

Crane Laura Dent

**The Automobile Girls at
Chicago: or, Winning Out
Against Heavy Odds**



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Laura Dent Crane

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CHAPTER I

THE MAN IN SECTION THIRTEEN

BARBARA THURSTON awakened with a violent start.

"Wha – a-at is it?" she muttered, then opened her eyes wide. In the darkness of the Pullman berth she could see nothing at all save a faint perpendicular line of light at the edges of the curtains that enclosed the section.

"I – I wonder what made me wake up so suddenly?" Barbara put out a groping hand. The hand came in contact with Mollie Thurston's face. Mollie brushed it away, muttering irritably in her sleep. Then all at once Barbara discovered what had awakened her. Close at hand she heard the voices of two men. They were conversing in low, cautious tones.

"I tell you I'll crush him! I'll crush them both. I'll make beggars of them!" declared one of the men in a slightly heightened tone.

The train had stopped, as Barbara realized at that moment. Otherwise she might not have been able to hear the words so plainly. The girl shuddered at the tone of the speaker's voice more than at the words themselves. She drew the curtains aside a little and peered out. It was then that she discovered by the light reflected from the adjoining section that the berths next to her had not been made up. Two men were sitting in the double seat within a few inches of where her head had lain. She was unable to see the men, nor did Barbara recognize either of the voices. Their conversation could be of no possible interest to her, she told herself. Still for some reason that she did not stop to analyze, the girl lay back with half-closed eyes, listening. She listened not because she wanted to hear, but for the reason that she could not well help overhearing the conversation in the adjoining section.

At Barbara's side Mollie Thurston lay sleeping peacefully. As for Barbara, she was now wholly awake, all thought of sleep having left her.

"You mean you will crush them financially?" suggested the second speaker.

"Body and soul!"

"Do you mean to say that you would crush a human being – perhaps drive him to do desperate things – merely to gratify your love of money and power? Is that what you mean, Nat?"

"That is partly my meaning. Yes, I want power. Already they call me the 'Young Napoleon of Finance,' but that is not enough. Those men must be driven to the wall, for in crushing them I shall be increasing my own power as well as taking theirs from them. I'd crush them just the same if I knew it to be my last conscious act on earth."

Barbara Thurston gazed into the darkness wide-eyed. She knew she was listening to the resolve of a desperate man, though she had not the slightest idea what might be his plans for accomplishing his purpose.

"Why do you hate them so?" questioned the second voice. "What have they ever done to you?"

The first speaker paused a few seconds before replying, then in a voice tense with suppressed emotion he answered slowly:

"Hate them? That isn't exactly the word, but it will answer. I hate – because he turned me out when I was making my start. Turned me out into the street, Jim. Do you understand? Turned me out without a dollar in my pocket when I was trying to make something of myself. I hate the other man

because he is working with him. They are pulling together and they must go down together. Let them down me if they can. I'll make beggars of both of them!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Barbara Thurston in a tone that plainly must have reached the two men.

The terrible threat had struck her almost with the effect of a blow. A name had been mentioned that stirred her to instant alertness, a name almost as familiar to the girl as her own.

"What was that?" demanded the voice that had uttered the terrible threats.

"Someone dreaming."

"Let them dream. As for me, I never sleep these days. I leave that to others. Jim, you watch me. I'll be a king of finance yet. I'll be the Napoleon in reality before I have done. And what is more, those men will never know where their opposition comes from until after the blow has fallen. I'll see to it that they know then, however. Watch me, but keep silent. Not a word, not a breath of what I have told you. I've said too much, but I had to talk to some one I could trust. Now I'm all right again."

"Never fear, Nat."

"And I'll give you a tip, boy. Buy wheat."

Bab could not catch all of the sentence. She caught the word "wheat," but a word ahead of that she missed.

"Thank you, I never gamble," replied the second man. "I'm sure to lose if I do, so I have always steered clear of speculation. But I'm sorry for the Old Man if you are after him. I'm sorry for anyone that you visit your displeasure upon. I should hate to have you get after my scalp."

"What's – who's talking in this berth?" demanded Mollie, sitting up suddenly.

"Sh-h-h!" warned Barbara, laying a restraining hand on her sister's lips. "It isn't in this berth. It's in the next one. Go to sleep."

"Is – is Grace asleep?"

"Yes. Be quiet."

Grace Carter, the girls' companion, occupied the berth above them. As no sound had been heard from that quarter it was reasonable to suppose that Grace had not been awakened by the conversation of the two men.

Barbara was trembling violently. She was profoundly affected by what she had overheard. Yet while she had heard a name mentioned and a threat made against the owner of that name, she was in the dark as to the meaning of the threat – she did not understand what it was that this man proposed to do. Her ears were now strained to catch every word uttered on the other side of the partition.

"I shall watch the market with interest, Nat," the second speaker was saying. "I don't say that I approve of your way of getting revenge, but that is your own affair. Remember, however, that people who play with fire are sooner or later sure to be singed."

The other man laughed.

"My feathers were singed a long time ago, Jim," he said.

"Well, here's where I get off. Good luck, old man, and good night."

The train had moved forward slowly, halting at a station a short distance from the last stop. The man who had made the threats accompanied his friend to the door of the car, then instead of returning to the seat he had occupied with his friend, he seated himself opposite the section occupied by the girls.

Bab, determined to know who the man was, peered cautiously between the curtains.

"It's the man in section thirteen!" she exclaimed. Then she realized that she had expressed her thought aloud.

The man wheeled sharply, his face hardening, his eyes narrowed to mere slits as he gazed questioningly about him. He saw no one, for Barbara had quickly withdrawn her head, holding the curtains firmly so that he should observe no movement of them. The girl had learned that which she was so curious to know. She now knew the man who had uttered the threats. He had occupied the section opposite to her all during the previous afternoon, though she did not recall having heard

him speak nor did she know his name. The man across the aisle reached for his bag, from which he selected a package of papers. These he regarded thoughtfully for a full minute, after which he opened the package, taking several documents, returning the rest to the bag. Then after drawing his cigar case from the bag, he rose and strode rapidly toward the rear of the car, where the smoking compartment was located.

"So that's the man. I'm glad I know what I do, even though I do not know what it is all about. I must ask Mr. Stuart about that man," mused Barbara. Consulting her watch, she found that it was nearly one o'clock in the morning. The girl shivered, snuggled into her blankets and fell asleep. It was December and the air was chill. Barbara had not been asleep long when she was awakened by a violent jolt, then a bumping that shook her until her teeth chattered. The sleeping car swayed giddily from side to side as it moved slowly forward with a grinding, crunching sound. Then the car gave a lurch that hurled Bab violently against her sister.

Mollie uttered a little cry of alarm. Bab threw her arms about her, hugging Mollie in a tight embrace to save her sister from being thrown against the side of the car. As yet Bab had not had time to think of what was occurring outside. But now she began vaguely to realize that the Pullman car had left the rails. An accident had occurred. Shouts and cries of alarm from various parts of the car testified to the terror of other passengers who were being buffeted about by the rocking sleeper. All at once the forward end of the car appeared to plunge down head first, as it were. The two girls were tumbled into one end of their berth where for a few agonizing seconds both were nearly standing on their heads.

Mollie screamed again.

"Don't!" commanded Barbara sharply in a half-smothered voice, holding her sister even more tightly than before.

"We're going over!" cried Mollie.

Barbara had managed to straighten out and was now bracing herself with all her might. She had thus far made no effort to get out into the aisle. She was a girl quick to think and act in an emergency. She had reasoned that they would be safer in their berth than out of it, for they could not be buffeted about so much in the narrow berth as they might be in the aisle where they could hear the thud of bags and other articles falling from the various berths or being hurled from one side to the other of the car.

The lights suddenly went out. Fortunately the train had not been moving very fast when the accident occurred. Now it gave a sudden, sickening lurch and lay over on its side to the accompaniment of crashing glass as the windows were burst in and renewed cries of fear came from the passengers.

The broad windows of the Thurston girls' berth burst in, sending a shower of glass over them. Both received bruises as well as slight cuts from the broken glass that had showered over them, though Barbara had borne the brunt of the shock, managing to keep her own body between Mollie and danger.

"Are we killed? Are we killed?" moaned Mollie.

"No. We are all right," soothed Bab with a confidence that she did not feel. "Quick! Get on your clothes if you can find them. Here, put this on. Don't try to dress completely, but just throw about you whatever you can find."

While urging her sister to action, Bab was hunting feverishly for their belongings. She thrust the first clothing she could find into the hands of the trembling Mollie, then wrapped the younger girl in a blanket.

"I want my shoes," cried Mollie.

Barbara thrust two shoes into the girl's hands. One was Mollie's shoe, the other Barbara's, but she could not be particular under the circumstances.

Now a new danger threatened. Bab was certain that she could smell smoke. She fairly dragged Mollie from the berth into the aisle that was now tilted at an angle.

"Hurry! Get to the upper end of the car as fast as you can. The other passengers are out I do believe."

"Oh, I can't! Help me, Bab."

"Help yourself. I must look after Grace."

"Grace!" groaned Mollie, a sudden and new fit of trembling seizing upon her until her legs threatened to collapse under her.

Barbara gave her a violent push.

"Climb up the aisle. Support yourself by the seats. You will be able to get through all right. I'll follow you just as soon as I can find Grace. She may have gotten out, but I don't believe she has."

"Is – is – do you think she is dead?" gasped Mollie.

"Hurry!" urged Barbara, as the smell of smoke smote her nostrils more strongly than before.

"Grace!" she called, as soon as she saw that Mollie had begun climbing.

There was no answer. Barbara was hurrying into such of her clothing as she was able to find. The intense darkness of the car made any systematic effort to dress impossible.

"Grace! Oh, Grace!"

Still no answer. Bab observed by the light that now filtered through the broken windows of section number thirteen on the opposite side of the aisle, that that section was empty. The car itself appeared to be empty. At least the cries had died out, though outside the car there was a great uproar. Barbara climbed into the upper berth occupied by Grace Carter, who lay silent, unheeding Barbara's voice.

"Oh, Grace! Grace!" begged Barbara, throwing her arms about her friend. "Answer me."

There was no response. A bar of moonlight shone through the broken window of section number thirteen, falling directly on the pallid face of the unconscious girl. Barbara shook her, calling upon her friend to answer, but Grace neither spoke nor stirred.

"Is there any one left in here?" called a voice from the other end of the car.

"Yes, yes; come here quickly and help me," cried Barbara.

Instead of coming to her assistance, the owner of the voice appeared to turn back and go out again. Barbara was now chafing the hands and face of the motionless girl in the upper berth.

"Oh, she's dead, she's dead. What shall I do?" gasped Bab.

With a suddenly formed resolution, she clasped her arms about Grace and with considerable difficulty – for Grace was now a dead weight – dragged the unconscious girl from her berth into the aisle. Bab did not pause for an instant. Handling her friend as tenderly as possible, she began working her way up the steep aisle, making but slow progress, one arm about Grace Carter, the other pulling herself and her heavy burden along by grasping the backs of the seats and the partitions between such of the berths as were made up.

CHAPTER II

THE MISSING PASSENGER

AN endless corridor it seemed to Barbara Thurston as little by little she dragged her drooping burden to the end of the aisle. Reaching the narrow passage that led past the staterooms, she was obliged to creep on hands and knees along the slippery lower side of the car.

Suddenly she heard a groan.

Bab glanced apprehensively at the curtains that hung over the door of the smoking room. The curtains now stood out at a sharp angle. A thin cloud of smoke filtered out from the smoking compartment.

"Oh, there's some one in there," exclaimed the girl. But she had other work to do just then. The young woman struggled on, at last reaching the platform that now stood in the air some feet above the track.

"Jump! We'll catch you," called a voice.

"I – I can't. Help me. My companion is hurt."

"She's got someone with her. Get up there," commanded a sharp voice.

Two trainmen clambered to the platform.

"Is the girl dead?" demanded one.

"I don't know. Oh, please hurry," begged Barbara in an agonized tone.

The men quickly lifted down Grace Carter's limp form. Then they turned to assist Barbara, but she already had swung down without assistance. Mollie was kneeling beside Grace, other passengers crowding about the unconscious girl who lay stretched out on the ground beside the track. Someone pushed through the crowd to Grace and thrust a bottle of smelling salts under her nose.

This served to restore her to consciousness, and she feebly brushed the bottle aside.

"She's alive," screamed Mollie, almost beside herself.

"Oh, I'm so glad!" cried Barbara in an ecstasy of joy.

Grace Carter sat up dazedly.

"Are you hurt, dear?" urged Bab.

"I – I don't know. I think not. Oh, it was awful. I – I thought the world surely was coming to an end. Was anyone – anyone killed?"

"No," answered a voice from the crowd. "Some of us got a fine shaking up, but the train was running so slowly that the shock of the accident was not very severe."

"What was the matter?" asked Grace as Barbara assisted the trembling girl to her feet.

"The trainmen say it was a loose rail. They've been putting in new rails at this point and the train was running slowly on that account, the work not yet being entirely finished."

At this juncture the conductor came bustling up, ordering the passengers to go to the cars ahead, which had not left the track. The train was to move on in a few minutes. A flagman had been stationed some distance to the rear to stop any following trains and the conductor was anxious to reach the next station ahead to telegraph for a wrecking train and report the wreck of the sleepers. A pleasant-faced woman whom Barbara had seen on the train the day before, stepped up and offered to assist them, which she did by placing an arm about Grace, helping to support the latter in the walk to the cars.

"I am Miss Thompson, from Chicago," said the woman. "My father is with me. I saw you yesterday and wanted to speak to you. Are you going to Chicago?"

"Yes. You are very kind," answered Barbara.

"I wonder if all the passengers were gotten out of the sleeper?" asked Miss Thompson when they had finally reached the cars up ahead and Grace had been comfortably disposed of in another sleeper.

Barbara started.

"Oh, I forgot. Conductor! There was a man in the smoking compartment of our car."

The porter who had followed them with the other passengers and such luggage as he could find, shook his head.

"I know there was. I had forgotten all about it," declared Bab. "I heard someone groan in there as I passed the compartment with my friend. Where is the man who occupied the lower berth of section thirteen?"

No one had seen him. All the other passengers had been accounted for, but no one had seen the tall, slim, sandy-haired man from section number thirteen.

"Then he is in that smoking compartment. I saw him when he went there. The compartment was on fire when I passed it," cried Barbara Thurston, springing up, her face flushed, her eyes large and troubled.

"If there's anyone there the men will find him. There was no fire in that car," said the conductor, with which statement the porter agreed.

"There was smoke," declared Bab. "I don't know about fire. I do know that I'm going back to find out about that man," she announced.

"Come back," called the conductor. "We're going to start."

Unheeding, Barbara ran for the door, and, leaping from the platform, started on a run back to the wrecked sleeper. The conductor was determined to move his train, but the passengers objected so strenuously that he reluctantly decided to wait and make a further hurried search of the wrecked sleeper.

With a porter and half a dozen passengers the conductor followed Barbara. She could smell the smoke before she reached the car. Hastily climbing to the platform, she crawled in. By the time she had gotten into the corridor a porter had also climbed up. The smoke was so thick and suffocating that the girl choked and coughed.

"He's here," she cried, as a faint groan reached her ears. "Hurry! Oh, do hurry!" Then Bab's words were lost in the fit of coughing that had seized her.

Three men pushed their way into the smoking compartment. They saw that the carpet was smouldering. It had probably been set on fire by a burning cigar or a lighted match. There was no blaze, just a dull smoulder and a lot of smoke. It did not seem possible that one could live in that atmosphere for very long.

Suddenly the porter stumbled over the form of a man. It was the former occupant of section number thirteen.

"Young woman, get out of here at once," commanded the conductor. "We will take care of this man."

Bab staggered out to the platform, where she waited. A minute later the men came out bearing the unconscious form of the stranger. Barbara asked if he were dead. The men said no, but that he was half suffocated from the smoke he had inhaled. They carried the man on ahead to the train and up to the dining car, after which a doctor was hurriedly summoned from one of the other cars. In the meantime Barbara had returned to her companions, who were anxiously awaiting her reappearance. She told them of finding the man, and was warmly commended by the passengers for her bravery.

"I do wish we could get word to Ruth Stuart that we are all right," said Barbara, after she had related the story of the finding of the man from section thirteen.

"Ruth Stuart?" questioned Miss Thompson. "I wonder if by any chance she could be related to Robert Stuart, a Chicago broker?"

"Why, she is his daughter. Do you know the Stuarts?" cried Barbara, a smile lighting up her face still pale and somewhat drawn.

"No, but my father wishes to know Mr. Stuart. Only yesterday he was speaking of him. I should not be surprised if he were to call on Mr. Stuart soon to discuss a business matter with him."

"The world is small, after all, isn't it?" smiled Bab. "We are on our way to Chicago to visit the Stuarts. We are friends of Ruth Stuart. We four are known to our friends as the 'Automobile Girls.'"

The readers of this series must undoubtedly feel well acquainted with that quartette of sweet, dainty, lovable girls, Ruth Stuart, Barbara and Mollie Thurston and Grace Carter, who were met with in the first volume of this series, "The Automobile Girls at Newport." Their acquaintance really dated from the time Barbara Thurston so pluckily stopped a team of runaway horses driven by Ruth Stuart, a wealthy western girl, then summering at Kingsbridge, the home of the Thurstons. A warm friendship sprang up almost at once between the two girls, culminating in a long trip in Ruth's automobile, during which journey Ruth, Bab and Mollie Thurston, their friend Grace Carter, and their chaperon, Aunt Sallie Stuart, met with many exciting adventures. It was on this eventful trip, as will be recalled, that Barbara distinguished herself by causing the arrest of a society jewel thief, at the same time heaping coals of fire on the head of a girl cousin who had treated Barbara and Mollie with scornful contempt.

The girls were next heard from in "The Automobile Girls in the Berkshires," to which region, chaperoned, as always, by Ruth's Aunt Sallie, they had driven in Ruth's car for a month's stay in a lonely cabin in the Berkshire Hills. Their experiences with the "Ghost of Lost Man's Trail" was not the least of their exciting adventures there; in fact, their stay in the mountains was filled with a succession of strange happenings that thrilled the girls as nothing in their lives ever had done before.

By this time they considered themselves veteran automobilists and seasoned travelers. As related in "The Automobile Girls Along the Hudson," the now famous quartette showed themselves fully equal to the more than ordinary emergencies they met with from time to time on a most eventful journey. From balking highwaymen to fighting a forest fire that for a time threatened the ancestral home of Major Ten Eyck, whose guests they were at the time, the "Automobile Girls" fully lived up to the reputation they had earned for themselves.

After their trip through the Sleepy Hollow country, Ruth had returned to her home in Chicago, while Mollie, Barbara and Grace had settled down to their studies in the Kingsbridge High School. But with the approach of the holidays had come Ruth's cordial invitation to spend Christmas with her in her own home, not forgetting to mention "Mr. A. Bubble," who, she promised, would do his part toward making their visit a lively one. The three girls had set out on their journey to the Windy City on the Chicago Express, that journey having been interrupted in a most unexpected manner, as already related.

The conductor sent off a message for them to Ruth Stuart at the next stop. It was a characteristic message from Barbara, reading:

"Train wrecked. 'Automobile Girls' safe. Arrive some time.

"Grace, Mollie, Bab."

This telegram for a time created no little excitement in the Stuart home.

Daylight was upon them by the time the train started from the scene of the wreck. Grace said she felt as though she had contracted a severe cold, for she was aching in every muscle of her body. Mollie declared that she was all right, but Bab averred that she knew she hadn't been in bed in a hundred years.

The dining car was opened early, for all the passengers felt the need of something more sustaining than fright. When the girls came back from the dining car they felt much better. Grace had suffered no serious injuries, but Bab's face was scratched from the particles of broken glass that had showered over her when the windows burst in.

A young man was occupying Barbara's seat when she entered the car they had occupied since the accident. He was leaning back against the high chair. His eyes were closed and a bandage was bound about his head.

"That's the man from number thirteen," whispered Barbara over her shoulder to Mollie. He glanced up, met Barbara's eyes and smiled.

"I am very glad to see that you weren't seriously hurt," said Bab.

The young man rose, supporting himself by the back of the chair.

"Are these your seats?" he asked.

"Yes, but please do not disturb yourself," urged Bab, taking a seat across the aisle. The young man leaned toward her.

"You are Miss Thurston, are you not?" he asked.

Barbara nodded, flushing a little.

"I have been told that I practically owe my life to you. The fire was nothing but a smoulder of the carpet, but I was slowly being asphyxiated. Thirty minutes more and it would have been all up with me. Even had I been rescued too late to get this train it would have been serious for me. My presence in Chicago to-day is imperative. I might say that it involves my whole future. You see, my dear young lady, you have done more for me than you perhaps realize. You are going to Chicago?"

"Yes; we are going on a visit to our friends, Mr. Robert Stuart and his daughter."

"Robert Stuart!" exclaimed the young man. Then his face grew hard.

Suddenly the conversation that she had overheard the previous night flashed into the mind of Barbara Thurston. The color left her face. The young man's keen eyes observed her change of expression. He shot a sharp glance of inquiry at her.

"I have a slight acquaintance with Mr. Stuart and his daughter," he said coldly. "I also know intimate friends of theirs, Mr. and Mrs. Presby and their daughter. Therefore I may have the pleasure of meeting you again. I think perhaps I had better lie down and rest for the remainder of the journey. By the way," he continued, after a slight hesitation, "did you perchance discover a bundle of papers when you found me in the compartment on the other car?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon!" exclaimed Bab. "I did find some papers. They are in my bag. I picked them up from the floor of the car thinking they might be of value to you."

Slightly confused, Barbara opened her bag, and after turning over its contents drew forth a bundle of papers held together with rubber bands. She handed the bundle to the young man.

The smile that lit up his face as he thanked her changed his expression completely. It was almost a gentle smile, and seemed strangely out of place on that cold, calculating face.

"Here is my card. I am rated as a cold, heartless man. But, my dear Miss Thurston, I have at least one virtue – gratitude. If ever you are in need of assistance in any way do not hesitate to call upon me," he said, extending a hand to Barbara as he rose rather unsteadily to his feet. Bab mechanically dropped the card into her bag without looking at it, closing and dropping the bag on the floor beside her before accepting the hand. The touch of the cold fingers of the man's hand sent a feeling of dislike through her. It recalled to her mind more vividly than ever the conversation she had overheard in the sleeper.

"I hope I never shall see him again," muttered Barbara, just as Miss Thompson came smiling up to them. But Barbara Thurston was destined to see the man whom she had rescued, though under circumstances that she little dreamed of at the present moment.

CHAPTER III

A DIZZY ROUND OF PLEASURE

THE train stopped at Englewood for a moment and then pulled out again for the Union Station. The girls already knew that they were in Chicago, and were feverishly gathering up their wraps. Bab was drawing on her overshoes when two warm hands were suddenly pressed over her eyes.

"Guess who it is?" cried Grace, after she and Mollie had uttered little smothered exclamations of delight.

"It's my Ruth! Oh, Ruth, Ruth!" cried Barbara, springing up and flinging both arms about the neck of Ruth, fairly smothering her friend with kisses. Ruth and her father had gotten on at Englewood to welcome their young friends.

"You dear, dear 'Automobile Girls,'" cried Ruth, now clasping the three girls one after another in a tight embrace.

"Am I to be left out of this entirely?" questioned Ruth's father in an aggrieved tone.

The girls disengaged themselves from Ruth's arms and fairly pounced upon Mr. Robert Stuart.

"Oh, how is dear Aunt Sallie and Mr. A. Bubble?" laughed Barbara, her eyes shining with joy.

"Aunt Sallie is waiting to greet you at our home. Mr. A. Bubble is outside growling over your delay in getting to Chicago," smiled Mr. Stuart.

"We received your telegram," said Mr. Stuart, as they left the Union Station. "For a time we were considerably upset. Later we saw an account of the wreck in the morning paper. We did not learn that anyone was injured."

"What caused it? Wasn't it awful?" questioned Ruth, gazing at her friends admiringly. "And to think I wasn't there to share the honor of being mixed up with a railroad wreck. Too bad," she pouted.

"It wasn't a wreck, it was a shake-up," answered Grace.

"I am glad you were not with us. Who knows what might have occurred," answered Bab soberly. "Oh, there is Mr. Bubble," she cried, her serious expression changing to a happy smile as she ran forward to the puffing red automobile and patted it affectionately. A thin curl of blue smoke was rising from the exhaust of the motor car.

"Hear him purr his delight," cried Mollie. "He's just like a contented kitten for all the world," she laughed. "He isn't grumbling at all."

"He was grumbling loudly enough when we left him," answered Mr. Stuart.

"That's because he was cold. But we will warm Mr. A. Bubble up on our way home," declared Ruth. This she did, keeping a wary eye out for traffic policemen who might claim that she was exceeding the speed limit. But Ruth knew fairly well where to look out for a traffic man and where not to look for him. Up Dearborn Street to Madison Street the car whirled, the sharp air putting color in the faces of the girls and making their eyes sparkle.

Bab kept stealing perplexed glances at Mr. Stuart. Something was on the young woman's mind, but she did not give expression to the thought. In the meantime the girls were chattering at a rapid rate. Through Madison Street they traveled and into Michigan Avenue, where a gust of biting wind fresh from Lake Michigan smote them in the face.

"Oh, look at the river!" cried Mollie.

"That's Lake Michigan, you goose," answered Ruth, laughing merrily. "How insulting to call our lake a river. But here we are."

The car swung into a driveway, coming to a halt before an imposing residence, four stories high, overlooking the lake.

"What is this great building?" questioned Mollie.

"This is where we live, dear," answered Ruth. "This is my home."

"Oh, dear me, I thought it was the Chicago public library," retorted Mollie.

"Molliekins, what *are* we going to do with you?" chided Ruth, laughing.

The other girls were already running up the broad stone steps. The doors swung open and the next second Barbara, Mollie and Grace threw themselves into the arms of Miss Sallie Stuart. There was a volley of little screams of delight and any number of resounding smacks. Mr. Stuart had followed them in. He stood with his back to the door, smiling contentedly on the joyous scene. He had come to love the three girls with a love that was not far behind his affection for his own daughter Ruth.

The girls having released Miss Sallie from their embrace, Ruth dragged her friends upstairs. They were first shown to their own rooms, and wonderful rooms they were. None of the three girls from Kingsbridge ever had seen anything to compare with the beauty of these handsome apartments. A few minutes later they were in Ruth's private sitting room, the walls of which were done in pale blue silk. The furniture was of old mahogany and on a dainty writing desk the girls found paper and envelopes bearing the monogram "A. G." Ruth had had these prepared for the girls' use.

"Now, girls," she said, "are you too fatigued after your exciting experiences to go out this evening?"

"No, indeed," cried the three girls in chorus.

"Then listen! Father has taken a box at the opera for this evening. We are to hear Romeo and Juliet – "

"Oh, how perfectly lovely," bubbled Mollie.

"That reminds me, Molliekins, that I received a note from your 'lovely lady,' Mrs. Cartwright, yesterday. She asked me to tell you to look for a diamond butterfly at the opera to-night. She thought that might help you to locate an old friend."

Mollie smiled happily. At this juncture there came a light tap at the door and a well-known gentle voice asked, "may I come in?"

Miss Sallie was assisted into the room somewhat faster than she considered dignified, but there was no resisting her "Automobile Girls." After getting her breath she sank into an easy chair, the girls surrounding her.

"I want to consult with you about our plans," she said. "We wish to make this reunion one that you will remember all the rest of your lives. Our cousins, the Presbys, wish you to spend some time with them. Olive Presby, their daughter, is especially desirous of having you there. You will find her a charming girl and I am sure you will all fall in love with her at sight. What do you say?"

"About the falling in love?" questioned Mollie innocently.

"No, no, Molliekins," rebuked Ruth. "About the invitation, of course."

"I am sure we shall be well pleased with whatever arrangements have been made for us," said Grace.

"Yes, indeed," added Barbara.

"I am between fire and water," declared Ruth laughingly, as she dropped into a chair before the fireplace. "I want you to stay and I want you to go to the Presbys. I have decided, with your approval, that we shall divide your time between our home and the Presbys' place. First, we will do Chicago, after which we will go to Cousin Jane and Cousin Richard Presby. They have a grand old home and hundreds of acres of grounds surrounding it."

"Are they so very rich?" questioned Mollie.

"On the contrary, they are extremely poor," answered Aunt Sallie, whereat Mollie puckered her brow in perplexity. "Their property is heavily mortgaged. They are in a fair way to lose it unless – "

"Unless what, Aunt Sallie?" asked Bab gently.

"Unless perhaps they may in the meantime find the buried treasure."

The effect of this announcement on Mollie, Barbara and Grace made Miss Sallie smile.

"Buried treasure? Buried treasure! Oh, oh, oh!" they cried in chorus.

"Don't get excited, dears. There is no chance for the 'Automobile Girls,'" interjected Ruth. "I've stirred myself up so many times over that old treasure that I have lost ever and ever so many nights' sleep. Take my advice and forget all about it," she admonished.

"Oh, please tell us about it," urged Mollie.

"A buried treasure? How perfectly delightful!" sparkled Barbara.

"I haven't time to tell you now. It is a long story. This treasure was buried many years ago by one of the Presbys' ancestors. They will tell you all about it when you go out there, and I am sure Cousin Richard can make the story much more interesting than I could."

This had to suffice for the present, though the girls were burning to hear the story. Anything that savored of adventure appealed to these healthy, outdoor girls, and what could be more adventurous than hunting for a treasure that had been buried for years and years?

The girls' trunks had been brought up, and while they were dressing for the evening, Bab took advantage of the occasion to consult with Ruth about her gown.

Ruth ran forward, flinging her arms about Barbara's neck the instant Bab came into her room.

"Dear, dear old Bab," she breathed, running tender fingers over the shining brown hair of her companion. "You can't know how I have wanted you. It seems years since last I saw you. Answer me truly, dear. How do you think father is looking?"

Barbara's face sobered instantly. Ruth noted the quick change of expression.

"You needn't tell me. I see by your expression what you think," added Ruth quickly, brushing a stray wisp of hair from her face.

"That was what I wished to ask you about, dear," said Barbara. "He looks so worn. What is the trouble? Has your father been ill?"

"No. Not in the sense you mean. Nevertheless, we are greatly worried about him. He has been speculating. We think he has lost a lot of money. He does not speak of his business affairs as he used to do, and that makes us all the more certain that things are not going as they should with him. However, I mustn't speak of these matters now, as I wish you to have the happiest time of your life while you are with us. Why, Barbara Thurston, what a lovely frock!" exclaimed Ruth impulsively.

Barbara flushed with pleasure at the compliment. Her gown was of dark red crepe-de-chine, trimmed in soft folds of liberty velvet. Bab had tucked a single red rose in her hair. Ruth never had seen Bab look more charming.

"It is mother's Christmas present to me," explained Bab, referring to the frock. "I think it very pretty."

"I wish I could look half so well in anything," answered Ruth, but without a trace of envy in her tone. "But I must hurry. If I run on like this we'll never get to the opera."

"I was just about to ask if you mind my running down to chat with your father a few moments before we go?"

"Do, dear. It will do him good. You always act like a tonic on father," smiled Ruth. "He's in the library."

Bab tripped away, holding up her skirts, followed by the admiring eyes of her friend.

"She's such a dear," mused Ruth, beginning the finishing touches of her dressing.

Bab was especially anxious to see Mr. Stuart alone. She wanted to see if she could fathom the cause of his distress. He looked even more tired and careworn than when she had first seen him. She entered the library rather diffidently pausing before Mr. Stuart, who stood near the fireplace.

"Am I intruding?" asked Bab.

"Intruding, my dear? You could not do that. But how beautiful you are to-night."

"Don't. Please don't," protested Bab with well-feigned displeasure. "You will make me a vain little creature. Ruth has just said the same thing to me. At this rate I fear I shall begin to believe something of the sort myself very soon."

"No," answered Mr. Stuart, gazing at her approvingly. "You are far too sensible a young woman to have your head turned so easily as that. Tell me about your good mother. How is she?"

"Quite well, thank you," replied Bab simply.

"I am sorry that she could not come with you. We had hoped to have her with us."

"Yes, we wanted mother to come. She asked me to thank you very kindly for your invitation, but said it would not be possible for her to go so far away from home just now. Perhaps later she may visit you."

"Bab, a good mother like yours is a most priceless treasure. Never forget to value your treasure at its real worth," said Mr. Stuart impressively.

"I do and I trust I always shall, sir," answered Barbara, and Robert Stuart smiled, for he knew that she meant what she said.

Ruth and the other two girls came in at this juncture and the conversation turned on their gowns and the pleasures that were before them that evening. Barbara had not mentioned that she thought Mr. Stuart was looking ill. She would not have ventured to do so, although she was more convinced than before that something very, very serious had come into the life of her friend's father. She wondered if she might not be able to do something to relieve the distress under which he was so plainly laboring.

"There, now, what did I tell you, Bab?" demanded Ruth, entering the library. "Didn't I say you were always a tonic to father?"

Barbara blushed.

"She is indeed, daughter. So are you all. But we must be going. Is your Aunt Sallie ready?"

"She is waiting for us in the reception room," answered Ruth.

"Then we will be off. Be sure that you girls are well wrapped up. You are not used to going out in this climate with such thin gowns. Ruth, where is your cloak?"

"Below, father. I will pick it up on my way down."

Then they started downstairs, Mr. Stuart leading the way. They were joined by Miss Sallie in the hallway and a few minutes later were being borne away by Mr. A. Bubble, who, for this evening at least, was on his best behavior. Reaching the opera house, they were conducted to the box reserved for them. Ruth insisted on her guests occupying the front chairs. How the heads of the three little Kingsbridge girls did swim! Beautiful gowns, beautiful women and dazzling jewels were to be seen wherever the eye rested. It was a brilliant and animated scene, such as none of the three girls ever before had gazed upon, for this was their first visit to the opera.

"Isn't it all wonderful?" said Bab to Ruth.

"Yes, indeed," responded Ruth warmly. "There is nothing quite like an opera night, and I have been particularly interested in grand opera since we discovered Zerlina."

"Oh, to be sure," exclaimed Bab. "Where is Zerlina now?"

"She is in Paris, studying under the best teachers that can be procured for her," replied Ruth. "She writes me regularly. Her teachers give her great encouragement, and she expects to be ready to sing important rôles within the next two years. She adores José, and he is delighted with having so talented a sister."

"She is one of the most beautiful girls I have ever seen," said Barbara. "What a wonderful 'Carmen' she will make."

"Yes; won't she, though," responded Ruth eagerly, "and that is the part that she particularly looks forward to singing."

The subject of Ruth's and Barbara's conversation was a beautiful gypsy girl that they had met during their trip along the Hudson. She had become a protégé of Ruth, who had cherished high hopes of sending Zerlina to a conservatory, but had been forestalled by the appearance on the scene of Zerlina's handsome half-brother, José Martinez. On account of family differences, José and Zerlina had been separated for many years, but in the end Zerlina was persuaded by him to place herself under his protection. All of this has been fully narrated in "The Automobile Girls Along the Hudson."

"What do you think of it, Molliedkins?" whispered Ruth over Mollie's shoulder.

"Think of it?" breathed the golden-haired Mollie. "I'm so happy that I could scream right out so everybody in the theatre would hear me," answered Mollie. "I don't know what I shall do when the music begins."

A wave of laughter rippled over the box at Mollie's quaint way of expressing her delight.

CHAPTER IV

BATTLE OF THE BULLS AND BEARS

THAT evening at the opera was like a dream to the little Kingsbridge girls. Mrs. Cartwright visited them between the acts, then they were introduced to Olive Presby, who came to their box, accompanied by a young man named Jack Howard, an artist who had just returned from Paris. These two had been chums since childhood.

Bab thought Olive the most beautiful girl she had ever seen. She could not keep her eyes off of her, and Olive appeared to be equally attracted to Barbara, though there was little opportunity for conversation between them. Olive was fully five years older than Barbara with fair skin, black hair, and eyes of deep gray, veiled with long, black lashes, making an unusual and most attractive combination. Olive Presby was a striking looking girl. All through the second act Bab kept gazing across at Olive, and it was with a deep sigh of regret that Barbara finally turned her eyes away under the teasing of Ruth and Grace. The glorious evening came to a close all too soon for them.

Reaching home, the girls lost little time in getting to their rooms, for the three travelers had had little sleep in the past two nights.

They fell asleep almost the instant their heads touched their pillows, but in spite of their late hours the four girls descended to the dining room the following morning bright-eyed and ready for whatever the day might bring forth.

Miss Sallie rustled in, dressed in her silk morning gown a few moments after the others had reached the dining room. The girls greeted her enthusiastically, each girl giving her a hearty hug and kiss, after which they seated themselves at the breakfast table, and a lively chattering ensued.

"What do you think of Cousin Olive?" asked Ruth.

"Oh, I just love her," cried Bab enthusiastically.

A cloud passed swiftly over the face of Ruth Stewart.

"I could love her almost to death. Is she engaged to Mr. Howard?"

"No indeed," said Miss Sallie with emphasis. "Olive is devoted to her parents, especially now that they are in such deep trouble. She is their comfort in their distress and she knows it."

"Young ladies," interrupted Mr. Stuart, "do you feel equal to beginning your sight-seeing to-day?"

"We do," chorused the girls.

"I have so planned my affairs as to have this day free for you. Mr. A. Bubble also is at your disposal. He has had a thorough going over at the hands of his man this morning, and I think you will find him in fine condition."

"Olive Presby is coming to see you this morning, you know," reminded Miss Sallie.

Ruth's face clouded again. Bab's eyes glowed, for she wished to see Olive even more than to explore Chicago.

"We might call her up on the telephone and have her come over so she may go with us," suggested Mr. Stuart.

The girls seconded this proposal enthusiastically, and this was done without delay, Olive promising to come over as soon after breakfast as possible.

"I propose," announced Mr. Stuart, "to take you over to the Board of Trade on La Salle Street to show you the famous Pit."

"Is it a very big hole?" questioned Mollie innocently, whereat a merry laugh rippled all the way around the table.

"The Pit," explained Mr. Stuart, smilingly, "is the place where men buy and sell grain-stuffs. It's the same as stock speculation."

Mollie thought stock speculation was trading in cattle.

"You ridiculous child," exclaimed Ruth. "I'll explain it to you so you will understand it. Now if you want to speculate you order your brokers, for instance, to 'buy a thousand shares of B. Sell five thousand shares of G and ten thousand shares of C.' That's all. Next morning you wake up to find yourself ten or fifteen thousand dollars richer – "

"Or poorer," added Mr. Stuart. "I must say, Ruth, that your explanation is very lucid. Take the girls down to my office, leaving here at half past ten o'clock. I shall have my morning mail disposed of by that time and my day's orders issued, then my time will be at your disposal. Sallie, are you going with the girls?"

"No, thank you. Not this morning. I have seen quite all of Chicago, I think. Besides, I have no love for your horrid Board of Trade. The automobile will be pretty well filled as it is."

"Oh, please come with us," urged Mollie.

Aunt Sallie shook her head smilingly, so it was arranged that the girls should go downtown by themselves, there to be met by Mr. Stuart. Olive bustled in shortly before ten o'clock. She was dressed in a brown tailor-made suit of broadcloth, with furs and hat of mink. She came running up the stairs to Ruth's sitting room, bright and eager, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

"Here I am," she cried gayly. "I'm going to introduce myself all over again. I'm Olive, girls. I'm a sort of adopted cousin of the 'Automobile Girls.' So this is Bab," she sparkled, giving Barbara's hand a friendly squeeze. "This little yellow-haired girl is Mollie, and the bigger, brown-haired one is Grace. Now I think we are properly introduced. Now what can I do to add to the pleasure of the 'Automobile Girls' this fine morning?"

"I would suggest that you first sit down and compose yourself," replied Ruth with some severity. "How you do run on, Olive."

"Now, I call that downright mean," pouted Miss Presby. "Don't you, Bab?" Olive suddenly bent over Barbara, giving the little Kingsbridge girl an impulsive hug.

Ruth frowned. Bab looked embarrassed. She felt that Ruth resented Olive's affectionate demonstration. It caused the three Kingsbridge girls, however, to lose their awe of Miss Presby, whom they had before looked upon as a superior grown-up person.

"What are the plans for the day, dear?" questioned Olive, turning to Ruth.

"We are first to go to the office to pick up father. He is to take us to the Pit. I don't know where we shall go from there."

About this time a maid came up to tell them that the car was at the door. The girls hurried down, laughing and chatting, Ruth's irritation apparently having been banished from her mind. It was a bright, sparkling day. The lake glistened and the wind from it again blew the color into the faces of the "Automobile Girls."

Mr. Stuart's office was in one of the tall office buildings on La Salle Street, not far from the Board of Trade. The girls were shot up to the seventeenth floor on the elevator with a speed that fairly took their breaths away. Mollie uttered a chorus of subdued "ohs" all the way up.

Even in the staid business office the girls found much to interest them. Mollie's attention was first attracted to an energetic little machine at one side of the room. This odd looking machine ticked like a clock, but resembled one in no other way, and from it at intervals spun a narrow, ribbon-like strip of paper which curled and coiled into an elongated waste-paper basket. Mollie stood over the basket regarding the perplexing letters and figures printed on the paper ribbon.

"Do – do you make ribbons on this?" she questioned, laying a finger on the glass globe that covered the mechanism.

"Not exactly, my dear," answered Mr. Stuart. "But that little machine sometimes helps us to buy ribbons for our families. That is a ticker. It gives the market quotations. I hardly think you will be interested in it."

Mollie decided that she wasn't.

"If you are ready, girls, we will go over to the Board of Trade, where you will see the bulls and bears engaged in a pitched battle. It is to be a lively day on the floor of the Pit."

Mollie was frowning perplexedly.

"Are we really going to see a bull fight?" she whispered to Ruth. "Do the bulls and the bears really fight? I – I don't think I want to see them if they do."

"No, no, silly. Nothing of the sort. Oh, girls!" laughed Ruth merrily.

"Don't you dare tell them," admonished Mollie, "I'll never forgive you if you do."

"Never mind," called Ruth to the others, "I'll explain, dear. Of course you know nothing about these things. I wish I didn't. I wish father did not, either," she added with a touch of bitterness. "Bulls and bears are mere men. The bulls are those who try to force up the prices of wheat and other things, while the bears are the ones who seek to keep the prices down. I – I never have been able to make up my mind which of them is the most undesirable."

"I am sure Mr. Stuart isn't a bear," muttered Mollie.

"Indeed he is not," laughed Ruth, once more restored to good nature.

Instead of taking Mr. A. Bubble, the girls walked down from Mr. Stuart's office to the big, gloomy building that housed the Board of Trade. They were conducted to the gallery, where Mr. Stuart left them to go down to the brokers' rooms to consult with some of his friends.

It was a mad, wild scene that the little country girls gazed upon. It was like nothing they ever had seen before.

"Goodness me, they *are* fighting!" cried Barbara in alarm.

Men were dashing about here and there. Hats were smashed, paper was being torn by nervous hands and hurled into the air, to fall like miniature snow flurries over the heads of the traders. Shouts and yells, hoarse calls were heard from all parts of the floor. One man threw up a hand with the fingers spread wide apart. Instantly a dozen men hurled themselves upon him. He staggered and fell. Willing hands jerked him to his feet. It was then that the "Automobile Girls" saw that the unfortunate man's coat had been torn from him. His collar flapped under his ears and a tiny red mark was observable on one cheek.

"Oh!" gasped the Kingsbridge girls.

"Wha-a-at are they fighting about?" gasped Mollie, her face pale with excitement, perhaps mingled with a little fear.

"They aren't fighting." Ruth had to place her lips close to the ears of her companion to make herself heard. "They are buying and selling. That is the way business is done on the floor of the Pit. See! There is father!"

The girls gazed wide-eyed. Mr. Stuart had projected himself into the maelstrom of excited traders. He, like the rest, was waving his arms and shouting. A group of excited men instantly surrounded him. He was for the moment the centre of attention, for Robert Stuart was one of the largest and most successful traders on the Chicago Board of Trade. The battle waged furiously about him, while the "Automobile Girls" gazed in fascinated awe upon the strange, exciting scene.

All at once a gong sounded. The tension seemed to snap. Men who had been fighting and shouting suddenly ceased their activities. The bodies of some grew limp, as it were. Some staggered. Others walked from the floor laughing and chatting. Out of the crowds strode a man – a young man. What first attracted the attention of the girls to him was a bandage about his head. He was walking straight toward them, though on the floor below. All at once he glanced up. Only Bab was looking down at him now. His gaze swept over the gallery. His eyes rested for a moment on the face of Barbara Thurston.

"The man from section thirteen!" exclaimed Bab under her breath. Then as she caught his eyes, she gazed in trembling fascination. The man's features were contorted. Barbara thought it was the most frightful face she ever had gazed upon. Anger, deadly passion and desperate purpose were

written there so plainly that anyone could read. Looking her fairly in the face, the man sneered. Whether he recognized her or not, the girl did not know.

"Oh!" cried Bab, with a shudder.

"What is it, dear?" questioned Ruth anxiously.

"Oh, take me away from here. Please take me away," almost sobbed Barbara. "I – I can't stand it. It was awful."

"Come, girls," urged Ruth. "Bab is upset. I will confess that I have had enough of this place of nightmares." Rising, she led her friends down the stairs to the lower floor. Barbara was still trembling when they saw Mr. Stuart coming toward them. His face was set and stern. But the instant he caught sight of the "Automobile Girls" the sternness drifted slowly from his features, giving place to a pleased smile.

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