

Crane Laura Dent

The Automobile Girls Along the Hudson: or, Fighting Fire in Sleepy Hollow



Laura Crane

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CHAPTER I – THE UNEXPECTED ALWAYS HAPPENS

“I think I’d make a pretty good housemaid,” said Barbara, on her knees, energetically polishing the floor of the cottage parlor.

“Only housemaids don’t wear gloves and all-over aprons and mobcaps,” replied Mollie.

“And they don’t protect their skins from dust with cold cream,” added Barbara, teasingly. “Do they, Molliedkins?”

“Oh well,” replied Mollie, “duty and beauty rhyme, and every woman ought to try and keep her looks, according to the beauty pages in all the papers.”

“Poor old Molliedkins!” exclaimed her sister. “Crowsfeet and gray hair at fifteen!”

“Going on sixteen,” corrected Mollie, as she gave a finishing rub to the mahogany center table, a relic of more prosperous days, and flourished an old, oily stocking that made an excellent polisher. “But the papers do say that automobiling is very harmful to the complexion and the face should be protected by layers of cold cream and powder, and a veil on top of that.”

“I’m willing to take the chance,” laughed Barbara, “if ever I get another one.”

“I suppose Ruth is so busy getting ready for her six weeks’ trip abroad that she won’t have much time for her ‘bubble’ this August,” observed Mollie. “But, dear knows, we can’t complain. There never was a rich girl who knew how to make other people happy as well as she does. Sometimes I think she is really a fairy princess, disguised as a human being, who is just gratifying her desire to do nice things for girls like us.”

“No, she is no fairy,” commented Barbara. “That is why we love her so. She is just a jolly, nice girl and as human as anybody. When she asked us to go to Newport it was because she really wanted us. She has often told me, since, that she had been planning the trip for months, but the girls she knew were not exactly the kind who would have fallen into such a scheme. Gladys Le Baron would never have done, you see, at that time, because she always wanted Harry Townsend hanging about.”

Harry Townsend, our readers will recall, appeared in a former volume of this series, “The Automobile Girls at Newport.” He was the famous youth known to the police as “The Boy Raffles,” whose mysterious thefts were the puzzle of the society world. It was Barbara Thurston, by her grit and intelligence, who finally brought the criminal to justice, though not before Newport had been completely bewildered by a number of inexplicable jewelry robberies.

Following the visit to Newport came another delightful trip to the Berkshire Hills. The romantic rescue of a little girl whose birth had been concealed from her rich white relatives by her Indian grandmother; Mollie Thurston lost in an unexplored forest; the thrilling race between an air ship and an automobile – these and other exciting adventures were described in the second volume of the series entitled “The Automobile Girls in the Berkshires.”

“How hot it is!” continued Bab. “Suppose we have some lemonade. These forest fire mists are really fine ashes and they make me quite thirsty.”

She polished away vigorously while Mollie tripped off to make a cooling drink in the spotless little kitchen. Except for the tinkle of ice against glass the house was very still. Outside, not a breeze was stirring, and the meadows were draped in a curious, smoky mist. The sun hung like a red ball in the sky; the air was hot and heavy. The flowers in the garden borders drooped their heads in spite of persistent and frequent waterings. Three months’ drought had almost made a desert of Kingsbridge.

The neat little scrap of a lawn was turning brown in patches, like prematurely gray hair, Barbara said. Even the birds were silent, and Mollie's cherished family of bantams, a hen, a rooster and one chick, crouched listlessly in the shadow of the hedge.

Just then the stillness was broken by the distant crunch-crunch of an automobile. But the girls were too intent on what they were doing to take any notice until it stopped at their own front gate, and the sound of gay laughter and voices floated up the walk. Mollie and Barbara rushed together to the front porch.

"It's Ruth herself!" they cried in the same breath, running down the steps without stopping to remove their long gingham aprons and dusting caps. "And there's mother, too," exclaimed Mollie.

"And Mr. Stuart and Aunt Sallie, all complete!" cried Barbara.

In a moment the three girls were engaged in a sort of triangular embrace while the others looked smilingly on.

"Well, young ladies," said Mr. Stuart, "are those automobile coats you're wearing, and bonnets, too?"

"I think they would do pretty well for motoring," replied Barbara, "they are specially made for keeping out the dust."

"They are just as cute as they can be," said loyal Ruth, who was too tender-hearted to let her friends be teased.

"But where on earth did you come from, Ruth?" asked Mollie. "We were just talking about you a moment ago. We thought, of course, you were still in Denver, and lo and behold! you appear in person in Kingsbridge."

"Well, papa had a call East," replied Ruth, bubbling with suppressed joy, "and I had a call, too. Papa's was business and mine was – well, just to call on you." By that time they had reached the cool, half-darkened little parlor whose bare floor and mahogany furniture reflected their faces in the recently polished surfaces.

"Oho!" cried Mr. Stuart. "I see now where Queen Mab and her fairies have been working in their pinafores and caps."

"Take them off now, girlyes," said Mrs. Thurston, "and get a pitcher of ice water. I know our friends must be thirsty after their dusty ride."

But Mollie, who had already disappeared, came back in a few minutes bearing a large tray of glasses and a tall glass pitcher against whose sides cracked ice tinkled musically.

"That's the most delightful sound I've heard to-day," exclaimed Mr. Stuart, and even Aunt Sallie took a second glass without much urging.

"Where is our little Indian Princess from the Berkshire Hills?" asked Mr. Stuart suddenly. "One of my reasons for coming East was to see Eunice. Ruth says she is the prettiest, little brown bird that ever flew down from a mountain to live in a gilded cage. What have you done with her, Mrs. Thurston?"

"I have had to give her up, Mr. Stuart," Mrs. Thurston replied, sadly. "And I was beginning to love Eunice like one of my own children. You cannot guess how quickly she learned the ways of our home. She soon forgot the old, wild mountain life and her Indian grandmother's teaching. But just now and then, if one of us was the least bit cross with her, she would run away to the woods; and then only Mollie, whom she always loved best, could bring her home again."

"Oh, how I hated to have her leave us!" Mollie declared. "But after the one winter with mother, Eunice's rich uncle, Mr. Latham, came here to see her. He was so charmed with her beauty and shy lovely manners that he took her back to his home in the Berkshires to spend the summer with him. This fall Mr. Latham is going to put Eunice in a girl's boarding school in Boston, so that she can be nearer his place at Lenox. He wants to be able to see her oftener. The dream of little Eunice's life is to some day ask 'The Automobile Girls' to visit her."

“Well, girls,” said Ruth, as they moved toward the front porch, leaving their three elders to chat in the parlor, “I suppose you know I’ve got something in my mind again.”

“No, honor bright, we don’t,” declared Barbara. “Isn’t Europe about as much as you can support at one time?”

“But Europe doesn’t happen until next month, children, and after finishing his business in the East, papa is going to be kept very busy for at least a month in the West. In the meantime Aunt Sallie and I have no place to go but out, and nothing to do but play around until it’s time to sail. And so, honored friends, I’m again thrown upon your company for as long a time as you can endure my presence. And this is the plan that’s been working in my head all the way on the train: What do you say to a lovely motor trip up along the Hudson to Sleepy Hollow? Don’t you think it would be fine? Grace can go, and we’ll have our same old happy crowd. It’s really only one day’s trip to Tarrytown, where we will stop for as long as we like, and from there we can motor about the country and see some of the fine estates. It is a historic place, you know, girls, full of romance and old stories and legends. We can even motor up into the hills if we like.”

“It would be too perfect!” cried the other two girls.

“I’m just in the mood for adventures, anyway,” declared Barbara. “I’ve been feeling it coming over me for a week.”

“When are we going?” asked Mollie.

“Well, why not to-morrow,” replied Ruth, “while the spirit moves us?”

“O joy, O bliss, O rapture unconfined!” sang Mollie, dancing up and down the porch in her delight.

“You see, there is no special getting ready to do,” went on Ruth. “The chauffeur will go over ‘Mr. A. Bubble,’ this afternoon, and put him in good shape. He’s been acting excellently well for such a hardworking old party. I mean ‘A. Bubble,’ of course.”

“Does mother know yet, Ruth?” asked Barbara, with a sudden misgiving.

“Oh, yes, she knows all about it. Papa and I laid the whole plan before her when we picked her up in the village. She was agreeable to everything, but of course she would be. She is such a dear! Aunt Sallie was the only one who was a bit backward about coming forward. She seemed to think that the forest fires would devour us if we dared venture outside of New York. But, of course, they are only in the mountains and there is no danger from them. It took me an age to gain her consent. If she has any more time to think about it she may back out at the eleventh hour.”

“Is it all settled, girls?” called Mr. Stuart’s voice through the open window.

“Oh, yes,” chorused three gay voices at once.

“Well, I think we’d better be going up to the hotel, then,” cried Miss Sallie. “If I’m to be suffocated by smoke and cinders I think I shall need all the rest I can get beforehand.”

“But, dearest Aunt Sallie,” said Ruth, patting her aunt’s peach-blossom cheek, “the fires are nowhere near Sleepy Hollow. They are miles off in the mountains. And truly, in your heart, I believe you like these little auto jaunts better than any of us.”

“Not at all,” replied the inflexible Miss Stuart. “I am much too old and rheumatic for such nonsense.”

Whereupon she jumped nimbly into the car.

The others all laughed. They understood Miss Sallie pretty well by this time. “She has a stern exterior, but a very melting interior,” Barbara used to say of her.

“Don’t fail to be ready by ten, girls,” called Ruth as she followed her aunt, while Mr. Stuart was offering his adieux to Mrs. Thurston.

“But, Bab,” whispered Mollie, as the automobile disappeared around a curve in the road, “what about the forest fires?”

“Sh-h!” said Barbara, with a finger on her lip.

And they followed their mother into the house.

CHAPTER II – MR. STUART CONFIDES A SECRET

The next day was like the day before, very hot and still, the air thick with a smoke-like mist even in that seashore place. It hung over the sea like a heavy fog, and the foghorn could be heard in the distance moaning like a distracted animal calling for its young.

Barbara had refreshed herself by an early morning dip in the ocean, but she felt the oppressive atmosphere in spite of the tingling the cool salt water had given to her skin.

They were seated around the little breakfast table, always so daintily set, for Mrs. Thurston had never lost that quality which had characterized her in her youth and which still clung to her in the days of her hardships and troubles.

“And now, girlyies,” she said, “you must promise me one thing. Don’t lose your heads at the wrong time. Not that you ever have before, and I am sure I have no premonitions, now; but remember, my daughters, if anything exciting should happen, to make a little prayer to yourselves; then think hard and the answer is apt to come before you know it.”

“Do you remember how Gladys Le Baron shrieked the time the curtains in her room caught fire?” asked Mollie. “She didn’t do anything but just wring her hands and scream, and it was really Barbara who put the fire out. Bab pulled down the curtains and threw a blanket over them. And then Gladys had hysterics. But Barbara always keeps her head,” added Mollie, proudly.

“Your head is all right, too, Molliedkins,” exclaimed Barbara. “The night the man tried to break in the house, don’t you remember, mummie, how brave she was? She followed us up with a poker as bold as a lion.”

“So you did, my pet, and I’m not the least afraid that either one of you ever will be lacking in courage. But, when I was very small, my mother once taught me a little prayer which she made me promise to say to myself whenever I felt the temptation to give way to fear or anger. And many and many a time it has helped me. It was only a few words: ‘Heaven, make me calm in the face of danger,’ but I have never known it to fail.”

“Dearest little mother,” cried Barbara, kissing her mother’s soft cheek, “you’re the best and sweetest little mummie in the world and I’m sure I can’t remember ever having seen you angry or hysterical or any of those terrible things. But if ever I do get in a tight place I hope I shall not forget the little prayer.”

“‘Heaven, make me calm in the face of danger,’” repeated Mollie, softly.

“But, dear me, how gruesome we are!” exclaimed Mrs. Thurston. “It is time you were packing your bags, at any rate, children. Be sure and put in your sweaters. You may need them in spite of this hot wave. And, Mollie, don’t forget the cold cream for your little sunburned nose.”

The two girls ran upstairs to their room. In a few moments they were deep in preparations. By the time the whirl of an automobile was heard in the distance they had got into their fresh linen suits and broad-brimmed straw hats, and were waiting on the porch with suit cases and small satchels. Mrs. Thurston looked them over with secret pride.

“Do you see anything lacking, mother?” asked Barbara.

“No, Bab, my dear. I haven’t a word to say. You made a very choice selection in that pink linen, and Mollie was just as happy in her blue one. I never saw neater looking dresses. I hope they won’t wrinkle much. But you can have them pressed at the hotel, I suppose.”

“And don’t forget our automobile coats,” exclaimed Mollie proudly, as she shook out her long pongee duster, last year’s Christmas gift from Ruth. “This is the first time we’ve had a chance to wear them. I feel so grand in mine!” she continued, as she slipped it on. “With all this veil and hat I can almost imagine I am a millionaire.” And she swept up the porch and back with a society air that was perfect. “Good morning,” she said to her mother in a high, affected voice. “Won’t you take a little spin with me in my car? Life is such a bore now at these barbarous seaside places! There is really

nothing but bridge and motoring, and one can't play bridge all the time. Oh, and by the way," she continued, pretending to look at Bab haughtily, through a lorgnette, "won't you bring your little girl along? She can sit with the chauffeur."

They were still laughing when the automobile came spinning up with Ruth, Grace Carter, Miss Sallie Stuart and her brother.

"On time, as usual, girls," cried Ruth gayly. "And I am late as usual. But who cares? It's a lovely day and we're going to have a perfect time. I am so glad we're going that I would like to execute a few steps on your front porch for joy."

"Go ahead," said Barbara. "We've just been having one exhibition from Miss Clare Vere de Vere Thurston, who is bursting with pride over her automobile coat, and we would be pleased to see another."

"By the way, I should like to have a few words in private with the young party in the pink dress," called Mr. Stuart, who was engaged in taking a last look at the inner workings of the automobile.

"Meaning me?" asked Bab. "Come in, won't you, Mr. Stuart?"

"Now, what could they be having secrets about?" exclaimed Ruth, and even Miss Sallie looked somewhat mystified.

"I am dying to know what you two are confabbing about," cried Ruth, as Mr. Stuart and Barbara returned. "Have you given Bab permission to tell us?"

"Miss Barbara Thurston is a young woman of such excellent judgment," replied Mr. Stuart, "that I shall leave the secret entirely in her hands, and rely upon her to keep it or tell it as she thinks best."

"Well!" exclaimed Miss Sallie, "here's a nice mystery to commence the day on! But come along, girls; we had better be starting."

Mr. Stuart, with Bab's assistance, gathered up the bags and suit cases piled on the porch, packing the cases on the back with the others where they were secured with straps, and putting the small hand satchels on the floor of the car. Barbara seized her own satchel rather hastily and placed it beside her on the seat.

"Why, Bab, one would think you were a smuggler," cried Ruth. "Don't you want to put your satchel on the floor with the others?"

"Oh, never mind," replied Barbara carelessly. "It's all right here," and she exchanged a meaning look with Mr. Stuart.

"Dear me!" exclaimed Ruth. "You and papa grow 'curiouser and curiouser.'"

Then the good-byes were said, and the big automobile went skimming down the road in a whirl of dust, leaving Mrs. Thurston and Mr. Stuart at the gate waving their handkerchiefs, until it turned the curve and was lost to sight.

The travelers lunched at Allaire, as usual, in the little open-air French restaurant, and strolled about under the enormous elms of the deserted village while the meal was being prepared. But they did not linger after lunch. Ruth was hoping to make Tarrytown in time for dinner that evening, instead of stopping for the night in New York, which, she said, appeared to be suffering from the heat like a human being. "The poor, tired city is all fagged out and fairly panting from the humidity. If all goes well, I think we should get to New York by four o'clock, have tea at the Waldorf and start for Tarrytown at five. We ought to reach there by seven at the latest. It will be a long ride, but it's lots cooler riding than it is sitting still. Once we get to Tarrytown we can linger as long as we please."

They whizzed along the now familiar road, through the endless chain of summer resorts that line the Jersey coast, up the Rumson Road between the homes of millionaires, and finally struck the road to New York.

"It'll be easy sailing now," observed Ruth, "if we only catch the ferries."

By a stroke of good luck they were able to do so, and actually drew up in front of the Waldorf at a few minutes before four o'clock.

“Well, Ruth, I must say you are a pretty good calculator,” exclaimed Miss Sallie, “harum-scarum that you are.”

There was a brief interval for face-washing and the smoothing of flattened pompadours; another longer one for consuming lettuce sandwiches and tea, followed by ices and cakes, and the party was off again, as swiftly as if it had been carrying secret government dispatches.

Up Riverside Drive they sped, past the Palisades which loomed purple and amethyst in the misty light. Then eastward to Broadway, which was once the old Albany Post Road; along the borders of Van Courtlandt Park, where, even on that hot day, the golfers were out; through Yonkers, too citified to be interesting to the girls just then; and, finally, along the river through the loveliest country Barbara and Mollie had ever seen. Still the crags of the Palisades towered on one side, while on the other were beautiful estates stretching back into the hills, and little villages nestling down on the river front.

Miss Sallie and Grace were both sound asleep on the back seat. Mollie had let down one of the small middle seats, and sat resting her chin on the back of the seat in front of her, occasionally pressing her sister’s shoulder for sympathy.

Ruth was in a brown study. She was very tired. It was no joke playing chauffeur for more than a hundred miles in one day.

“Bab,” whispered Mollie, awed by the lovely vistas of river and valley, “do you think the Vale of Cashmere could be more exquisite than this? Or the Rhine, or Lake Como, or any other wonderful place we have never seen?”

“Isn’t it marvelous, little sister? It’s like an enchanted country, and it is full of legends and history, too. During the Revolution the two armies were encamped all through here.”

“Oh, yes,” interrupted Ruth. “If I were not too tired, I might tell you a lot of things about this historical spot, but we must take another spin down here later and see it all again. This village we are now entering is Irvington, the home of Washington Irving. His house is no longer open to the public, however. Tarrytown is only a little distance down the river. We shall soon be there.”

It was not long before a tired, sleepy party of automobilists drew up in front of an old hotel shaded with immense elms.

“Wake up, Aunt Sallie, dear,” cried Ruth, giving her sleeping relative a gentle shake. “Bestir yourselves, sweet ladies, for food and rest are at hand and the hostelry is open to us.”

Supper was, indeed, ready, and rooms, too. For Mr. Stuart had notified the hotel proprietor to expect an automobile containing five women to descend upon him about sundown.

The five travelers mounted the steps to the supper room, and refreshed themselves with beefsteak and hot biscuits; then mounted more steps to their bedrooms, where they soon fell into five untroubled slumbers.

CHAPTER III – ROCKING CHAIR ADVENTURES

“Well, girls,” exclaimed Ruth, next morning at the breakfast table, “here we are ready for adventures. But they will have to be early morning or late evening ones. It’s already too hot to breathe.”

“For my part,” observed Miss Sallie, “the only adventure I am seeking is to sit on the shady side of the piazza, in a wicker chair, and read the morning paper.”

“But, Miss Sallie, even that might turn into something,” said romantic Mollie.

“Yes, indeed,” pursued Ruth, “you know the way mamma met papa was by staying at home instead of going to a ball.”

“Why, Ruth!” cried Miss Sallie.

“But it’s quite true, dear Aunt Sallie. Mamma was visiting at a house party in the South, somewhere, and she had a headache and stayed home from a ball, and was sitting in the library. Papa came a-calling on one of the others, and was ushered into the library, by mistake, and introduced himself to mamma – and she forgot her headache and he forgot he was due to catch a train to New York at nine o’clock. It was simply a case of love at first sight.”

“My dear, I am not looking for any such romantic adventures,” said Miss Sallie, bristling. “Your father was an intimate friend of the family at whose house your mother was stopping. It was perfectly natural they should have met, if not that evening, at least another one. I always said your mother showed extreme good sense in staying away from a party and nursing her headache. Not many others would have done the same.” Miss Stuart gave her niece a meaning look, while the four girls suppressed their smiles and exchanged telegraphic glances of amusement.

Not long before Ruth had “doctored” herself up with headache medicine, and had gone to a dance against her aunt’s advice. As a result she had been obliged to leave before the evening was over, more on account of the medicine than the headache, Miss Sallie had believed.

“Dearest little auntie, you have a touch of sun this morning, haven’t you?” asked Ruth, leaning over and patting her aunt’s soft cheek; while Miss Stuart, who was indeed feeling the general oppressiveness of the weather, melted at once into a good humor and smiled at her niece tenderly.

Two persons were rather curiously watching this little scene from behind the shelter of the morning papers. One of them, a very handsome elderly man, seated at a table by the window, had started perceptibly when the party entered the room; and from that moment, he had hardly eaten a bite of breakfast. He was occupied in examining not the fair young girls but Miss Sallie herself, who was entirely unconscious of being the object of such scouting.

The other individual was quite different in appearance. He was dressed in black leather from head to foot, and a motor cap and glasses lay beside him on the table. His evident interest in the conversation of the girls was impersonal, perhaps the curiosity of a foreigner in a strange country. There was some admiration in his eyes as they rested on pretty Mollie’s golden curls and fresh smiling face; but his manner was perfectly respectful and he was careful to conceal his glances by the newspaper.

“That man is rather good-looking in a foreign sort of way,” whispered Mollie.

“Too much blacky face and shiny eye, to suit my taste,” replied Bab. “He looks like a pirate, or a smuggler, in that black leather suit.”

“Dear me, you are severe, Bab,” observed Ruth. “If he were not so young, I should take him for an opera singer on a vacation. He would do nicely dressed as a cavalier.”

“Be careful, my dears; you are talking much too loudly,” admonished Miss Sallie, for the young foreigner had evidently overheard the conversation, and had turned his face away to conceal an expression of amusement.

“I vote we adjourn to the porch,” said Ruth, “until we decide where we are going this morning. Come on, auntie, dear. There may be a rocking chair adventure waiting for you on that shady piazza.”

I saw a white haired gentleman giving you many glances of admiration, this morning, around the corner of his newspaper. Did you notice it, girls?"

"I did," replied Grace, somewhat hesitatingly, for she was just a little fearful about entering into these teasing humors with Ruth.

"Don't be silly, Ruth," said Miss Sallie. But she glanced quickly over her shoulder, nevertheless, as she led the little procession from the dining room, her lavender muslin draperies floating in the breeze. She stopped in the office and bought a newspaper, then proceeded to the shady piazza, where she seated herself in a rocking chair and unfolded the paper.

The girls leaned over the railing and looked down into the street, while Ruth expounded her views on their morning's ride.

"Suppose we have a lunch fixed up," she was saying, "and spend the morning at Sleepy Hollow? It's lovelier than anything you ever imagined, just what Washington Irving says of it, a place to dream in and see visions."

A charming tenor voice floated out from an upper window, singing a song in some foreign language.

The girls looked at each other and laughed.

"He did hear us, and he is an opera singer," whispered Grace.

"I knew it," came Miss Sallie's voice from the depths of the paper.

"Knew what?" demanded the four girls somewhat guiltily, as the singing continued.

"Knew that we would all be cremated if we came into these dreadful wild regions," replied Miss Sallie, as she gazed tragically down the shaded street lined with beautiful old homes.

"But, Miss Sallie," interposed Barbara in soothing tones, "the fires are up in the Catskills and the Adirondacks, aren't they? It is only when the wind blows in this direction that we get the smoke from them. Even New York gets it, then; and certainly there is no danger of New York burning up from the forest fires."

"Very well, my dears, if we do run into one of those shocking conflagrations, you may just recall my words to you this morning."

The girls all laughed, and there is nothing prettier than the sound of the light-hearted laughter of young girls; at least so thought the tall, military-looking man they had seen at breakfast. He had strolled out on the piazza, and was walking straight toward Miss Sallie with an air of determination that was unmistakable even to the stately lady in lavender.

A few feet from her chair he paused as if a sudden thought had arrested him, and the two looked straight into each other's faces for the space of half a minute. The girls were fairly dumb with amazement as they watched the little drama. Miss Sallie's face had flushed and paled before it resumed its natural peachy tone. They could not see the face of the stranger whose back was turned to them.

"Is it possible," asked Miss Sallie after a moment, in a strange voice, "that this is John Ten Eyck?"

She had risen from her chair, in her excitement, and the newspapers had fallen on the floor with her lavender silk reticule, her fan and smelling salts, her lace-edged handkerchief and spectacle case, all in a confused mass.

"You have not forgotten me, Sallie?" the man demanded, almost dramatically. "I am John Ten Eyck, grown old and gray. I never dreamed that any of my old friends would recognize me after all these years. But are these your girls, Sallie?" he asked, turning with a courtly air to the four young women.

"No, indeed, John," replied Miss Sallie, rather stiffly, "I have never married. This is my niece, Ruth Stuart, my only brother's child." And she proceeded to introduce the others in turn. "Ruth, my child, this is Major John Ten Eyck, an old friend of mine, whom I have not seen for many years. I

suppose you have lived in foreign lands for so long you have completely lost sight of your American friends.”

“It has been a great many years,” answered Major Ten Eyck, after he had taken each girl by the hand and had looked into her face with such gentleness and charm of manner as to win them all completely. “It’s been thirty years, has it not, Sallie?”

“Don’t ask me such a question, John Ten Eyck! I’m sure I have no desire to be reminded of how old we are growing. Do you know, you are actually getting fat and bald; and here I am with hair as white as snow.”

“But your face is as young as ever, Sallie,” declared the gallant major.

“Isn’t it, Major Ten Eyck?” exclaimed Ruth, who had found her voice at last. “She is just as pretty as she was thirty years ago, I am certain. Papa says she is, at any rate.”

“So she is, my dear,” agreed the old man as he gazed with undisguised admiration into Miss Sallie’s smiling face.

“Do sit down,” said Miss Sallie, slightly confused, “and tell us where you have been, and what you have been doing these last three decades.”

“It would take too long, I fear,” replied the major, looking at his watch. “I am looking for my two nephews this morning.”

“You mean Martin’s sons, I suppose?” asked Miss Sallie.

“Yes, they are coming down to stay with me at my old place, back yonder in the hills. They are bringing one or two friends with them, and we shall motor over this afternoon if the weather permits. But tell me, what are you doing here? Spending the summer? Don’t you find it a little dull, young ladies?”

“Oh, we are just on a motor trip, too,” replied Ruth. “We are birds of passage, and stop only as long as it pleases us.”

“And have you no men along, to look after you and protect you from highwaymen, or mend the tires when they are punctured?”

“My dear Major,” replied Miss Sallie, “you have been away from America for so long that you are old-fashioned. Do you think these athletic young women need a man to protect them? I assure you that the world has been changing while you have been burying yourself in Russia and Japan. Ruth, here, is as good a chauffeur as could be found, and Barbara Thurston can protect herself and us into the bargain. She rides horseback like a man.” Barbara blushed at the memory of the stolen horseback ride on the way to Newport. “Grace and Mollie are a little bit more old-fashioned, perhaps, and I am as helpless as ever. But two are quite enough. They have got us out of every scrape so far, the two of them.”

The girls all laughed.

Only Barbara, who was leaning on the railing facing the window, saw a figure move behind the curtain, which had stood so still she had not noticed it before.

“Since you are off on a sort of wild goose chase for amusement,” began the major (here the figure that was slipping away paused again), “couldn’t you confer a great honor and pleasure on an old man by making him a visit?”

“Oh!” cried the girls, breathless with delight, remembering the automobile full of youths that would shortly appear.

“Now, Miss Sallie, you see they all want to come,” continued the major. “Don’t, I beg of you, destroy their pleasure and my happiness by declining this request of my old age.”

“Oh, do say yes, Aunt Sallie!” cried Ruth.

And still Miss Sallie hesitated. She had a curious smile on her face as she looked out over the hills and meadows beyond.

“It’s an interesting old place, Sallie,” continued the major. “It was built by my Dutch ancestors, a charming old house that has been added to from time to time. I would like to see it full of young

faces once more. What do you say, Sallie? Won't you make us all happy? The boys and me, and the girls, too? For I can see by their faces they are eager to come."

"How far is it from here, John," asked Miss Sallie, doubtfully. "Is it anywhere near those dreadful forest fires?"

"It is fifteen miles back in the country, and I have heard no rumor of any fires in that vicinity lately. The boys and I are leaving this afternoon. We will see that everything is ship-shape, and you and the girls could follow to-morrow. I have an excellent housekeeper. She and her husband were a young couple when I went away, and they have lived at the place ever since. I am certain she can make you comfortable. I will give Miss Ruth explicit directions about the route. It is a fairly good road for motoring. We have a fine place for dancing there, young ladies. There's a famous floor in what, in my grandmother's time, we used to call the red drawing-room. There are dozens of places for picnics, pretty valleys and creeks that I explored and knew intimately in my youth. I have some good horses in my stables, Miss Barbara, if you have a fancy for riding," he continued, turning to Barbara with such grace of manner that she blushed for pleasure.

Looking from one eager face to another, and finally into the major's kindly gray eyes, Miss Sallie melted into acquiescence and the party was made up forthwith.

The major then pointed out to Ruth and Barbara the street they were to take, which would lead to the road to his old home. He drew a map on a piece of paper, so that they could make no mistake.

"When you come to the crossroads," he added, as a parting caution, "take the one with the bridge, which you can see beyond. The other road is roundabout and full of ruts besides."

Just then the horn of an automobile was heard, as a large touring car containing four young men and a deal of baggage, drew up in front of the hotel. At the same time, Barbara, who was still facing the window, saw the figure on the other side of the curtain steal quietly away.

Major Ten Eyck went forward to meet the newcomers, and he and his two nephews had a little earnest conversation together for a few moments. The young men looked up, saw Miss Sallie and the girls, and all four caps came off simultaneously.

"Please don't go yet," called the major, as Miss Stuart rose to leave. "I want to introduce the boys first."

Stephen and Martin Ten Eyck were handsome, sturdy youths, with clear cut features. The two visitors were far different in type; one, Alfred Marsdale, a young English friend, who was spending the summer with the Ten Eycks, and the other, Jimmie Butler, who seemed to have come from nowhere in particular but to have been everywhere.

"And now come along, boys," urged the major, after he had given the young people a chance to talk a few minutes. "These ladies want their ride, I know, and we must be off for the hall before it gets too hot for endurance."

With a last caution to Ruth about the proper road to Ten Eyck Hall, and a reminder to Miss Stuart not to break her promise, the major ushered his boys into the hotel office, while "The Automobile Girls" went up to their rooms.

"Isn't this perfectly jolly, girls?" called Ruth from the mirror as she pinned on her hat.

"De-lighted!" exclaimed Barbara and Mollie, joining the others.

"And listen, girlyies, dear! Did you scent a romance?" whispered Ruth.

"It certainly looked very much like one," replied Barbara.

"They were engaged once," continued Ruth, "but they had some sort of lovers' quarrel. The poor major tried to make it up, but Aunt Sallie wouldn't forgive him, and he went away and never came back, except for flying trips on business. Until to-day she has never seen or heard from him."

"But she must have cared some, because she didn't marry anyone else," observed Mollie reflectively.

"I wonder what he did," pondered Grace.

“Flirted with another girl,” answered Ruth. “Papa has often told me about it. Aunt Sallie had another lover, at the same time, who was very rich. She kept the two of them dangling on, and it was because she went driving with the other lover that Major Ten Eyck paid devoted attention to some other girl, one night at a ball. So they quarreled and separated.”

“Poor old major!” sighed tender-hearted Mollie.

“But she *did* have her rocking chair adventure after all,” laughed Barbara, as they started downstairs in obedience to Miss Sallie’s tap a few moments before.

The lovely vistas of valley and river, with intersecting hills, were softened into dream pictures by a transparent curtain of mist, which hid the parched look of the foliage from the long drought.

The five automobilists sped along over smooth roads between splendid estates. Most of the great houses were screened by stretches of thickly wooded parks, and each park was guarded by a lodge, after the English fashion. But there were plenty of charming old houses in full view of the passerby – rambling, comfortable homes set down on smooth lawns.

“How beautiful all this is!” sighed Mollie, as she leaned back in her seat and gazed down the long avenue of trees.

“Yes,” called Ruth over her shoulder. “I took the longest way to the church, because this road is so pretty.”

“Here’s the lane to Sleepy Hollow,” cried the ever-watchful Barbara, and the automobile turned into a country road that appeared to lead off into low-lying hills beyond.

“What is that cloud of dust behind us,” demanded Miss Sallie, looking back.

“It’s a man on a motor cycle,” replied Grace. “He is turning in here, too, but he is slowing up. I suppose he doesn’t want to give us a dusting. Rather nice of him, isn’t it?”

“Fancy a motor cycle and a headless horseman riding in the same lane,” observed Ruth.

“Well, if it came to a race,” replied Barbara, “I think I would take the motor cycle. They do go like the wind.”

“And the noise of them is so terrifying,” went on Ruth, “that the poor headless horseman would probably have been scared back to death again.”

Presently the girls came to a steep declivity in the land that seemed to dip and rise with equal suddenness.

“Is this the Hollow?” asked Mollie a little awed.

“This land is full of hollows, my dear,” answered Miss Sallie, who did not like uneven traveling. “We have been through several already, and, with that hobgoblin on an infernal machine coming after us, and all these dense forests packing us in on every side, and nothing but a lonesome churchyard in front of us, it seems to me we should have brought along some better protectors than two slips of girls.”

Here Miss Sallie paused in order to regain breath.

“I declare,” exclaimed Ruth, “I don’t know which one of these roads leads to the churchyard. Of course we can explore both of them, but we don’t want to miss seeing the old church, and we certainly don’t want to miss lunch. It will be so cheerful picnicking in a graveyard.”

The automobile stopped and the motor cycle, catching up with them just then, stopped also. The rider put his foot down to steady himself, and removing his black leather cap and glasses, bowed courteously to Miss Stuart.

“Is Madame looking for the ancient church?” he asked, in very excellent English with just a touch of accent.

The five women remembered, at once, that this was the stranger whom they had lately seen at breakfast. From closer quarters they saw that he was good-looking, not with the kind of looks they were accustomed to admire, but still undeniably handsome. His features had rather a haughty turn to them, and his black eyes had a melancholy look; but even the heavy leather suit he wore could not hide the graceful slenderness of his figure.

“Yes; we were looking for the church,” replied Miss Sallie in a somewhat mollified tone, considering she had just called him a hobgoblin on an infernal machine. “Will you be good enough to tell us which one of these roads we must take?”

“If you will follow me,” answered the stranger, “I also am going there. You will pardon me if I go in front? If you will wait a moment I will get somewhat ahead, so that madame and the other ladies will not be dusted.”

“I must say he is rather a polite young man,” admitted Miss Sallie, “if he is somewhat rapid in his movements.”

“He is curiously good-looking,” reflected Ruth. “Not exactly our kind, I should say; but, after all, he may be just foreign and different. Just because he is not an American type doesn’t keep him from being nice.”

All the time the foliage was getting more impenetrable. Tall trees reared themselves on either side of the road, seeming vanguards of the forests behind them. A cool, woodsy breeze touched their cheeks softly, and Barbara closed her eyes for a moment that she might feel the enchantment of the place.

“How many Dutch burghers and their wives must have driven up this same grassy road,” she was thinking to herself. “How many wedding parties and funeral trains, too, for here is their graveyard. No wonder a traveler imagined he saw ghosts on this lonely road, with nothing but a cemetery and an old church to cheer him on his way. And here is our auto running in the very same ruts their funny old carriages and rockaways must have made, and this stranger in front of us on something queerer still. I wonder if ghosts of the future will ride in phantom autos or on motor cycles. What a fearful sight! A headless man on an infernal machine – ”

Her reflections were interrupted by the turning around of the automobile. Ruth had evidently decided to go back by the way they had come. Opening her eyes she saw before her a quaint and charming old church set in the midst of a rambling graveyard.

There also stood the black cyclist, like a gruesome sentinel among the tombs. He lifted his cap as they drew up, and, after hesitating a moment, came forward to open the door and help Miss Sallie alight.

“Permit me, Madam,” he said, with such grace of demeanor that the lady thanked him almost with effusion. Grace and Mollie were assisted as if they had been princesses of the blood, as they described it later, while the other two girls leaped to the ground before he had time to make any overtures in their direction.

There was rather an awkward pause, for a moment, as the stranger, with uncovered head, stood aside to let them pass. The silence was not broken and Miss Stuart chose to let it remain so.

“One cannot be too careful,” she had always said, “of chance acquaintances, especially men.” However, she was predisposed in favor of the cyclist, whose manners were exceptional.

The girls were strolling about among the graves, examining the stones with their quaint epitaphs, while the stranger leaned against a tree and lit a cigarette.

Miss Stuart, with her lorgnette, was making a survey of the church.

“From the account of the supper party at the Van Tassels’ in Sleepy Hollow,” said Ruth, “the early Dutch must have just about eaten themselves to death. Do you remember all the food there was piled on the table at the famous quilting party? Every kind of cake known to man, to begin with; or rather, Washington Irving began with cakes. Roast fowls and turkeys, hams and sausages, puddings and pies and the humming tea-urn in the midst of it.”

“I don’t think the women had such big appetites as the men,” observed Mollie. “At least Katrina Van Tassel is described as being very dainty, and I can’t imagine a pretty young girl working straight through such a bill of fare, and yet looking quite the same ever after.”

“But remember that they took lots of exercise,” put in Barbara, “of a kind we know nothing about. All the Dutch girls were taught to scrub and polish and clean.”

“What were we doing when Ruth and Miss Sallie and Mr. Stuart arrived, Bab, I’d like to know?” interrupted Mollie indignantly. “Weren’t we rubbing the parlor furniture and polishing the floor?”

“Yes,” returned Barbara, “but you could put our entire house down in the parlor of one of those old Dutch farm houses, and still have room and to spare.”

“And think of all the copper kettles they had to keep polished,” added Grace.

“And the spinning they had to do,” said Ruth.

“And the cooking and butter making,” continued Bab. “Yes, Mistress Mollie, I think there’s some excuse for sausages and all the rest. And I am sure I could have forgiven Katrina if she ate everything in sight.”

“Ah, well,” replied Mollie, “no doubt she was fat at thirty!”

CHAPTER IV – A CRY FOR HELP

AS they talked the young girls wandered over the grassy sward of the churchyard and their voices grew fainter and fainter to the cyclist and Miss Sallie.

The latter had seated herself on the stump of an old tree and was busily engaged in re-reading her mail, at which she had glanced only carelessly that morning.

The air was very still and hot, and the hum of insects made a drowsy accompaniment to the songs of the birds. The cyclist had stretched himself at full length on the grass under an immense elm tree and was lazily blowing blue rings of smoke skywards.

Presently there broke upon the noonday stillness a cry for help. It was in a high, girlish voice – Mollie's in fact – and it was followed by others in quick succession.

Miss Stuart, scattering her mail on the ground in her fright, rushed in the direction of the cries, the cyclist close behind her.

On a knoll near the church the sight which met Miss Sallie's eyes almost made her knees give way. But she had a cool head in danger, in spite of her lavender draperies and pretended helplessness.

A tramp, who seemed to them all at the moment as big as a giant, with matted hair and beard and face swollen from drink, had seized Ruth and Barbara by the wrists with one of his enormous hands. A woman equally ragged in appearance was tugging at the fellow's other hand in an effort to quiet him.

As Miss Sallie ran toward the group she heard Barbara say quietly:

"Let go our wrists and we shall be glad to give you all the money we have with us."

"I tell you I want more money than that," said the man in a hoarse, terrible voice. "I want enough money to keep me for the rest of my days. Do you think I like to sleep on the ground and eat bread and water? I tell you I want my rights. Why should you be rich and me poor? Why should you be dressed in silks while my wife wears rags?"

As he raved, he jerked his hand away from the woman, almost throwing her forward in his violence, and gesticulated wildly.

The two girls were both very pale and calm, but the poor tramp woman was crying bitterly.

Barbara's lips were moving, but she said nothing, and only Mollie knew it was her mother's prayer she was repeating.

"Don't be frightened, young ladies," sobbed the woman, "I will see that no harm comes to you, even if he kills me."

"Do you call this a free country," continued the tramp, "when there are thousands of people like me who have no houses and must beg for food? I would like to kill all the rich men in this country and turn their children loose to beg and steal, as we must do to get a living! Do you think I would ever have come to this pass if a rich man had not brought me to it? Do you think I was always a tramp like this, and my wife yonder a tramp, too?"

At this point the drunken wretch began to cry, but he still held the two girls tightly by the wrists.

"I tell you I'll take a ransom for you and nothing less. I'll get out of the world all it's taken from me, and your father will have to do the paying. Come on!" he cried in a tone of command, to his trembling wife.

At this critical moment Miss Stuart and the motor cyclist came running to the scene.

There was a look of immense relief on Miss Sallie's face when she saw the courteous stranger at her heels. She had been about to speak, but was silent.

"Oh, ho!" cried the tramp, "so you've got a protector, have you? Well, come on! I'll fight the whole lot of you, women and men, too, and with one hand, at that!"

He loomed up like a giant beside the small, slender cyclist, but he was a drunken giant nevertheless and not prepared for what was about to happen.

However, at first, it appeared to them all that a little persuasion might be better than force.

"If you will let the young ladies go, my good man," said the cyclist, "you will not regret it. You will be well paid. I would advise you to take a sensible view of the matter. You cannot kidnap us all, and it would not take long to get help. Would you prefer a long term in jail to a sum of money?" And the cyclist drew a leather wallet from his coat pocket.

"You think you are mighty smart, young man," sneered the tramp, "but I can kidnap all of you, and nobody ever be the wiser. Do you think I'd let a chance like this go? My pals are right over there." He pointed with his free hand to the woods back of him.

"You will be sorry," said the cyclist.

With an oath, the tramp put his finger to his mouth and gave a long, shrill whistle.

But in that moment he was off his guard, and the cyclist leaped upon him like a leopard on a lion. One swift blow under the jaw and down tumbled the giant as Goliath fell before David.

The poor woman, who was crouching in terror behind a tree, jumped to her feet.

"Run!" she cried in a frightened whisper. "Run for your lives!"

The cyclist seized Miss Sallie by the arm.

"She is right. It is better to run. The others may be coming."

And they did run. Terror seemed to lend wings to their feet. Even Miss Stuart, assisted by their rescuer, fled over the grass as swiftly as her charges.

Ruth and Barbara reached the automobile first. In an instant Ruth had cranked up the machine while Barbara opened the door.

Another moment, and they were off down the road, the black-clad cyclist following. Glancing back, they saw two other rough-looking men helping their comrade to rise to his feet. Then they disappeared in the woods while the woman, with many anxious backward glances, followed her companions.

Nobody spoke for some time. The girls were too much terrified by the narrow escape to trust to their voices. The bravest women will weep after a danger is past, and all five of these women were very near the point of tears.

Presently the cyclist came up alongside of the automobile, which had slowed down somewhat when they reached the main road.

"I will go ahead and inform the police," he called over his shoulder, "but I fear it will not be of much use. Men like that will scatter and hide themselves at the first alarm."

Miss Sallie smiled at him gratefully. Touching his cap, which was fastened under his chin with a strap and could not be lifted without some inconvenience, the stranger shot ahead and soon disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Miss Sallie was thinking deeply. She wished that Major Ten Eyck and the boys had not left the hotel that morning. She felt need of the strong support of the opposite sex. She felt also the responsibility of being at the head of her party of young girls.

Should they dare start off again next day into the wilderness after such an experience? Of course, as long as they were in the automobile, going at full speed, nothing could stop them except a puncture, and punctures on country roads were not as frequent as they were on city streets. What would her brother say? Would he sanction such a trip after this fearful experience? And still she hesitated.

The truth was, Miss Stuart was as eager as the girls to accept the invitation that had been so unexpectedly made. She did not wish to revive the romance of her youth, but she did have an overweening desire to see the ancestral home of her old lover, and to talk with him on the thousand subjects that spring up when two old friends come together after many years.

It was, therefore, with half-hearted vehemence that she said to the four rather listless girls:

"My dears, don't you think it would be very dangerous for us to go over to Major Ten Eyck's, to-morrow, after this fearful attack?"

Everybody looked relieved that somebody had had the courage to say the first word.

“Dear auntie, we’ll leave it entirely to you,” replied Ruth. “Although, I don’t believe we are likely to be kidnapped as long as we keep the automobile going. The fastest running tramp in Christendom couldn’t keep up with us, even when we’re going at an ordinary rate. From what Major Ten Eyck said, the road is pretty good. We ought to get there in an hour, since it’s only fifteen miles from here, and the last mile or so is on his estate.”

The other girls said nothing, it being a matter for the chaperon to settle.

“Very well, my dear,” answered Miss Sallie, acquiescing so suddenly that the others almost smiled in spite of the seriousness of their feelings at the moment. “But I do feel that we had a narrow escape this morning. If it had not been for the young man on the motor cycle I tremble to think what would have been the consequences. And I certainly believe if we are not going back to New York, the sooner we get into the society of some male protectors the better for us. I am sorry that fifteen miles separate us. I wish those boys had thought to motor back and get us to-morrow.”

“Oh, well,” observed Barbara, “fifteen miles is a mere bagatelle, when you come to think of it. Why, we shall be there before we know it.”

CHAPTER V – THE MOTOR CYCLIST

By this time the automobile had reached the hotel. Miss Sallie led the way to the dining room and they formed rather a weak-kneed procession, for they were beginning to experience that all-gone feeling that comes after a fright.

The luncheon hamper full of good things had been carried back into the hotel, since there had been neither time nor opportunity for the picnic party the girls had planned.

“I think a little food is what we really need, now,” exclaimed Ruth. “Cheer up, Mollie and Grace. Bab, smile for the ladies. It’s all over. Here we are, safe, and we are going to have a beautiful time at Major Ten Eyck’s. Please, dear friends, don’t begin to take this gloomy view of life. As for the anarchist person who attacked us in the woods, you may depend upon it that he and his friends are so frightened they will be running in an opposite direction from Tarrytown for another week. As for the foreign young man who stepped up to the rescue, he should certainly be thanked.”

Ruth had by nature a happy temperament. She quickly threw off small troubles, and depression in others made her really unhappy.

“It was truly a daring deed,” replied Barbara, “and all the more daring considering that the tramp would have made about two of the cyclist. But the blow he gave was as swift and sure as a prize fighter’s.”

“Did you notice that the poor woman was rather pretty?” commented Mollie.

“My dear child,” cried Miss Sallie, “I really believe you would notice people’s looks on the way to your own execution. Now, for my part, I could not see anything. I was almost too frightened to breathe. I felt that I should faint at any moment.”

“Why, Aunt Sallie, you are more frightened now than you were then,” exclaimed her niece. “You were as calm as the night. As for Grace, she looked like a scared rabbit. Mollie, darling, I’m glad you had the presence of mind to scream. If you hadn’t Aunt Sallie and the motor cyclist might have looked for us in vain.”

While she was speaking the cyclist came into the dining-room.

As soon as Miss Stuart saw him she rose from the table in her most stately manner and walked over to meet him.

“Sir,” she said, and Ruth gave the merest flicker of a blink at Bab, “you did a very brave thing to-day, and I want to thank you for all of us. If you had not been there my niece and her friend would undoubtedly have been kidnapped. You perhaps saved their lives. They might have been killed by those ruffians. Won’t you give us your name and address? My brother, I am sure, would like to write to you himself. We shall be indebted to you always.”

The young man’s face flushed with embarrassment.

“It was nothing, I assure you, Madam,” he replied. “It was easy because the man was intoxicated. He went over at the first blow. My name,” he continued, “is Martinez. José Martinez. My address is the Waldorf, New York.”

“I am Miss Stuart,” said Miss Sallie, “and I would like to present you to my niece, Miss Ruth Stuart, and her friends Miss Grace Carter and Misses Barbara and Mollie Thurston. It would give us great pleasure if you would lunch with us, Mr. Martinez.”

“When a man saves your life you certainly can’t stand on ceremony,” commented Miss Sallie to herself.

An animated discussion followed. Mr. Martinez had been to see the chief of police, he said, who would call on Miss Stuart that afternoon, if convenient. He could not offer any hope, however, of catching the men.

Miss Sallie replied that, for her part, she hoped they wouldn't take the creatures. It would do no good and she did not want to spend any time cooped up in a court room in such scorching weather. But did Mr. Martinez think it would be dangerous for them to take a trip up into the hills the next day?

"It would depend upon the road," replied Mr. Martinez. "That is, if the trip were taken by automobile. Of course my motor cycle can run on any road."

"It is a good road," replied Ruth. "At the crossroads there is a bad road; but, fortunately, we do not have to take it, since the new road with the bridge has been opened up, so Major Ten Eyck says."

In which case Mr. José Martinez was of a mind with the young ladies that the trip would be perfectly safe.

Miss Sallie gave a sigh of relief. If this estimable young man sanctioned the trip she felt they might take it with clear consciences. But she did hope her brother's views on the subject would be the same.

Then the talk drifted into other channels.

"You are a Spaniard, I presume, Mr. Martinez?" questioned Miss Sallie.

"Yes, Madam, a Spaniard by birth, a Frenchman by education and at present an American by choice. I have lived in England, also, but I believe I prefer America to all other countries, even my own."

Miss Stuart was much gratified at this avowal. She felt that in complimenting America he was complimenting her indirectly.

"Have you seen the Alhambra and the Rock of Gibraltar?" demanded Mollie, her wide, blue eyes full of interest.

"Oh, yes, Mademoiselle," replied the handsome Spaniard, smiling at her gently, "I have seen the Alhambra many times, and Gibraltar once only." A curious shade passed over his face as if Gibraltar held memories which he was not anxious to revive.

"Does the Rock of Gibraltar really look like a lion?" asked Grace, who had not noticed his distaste to the mere mention of the name.

"I do not know, Mademoiselle," he replied shortly. "I saw it only from land. I was," he added hesitatingly, "very ill when I was there."

The waiter announced the chief of police to see Miss Sallie, and the luncheon party adjourned to the shady side of the piazza.

All this time Barbara had been very quiet, so quiet, indeed, that Ruth had asked her in a whisper, as they left the dining room, if she were still feeling the shock of the morning.

"Oh, no," replied Barbara, "I am simply trying to stifle a ridiculous fear I have that, maybe, we ought not to go to-morrow. It is absurd, so please don't mention it to the others, especially as even Miss Sallie thinks it safe, and little coward Mollie is not afraid."

"You are just tired, poor dear," said sympathetic Ruth. "Come along up to your room, and we shall have a little 'relaxation,' as my old colored mammy used to say. We'll spend a quiet afternoon in our rooms, and at sunset we can take a spin along the river bank before supper. What do you say?"

"I am agreeable," replied Bab.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Martinez," said Ruth, as the others came up. "You will be wanting to take your siesta now, I suppose. Siestas, in Spain, are like afternoon tea in England, aren't they? Here in America we don't have either, much, but I think we shall need both to-day. Perhaps we shall see you at dinner?"

"If I may have that pleasure," replied the Spaniard, bowing low.

"Strangers of the morning are friends in the afternoon, in this, our life of adventure," laughed Ruth as they passed along the corridor to the steps.

But they did not see the stranger again that day. For some mysterious reason he left the hotel in the afternoon, and did not return until nearly midnight, when Barbara, who happened to be awake, heard him whistling softly as he went down the hall to his room.

CHAPTER VI – A FOREST SCRIMMAGE

It was really Miss Sallie Stuart's fault that they were so late in starting the next day to Major Ten Eyck's home.

The automobile had been ordered to be on hand immediately after an early luncheon, but another call from one of the town police caused the first delay.

The tramps had securely hidden themselves, the officer said, and no trace of them had been found in other towns in that vicinity.

The second delay was caused by a telegram from Miss Stuart's dressmaker, stating that a dress had been expressed to her which would reach Tarrytown that morning. Bab and Mollie were also expecting an express package of fresh clothes and their organdie dresses, which they felt, now, they would assuredly need.

Consequently the party waited patiently for these ever-necessary feminine adornments, and it was four o'clock before the girls started.

A third delay was caused by the puncture of a tire just as they were leaving the hotel. Now they were obliged to go to the nearest garage and have it repaired, which consumed another three quarters of an hour.

However, it was pleasanter riding in the cool of the afternoon, and they still hoped to reach Ten Eyck Hall long before dark. It was a very gay party that finally took the road, swathed in chiffon veils and dusters.

"I never felt so much interested in a visit as I do in this one," remarked Ruth. "Certainly we ought to be glad to get there after all these mishaps and delays."

Barbara was still in her silent humor. She sat with her small handbag clasped tightly on her knees and looked straight before her, as though she were watching for something.

"Bab, my child, what is it?" asked Ruth. "You have been in a brown study all day."

"Nothing at all, dear," replied Bab, smiling. "Perhaps this haziness goes to my head a little. But I am awfully glad, too, about the visit. I always wanted to see an old colonial house, and the only way really is to stay in it. If we have the run of the rooms, and all the halls and galleries, we can get to know it much more intimately than if we were just sight-seers being conducted through by an aged housekeeper."

Meanwhile, on the back seat, Miss Sallie was in a reminiscent mood. It was very agreeable to her to hark back to the joyous days of her youth, for Miss Stuart had been a belle, and the two girls were listening with pleasure to her accounts of the gallant major, who had been graduated from West Point ahead of time in order to join the army during the Civil War.

The conversation was interrupted by the sudden stoppage of the automobile at the crossroads, one of which led straight into the woods, while the other branched off into the open, crossing the now dry bed of a river spanning which was the new bridge.

"This is the right road, of course," said Ruth, taking the one with the bridge.

"Wait!" cried Barbara. "There's something stretched across the bridge."

Sure enough, a rope blocked all passage over the bridge, which was quite a long one. Secured to the rope with cords was a plank on which was painted:

"DANGEROUS: TAKE THE OTHER ROAD!"

"The paint on the sign is still sticky," exclaimed Barbara who had jumped out and run over to take a good look at it. "And the bridge is broken. There is a large hole, like a gash, on one side, and another further down."

"How remarkable!" replied Ruth. "It must have happened some time this morning. I do not suppose Major Ten Eyck knows anything about it, or he would have let us know. I'll back up, anyway, to the crossroads, and we can decide what to do. We could go on, I suppose. The major said the other

road passed his front gate, but it was a longer one and not such good traveling. What do you say, Aunt Sallie? Speak up, girls, are you all agreed?"

Miss Sallie was much troubled. She wanted to go and she did not want to go, and her mind was in a turmoil.

Bab was silent, and Grace and Mollie looked ready for anything.

"Well," said Miss Sallie, after a moment's reflection, "it is very dangerous and very venturesome; but, having got thus far, let us proceed on our way." She folded her hands resignedly, like a martyred saint.

"Then off we go!" cried Ruth. The automobile rolled into the wooded road that penetrated a deeper part of the forest.

The dense shade was a relief after the open, dusty country. Tall trees interlaced their branches overhead and the ground was carpeted with fern and bracken.

But an uneasiness had come upon the automobilists. They did not attempt to explain it, for there was no apparent cause. The road was excellent so far, smooth and level; but something was in the air. Miss Sallie was the first to break the silence.

"I am terribly frightened," she admitted, in a low voice. "We must have been bewitched to have attempted this ride. Ruth, my dear, I beg of you to turn and go back. I feel that we are running into danger."

Ruth slowed up the machine a little, and called over her shoulder:

"You are right, Aunt Sallie, but I am afraid we can't turn just yet, because there isn't room. Anyway, we may be nearer to the other end of the wood by this time."

The car sped on again, only to stop with such a sudden jerk, in the very depths of the forest, that the machinery ceased to whirl and in a moment was silent.

For a few moments all hands sat perfectly still, dumb with terror and amazement.

Across the road was stretched another rope. There was no sign board on it to tell them there was danger ahead, but the girls needed none. They felt that there was danger ahead, behind, and all around them. They knew they were in a trap, and that the danger that threatened them would make itself known all too soon.

Barbara had whispered to Ruth.

"Back up as fast as you can!"

Ruth had replied in another whisper:

"I can't before I crank up."

Regaining her nerve, Ruth was about to leap to the ground when she saw, and the four others saw at the same moment, the figure of a man standing by a tree at the roadside. It would seem that he had been standing there all along, but so still and motionless that he might been one of the trees themselves. And for two reasons he was a terrifying spectacle: one because his features were entirely concealed by a black mask, the other because he carried in one hand a gleaming and remarkably sharp looking knife, a kind of dagger, the blade slightly curved and pointed at the end, the silver handle chased all over in an intricate design.

To her dying day Bab would never forget the picture he made.

He wore a dark green velveteen suit, like a huntsman's, and a felt hat with a hanging brim that covered his head.

"Pardon me, ladies," he said in a curious, false voice, "but I must request you to keep your places."

Ruth, who was poised just over the step, fell back beside Barbara, who had maintained her position, and sat with blanched cheeks and tightly closed lips.

The highwayman then deliberately slashed all four tires with his murderous looking weapon. At each explosion Miss Sallie gave a stifled groan.

"Do not cry out, Madam," said the robber sternly, "or it will go hard with you."

“Be still,” whispered little Mollie, bravely taking Miss Stuart’s hand and patting it gently.

“And now, ladies,” continued the man more politely, “I must ask you to put all your money and jewelry in a pile here. Stand up,” he said to Barbara. “Put it on this seat and leave out nothing or you will regret it.”

The five women began mechanically to remove what simple jewelry they happened to be wearing, for the most part pins, rings, bracelets and watches, the latter Ruth’s and Grace’s. Then came the pocket books, Mollie’s little blue silk knitted purse topping the pyramid.

“But this is not all your money,” said the robber impatiently. “Do not delay. It is getting late.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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