Instantly she said:

“You do not fear. You lead these others. You have a quick mind and you invent things. You are usually first in everything; but power does not spoil you. You win love as well as admiration – there is a difference. You have parents and at least one brother. You have no sister. There is a – ” She shut her eyes for a moment, and hesitated. “There is a black person – a woman – who has something to do with you – ”

“Beware of the ‘black man coming with a bundle,’” hissed Bobby, giggling.

“Hush!” exclaimed Jess. “She means Mammy Jinny, Laura’s old nurse.”

Grace Varey had turned swiftly to the scoffing Bobby, and she pointed at her with an accusing finger.

“You do not believe,” she said, quickly. “You are light and thoughtless. You have been spoiled by a doting father. You have no mother – poor child! You are very frivolous and light-hearted; but a great sorrow is coming into your life soon. Into your school life, I believe. It is connected with one of your teachers – a woman. Beware!”

Now, this was very melodramatic; but Bobby, for some reason, could not laugh at it. The woman was too much in earnest. Suddenly Grace Varey’s manner changed, and she whined:

“Cross the poor Gypsy’s palm with silver, and she will tell you more. Only two shillings, little lady,” and she urged Laura toward the tent.

“All right,” said Mother Wit. “If the rest of you are game, I am. But don’t back out afterward.”

“Not if she is genuine,” said Jess, laughing.

Bobby hadn’t a word to say; for the moment she was quelled.

But all that the woman had said could be easily explained by the science of deduction – which is merely observation raised to the *nth* power.

Mother Wit went into the tent and found it a rather gloomy place. There was a folding table and two divans, besides some dingy hangings. It was evidently arranged for the purpose of fortune telling and nothing else.

“Sit down, lady,” said the Gypsy queen. “Let me see your hand. Do you believe in the reading of character by the lines of the hand?”

“I do not know whether I do or not,” replied Laura, calmly.

The woman laughed lightly. She peered at the lines of Laura’s palm for a moment, and then said:

“You believe nothing without investigation. For so young a person you are very cautious, and you have much good sense. You are sharp and intelligent. And you are gentle-hearted. In short, your friends love you very dearly, and you are very faithful to them. Is it not so?”

“You flatter me,” said Laura, quietly.

She noted that the woman was no longer holding her hand by the fingers; that she had shifted her own hand to Laura’s wrist, and that two of the queen’s fingers were resting lightly on her pulse – just as Dr. Agnew held a patient’s hand when he counted the throbbing of his heart.

“Oh, I know,” went on the Gypsy, in her whining, sing-song way. “You would be faithful in every event. If you had a secret you could keep it – surely. For instance,” she added, without changing her tone or raising her voice, “if you had seen the girl with the yellow handkerchief and green skirt,

and the little, puckered blue scar high up – near the right temple – you would not tell where she was – which direction she had gone.”

That was why the woman was feeling her pulse! Laura knew her heart jumped at the question. She might control her features; but the woman’s question had startled her, and that sudden heart-throb had told the shrewd queen what she wished to know.

She smiled lazily, in the dim light, upon the girl before her. She knew that Laura Belding and her friends had seen the fugitive from the Gypsy camp.

CHAPTER V – THE SITUATION LOOKS SERIOUS

Laura Belding was as quick to think as she was to act. She remained perfectly calm after the woman's question – calm outwardly, at least. Now she spoke:

"You have spoken a very true thing now. If I had seen such a girl I should not tell you. And this has nothing to do with my own fortune. I have paid you to tell me something about my future – which you seem to know so well."

This spurring phrase put the woman on her mettle. She flushed slowly under her dark skin.

"You are a heretic – you do not believe," she said.

"I must be shown before I believe," returned Laura, confidently.

"Then what comes to you in the future will only prove the case," laughed the Gypsy queen. "You do not believe in palmistry," and she tossed the hand from her lightly.

"Neither do you," said Laura, bluntly. "You did not hold my hand then to enable you to read my palm, but for another purpose."

"You are a shrewd lady," said the Gypsy. "I read character in other ways than by palmistry – it is true."

She looked at Laura for some seconds very earnestly. Of course, Mother Wit did not believe this Gypsy had any occult power; but her deep black eyes were wonderfully compelling, and it might be that there was something in "mind reading."

"You have an intention now that, if followed to its conclusion, will bring you trouble, young lady. Just what that intention may be, or what trouble it may bring, I cannot say exactly," declared the woman, slowly and impressively. "But it deals with a person you have never seen but once – I believe, recently. It seems that you may think you are helping her –"

"That is not prophesying," said Laura, quickly, and interrupting the Gypsy queen. "I shall scarcely think your information worth what I have paid you if you do not do better than that."

"What do you mean?" demanded the woman, hastily, and with a flush coming into her cheek again.

"You know very well that you are warning me not to assist the girl who has run away from this camp," Mother Wit said, boldly.

"Ha! Then you *did* see her?" cried the Gypsy.

"You know I did. You played a trick on me to find out. You are not telling my fortune, but you are endeavoring to find out, through me, about the girl who has run away. And I tell you right now, you will not learn anything further from me – or from the other girls."

The Gypsy queen gazed at her with lowering brows; but Laura Belding neither "shivered nor shook."

"You are quite courageous – for a girl," observed the woman, at last.

"I may be, or not. But I am intelligent enough to know when I am being fooled. Unless you have something of importance to tell me I shall conclude that this fortune-telling seance is ended," and Laura rose from her seat.

"Wait," said the woman, in a low voice. "I will tell you one thing. You may not consider it worth your attention now, little lady; but it will prove so in the end. *Do not cross the Romany folk – it is bad luck!*"

"And I do not believe in 'luck,'" rejoined Laura, smiling. She was determined not to let the woman see that she was at all frightened. Surely these people would not dare detain, or injure, seven girls.

"An unbeliever!" muttered the Gypsy woman. "We can tell nothing to an unbeliever."

"And having got *from* her all you are likely to get," said Laura, coolly, "your prophecies are ended, are they?"

Queen Grace waved her hand toward the tent flap. "Send in one of your companions," she said. "Any one of them. I am angry with you, and when passion controls me I can see nothing, little lady."

But Laura Belding went forth, fully determined that none of her friends should waste their money upon the chance that the Gypsy queen might see into the future for them.

"It's wicked, anyway," decided Mother Wit. "If God thought it best for us to know what the future had in store for us, he would have put it within the power of every person to know what was coming. Professional palmists, and fortune-tellers of all sorts, are merely wicked persons who wish to get foolish people's money!"

She found the six other girls grouped in the middle of the camp, trying to understand one of the women, who was talking to them, and evidently not a little frightened.

"Oh, Laura! How did it go?" demanded Jess, running to her.

"Very bad. She is a fraud," whispered Mother Wit. "And look out! they think we have seen the girl who ran away and they will try to pump us about her."

"That's what I thought," declared Jess.

"Know all about your past and future, Laura?" asked Bobby Hargrew.

"Dear me! it makes me shiver to think of it," said Nellie. "Does she stir a cauldron, and call on the spirits of the earth and air?"

"She calls on nothing but her own shrewd sense," replied Laura, shortly. "And she can tell you really nothing. Take my advice, girls, and don't try it."

"Oh!" cried the disappointed Bobby "I did so hope she could tell me – more."

"Don't you believe a thing she told you about trouble coming to you at school," said Eve, quietly.

"You needn't worry about that, Bobs," drawled Dora Lockwood. "You know you are always getting into trouble with Gee Gee."

"Maybe she could tell me how to circumvent her," sighed Bobby.

"You'll never get the best of Miss Grace Carrington," said Jess, decidedly; "so give up all hope of *that*."

"Let the little lady try it – do," whined one of the women. "She can learn much, perhaps. Because one fails, that is no reason why another should not succeed."

"I'd like to try it," said Bobby, earnestly.

Laura whispered: "What they want to find out is if we saw the girl who has run away from them, and if we know where she is. Be careful."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," Laura replied. "She caught me with her questions. She knows I saw the girl. I told her nothing else."

The queen came to the opening of the tent and beckoned to Bobby. She seemed to know instinctively which girl was anxious to try her arts.

"Oh, Bobby," whispered Dorothy. "Maybe you'd better not – as Laura says."

"I want to see for myself," said the other girl, doggedly.

And she moved toward the Gypsy's tent. Laura gathered the other girls about her. One of the women was so near that she could overhear anything said louder than a whisper.

"I want to get away from here at once," said Laura, quietly. "Let us buy any little things they may have for sale, and go on our way. We can get away better now when there are only two men in the camp than we can when those other three – and the bloodhound – get back."

"Oh, mercy me!" gasped Jess. "I had forgotten about the bloodhound."

"Hush!" murmured Laura. "Don't let that woman hear you."

But it was evident that the Gypsy woman had heard. She uttered a sentence or two in Romany and the two men whom the girls had seen before at the camp appeared. They did not come near, but sat by the roadside that passed through the hollow, and filled their pipes and smoked. It was quite evident that they were on guard.

“We are prisoners!” whispered Nellie, seizing Eve’s arm.

“Sh!” admonished Laura again. “Don’t let them see that you’re afraid. That will only make them the bolder.”

But all of the six girls outside the Gypsy’s tent were more than a little disturbed. The situation did seem serious.

CHAPTER VI – PRESSING HOSPITALITY

The other woman had been stirring the great pot of stew. It certainly *did* throw off a delicious odor. Each girl carried a lunch box and they had been about to hunt a pretty spot, near a spring, and satisfy their appetites. Now the woman at the cauldron, who looked a deal like an old witch, turned and waved her spoon, grinned, and said something to the half-frightened visitors.

The younger Gypsy woman interpreted:

“She says you can have some dinner, if you will stay.”

“My goodness!” whispered Dora. “I could not eat any of that stuff.”

“Some of the Gypsies are good cooks – and that smells delicious,” Eve said.

Laura shook her head, but tried to speak kindly. “We could not stop long enough to eat with you,” she said. “We must go just as soon as the other girl comes out.”

“Better think twice of it, little lady,” said the Gypsy woman. “When you eat the bread and salt of the Romany folk they remain your friends.”

“And chase you with bloodhounds if you try to get away,” spoke Nellie, unguardedly.

It was an unfortunate remark. The woman must have heard it. She turned and spoke to the men again. They rose and stood ready to oppose the departure of the girls of Central High.

Even Laura and Eve felt their courage waver at this. The latter knew that there were no farms near – no inhabited dwellings. The nearest family must be at least two miles away. And this road was lonely at best – and this time of year, when the farmers were just beginning to get their plows into the ground, everybody was busy and there would not be much driving on any of the ridge roads.

“What can we do?” moaned Dorothy Lockwood.

“Will they dare keep us here, Eve?” demanded her twin.

At this strained point in the proceedings there was a sudden excitement among the Gypsies. One of the men started up the road in an easterly direction. The girls looked in some worriment of mind to see what was to happen.

“They’ve caught the girl!” muttered Jess.

“No, But the dog’s coming back,” said Laura.

There appeared almost at once the three men who had hunted with the bloodhound – and the hound himself. He was more ferocious-looking close to than at a distance. The six girls shrank together when he passed them, his great dewlaps slobbering and dripping, and his red eyes glancing sullenly from side to side.

The Gypsies laughed when they saw fear so plainly displayed in the countenances of the six girls. The bloodhound was fastened to one of the wagon wheels, and then the Romany folk paid no particular attention to their visitors.

It was plain that they considered the girls would not go far when they saw that the dog could be unleashed and set upon their trail. Nellie Agnew began to cry, but Laura was growing angry.

“Just wait till Bobby comes out of that tent. I’m going to start right off along the road – ”

“You won’t ever dare to!” gasped Dora.

“Yes, I will. They won’t dare set a dog like that on us – ”

Just then the little boy they had first seen ran out of the other tent. He was evidently aiming for his father, who was a low-browed man with huge hoops of gold in his ears, and a ferocious mustache.

But the little one had to pass the dog. He saw him, gave a shriek of delight, and ran straight at the huge and savage-looking creature!

The girls were, for an instant, greatly startled. Then they were amazed to see the little fellow roll the bloodhound over and laugh and shriek in delight – while the dog nuzzled the baby and seemed to like the play.

“My goodness!” cried Jess. “That dog’s nothing but a bluff!”

"I believe you," said Laura. "I've heard of a dog's bark being worse than his bite; but in this case his appearance is a whole lot worse than his real nature. I guess they just keep him for his fearful looks and his ability to trail anything."

"Girls included," murmured Dora. "I don't want him trailing me."

The Gypsies had tried to call the little boy away from the huge dog. But they knew that the appearance of the hound would no longer strike terror to the hearts of their visitors.

Indeed, Laura, who was naturally unafraid of dogs, as she was of horses, went over to the big, ugly-looking brute, and patted his head. He raised up and looked at her, and his bloodshot eyes *did* have a fearful appearance; but he lapped her hand with his soft tongue – and *that* bogey was laid!

"Just as soon as Bobby comes out, we'll go, girls," said Laura, confidently. "They won't dare lay a finger on us."

At that moment Bobby burst from the fortune-teller's tent. She presented a wonderful and a shocking sight to her friends, for usually they saw her laughing. She was in tears and she ran to Laura and clung to her in a frightened way.

"Oh! oh!" she cried. "I want to get away from this horrid place. Do let's go, Mother Wit! Please do!"

"What's the matter with you, Bobby?" demanded Jess, nervously. "You give me the creeps."

"These hateful people – " began Dora Lockwood, when the Gypsy queen appeared at the tent entrance. Her eyes sparkled and her handsome face was flushed. She called something in a low, clear voice, and the men, who had gathered in a knot at one side, started toward her.

One of them unfastened the dog again and held the end of the chain. The queen was talking excitedly in their own tongue to the others.

Laura shook Bobby a little and said, shrewdly:

"I guess she got out of you what she wanted to know, eh?"

Bobby only sobbed.

"Did you tell her what direction that girl was going – that she was wading up stream?"

"Oh, yes! I did!" gasped Bobby. "She made me."

"Well, it can't be helped. It's really none of our business," said Laura. "But if they try to stop us from going away now, we've got to scatter and run. They can't hold us all very well, and one of us will surely find some house – "

"They won't dare stop us," said Eve, decidedly.

At that moment Nell held up her hand. "Hark!" she exclaimed. "What is that?"

The rattling of a heavy wagon coming down the road from the east was audible. Eve instantly ran out to the edge of the road. One of the Gypsies uttered a shrill, warning cry, and the men turned to intercept the girls.

But into view came the heads of a team of bay horses, and then a farm-wagon, with a bewhiskered man in high boots on the seat, driving the team.

"Hullo! Whoa!" exclaimed the farmer, when he saw Eve. "I declare I Is that you, Evie?"

"Why, Mr. Crook! how glad I am to see you," said the Swiss girl. "What have you got in the wagon? Just a few bags? Then you can give us a lift, can't you? We are tired walking."

"Sure I can, Miss Evie," replied the farmer. "What are you girls doin' with these 'Gyptians? Gettin' your fortunes told?"

"Oh, we just stopped here for a minute," said Eve, carelessly.

The Gypsies had hesitated to approach closer. The men began to slip away, one after the other.

"Pile in, girls," said the farmer, hospitably. "I'm going five or six miles on this road. Bound for Fielding?"

"Yes, we are," replied Eve, as her friends gratefully clambered into the end of the wagon.

"Oh, dear me!" whispered Jess. "What luck this is! I believe those folks would have tried to keep us."

“I don’t know about that,” returned her chum. “But the woman certainly managed to frighten Bobby most thoroughly.”

Bobby had hushed her sobs. But even when the wagon had started again and the Gypsy camp was out of sight, she was not willing to talk about what the Varey woman had told her.

CHAPTER VII – THE YELLOW KERCHIEF AGAIN

School opened the next Monday and the girls of Central High took up their tasks “for the last heat” of the year, as Jess Morse expressed it.

“And I’m glad,” she told her chum, Laura Belding, “Just think! next Fall we’ll be seniors.”

“Wishing your life away,” laughed Laura. “We were awfully glad to be juniors, I remember.”

“Sure. But we’ll boss the school next fall,” said Jess.

“We’ve done very well for juniors, especially in athletics,” observed Laura. “Why, practically, our bunch has dominated athletics for a year, now. We made the eight-oared shell in our sophomore year.”

“True. And the champion basketball team, too.”

“And Eve is going to qualify for the broad jump as well as the shot-put, I verily believe,” said Laura. “I’m glad I found that girl and got her to come to Central High instead of going to Keyport.”

“She was a lucky find,” admitted Jess. “And she wasn’t much afraid of those Gypsies last week – did you notice?”

“Of course she wasn’t. She told me this morning that the constable over there looked for the camp, but the Romany folk had moved on.”

“I wonder if they caught that girl in the yellow kerchief,” said Jess, thoughtfully.

“Don’t know. But they managed to scare Bobby pretty thoroughly,” said Laura. “I never did see Bobby Hargrew quite so impressed.”

Jess smiled. “She seemed to know something about you, too, Laura – that Gypsy queen. She knew you had a negro mammy at home.”

“I don’t know how she guessed that,” admitted Laura. “But I believe all that fortune telling is foolishness. If she came to the house and told Mammy Jinny half what she did us, Mammy would be scared to death. We had a good laugh on the dear old thing yesterday. She’s had a cold for several days and mother insisted upon calling Dr. Agnew in to see her. You know how Nellie’s father is – always joking and the like; and he enjoys puzzling Mammy Jinny. So when he had examined her he said:

“‘Mammy, the trouble is in your thorax, larynx and epiglottis.’

“‘Ma soul an’ body, Doctor!’ exclaimed Mammy, turning gray. ‘An’ I only t’ought I had a so t’roat.’”

“But Mammy does like to use long words herself,” chuckled Jess. “She will remember those words and spring them on you some time. Remember when her nephew had the rheumatism?”

“Of course,” Laura replied. “We asked her if it was the inflammatory kind and she said:

“‘Sho’ it’s exclamatory rheumatism. He yells all de time.’”

“But I *do* wonder,” said Jess, again, “if the Gypsies caught that girl. She must have wanted badly to get away from them to have run the risk of being chased by a bloodhound.”

“And she was smart, too,” Laura agreed. “Running on that wall and wading in the stream threw the dog off the scent.”

“If one of us had done such a thing as that when the water was so cold we would have got our ‘never-get-over,’” declared Jess.

“I believe you. And a lot of us girls are ‘tender-feet,’ as Chet says, at this time of year. We have been in the house too much. I tell you, Jess, we’ve got to get ‘em out in the field just as soon as it’s dry enough. Bill Jackway is working on the track and Mrs. Case says she thinks we can start outdoor relay practice and quarter-mile running on Saturday – if it’s pleasant.”

“That’s what we have got to practice up on, too, if we want to win the points we need to put Central High at the top of the list,” agreed her chum.

“I should say!”

The moment they were freed from the regular lessons of the day Laura and Jess and their particular friends made for the handsome gym, building and athletic field that Colonel Richard Swayne had made possible for them. Bobby Hargrew was very much down in the mouth, for she had gone up against Miss Carrington at several points and the martinet had been very severe with the irrepressible.

“I tell you what,” growled Bobby, “I believe that little brother of Alice Long hit it off about right when it comes to teachers.”

“How is that?” asked Laura.

“Why, he came home after going to school a few days last Fall, and says he: ‘I don’t think teachers know much, anyway. They keep asking you questions all the time.’”

“I agree with you there,” Jess said. “And such useless questions! Why, if you answered them literally half the time you’d be swamped in demerits. For instance, did you notice that one to-day: ‘Why did Hannibal cross the Alps?’ I felt just like answering: ‘For the same reason the chicken crossed the road!’”

The girls got into their gym. suits in a hurry and then played passball for a while, and, when well warmed up, went out on the field. Mrs. Case appeared and tried some of the younger ones out in relay running, while several of the bigger ones, including Eve, tried the broad jump, and Laura, and Jess, and more of the juniors trotted around the cinder path.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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