

Wayne Dorothy

Dorothy Dixon Solves the Conway Case



Dorothy Wayne

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Chapter I **OUT OF LUCK**

Above the speeding airplane, lowering black of approaching night and storm; below, the forest, grim and silent, swelling over ridges, dipping into valleys, crestless waves on a dark green ocean.

“We can’t make it, Betty.”

Dorothy Dixon, at the controls, spoke into the mouthpiece of her headphone set.

Betty Mayo, in the rear cockpit, glanced overside and shuddered.

“But you can’t land on those trees!” she cried shrilly. “We’ll crash – you know that!”

“Maybe we will – and maybe we won’t!” returned Dorothy, gritting her teeth. “Keep your eyes peeled for a pond or a woodlot – anywhere you think we can land.”

“What – what’s the matter?” called back her friend, steadying her wobbly nerves with an effort.

“Matter enough. We’re nearly out of gas – running on reserve fuel now. When the rain starts, it’ll be pitch dark in no time.”

“Oh, Dorothy – do try to stay up! We can’t crash and be killed – that’s what it will mean if you try to land here!”

“Betty, be-have, will you? This is my funeral.” The pilot in her anxiety, had struck upon an unhappy choice of words.

“Oh, you must do something – this is terrible – ” the frenzied girl in the rear cockpit almost shrieked.

Dorothy ripped off her headphone set. She could no longer allow her attention to be distracted by Betty’s excited whimpering.

The small amphibian, flying low, topped a crag-scarred ridge. At the foot of the cliff she saw a tiny woodland meadow.

Action in the air must be automatic. There is never time to reason. With the speed of legerdemain the young pilot sent her plane into a steep right bank and pushed down hard on the left rudder pedal. The result was a sideslip, the only maneuver by which the amphibian could possibly be piloted into the woodlot. Tilted sideways at an angle that brought a scream from terrified Betty, the heavy mass of wood and metal dropped like a plummet toward the earth.

This was too much for little Miss Mayo. Convinced that her friend had lost control of the plane, she closed her eyes and prayed.

With uncanny accuracy, considering the rainswept gloom, Dorothy recovered just at the proper instant. Hard down rudder brought the longitudinal axis of the plane into coincidence with its actual flight path again. At the same time she brought the up aileron into play, thereby preventing the bank from increasing. Then as the amphibian shot into a normal glide, she leveled the wings laterally by use of ailerons and rudder.

Their speed was still excessive, so for a split second or two, Dorothy leveled off and fishtailed the plane. That is, she kicked the rudder alternately right and left, thereby swinging the nose from side to side, and did so without banking and without dropping the nose to a steeper angle.

Taking the greatest possible care that her plane was in straight flight prior to the moment of contact with the ground, she gave it a brief burst of the engine, obviating any possibility of squashing on with excessive force. The airplane landed well back on the tail, rolled forward over the bumpy

ground and came to a stop at the very edge of the little meadow, nose on to the line of trees and underbrush.

Dorothy switched off the ignition, snapped out of her safety belt and turned round.

“Hail, hail, the gang’s all here,” she said cheerfully. “Wake up, Betty! We’ve come to the end of the line.”

Betty opened her eyes and looked about in startled amazement.

“Why – why we didn’t crash, after all!”

“Certainly not,” snorted Dorothy. “D’you think I’d let *Wispy* mash up my best friend? Come on, dry your eyes. Good thing it’s so dark and none of the boys are with us. You’d be a fine sight,” she teased.

“I think *Will-o-the-Wisp* is a silly name for a plane.” Betty’s remark was purposely irrelevant. She wanted to change the subject.

“Then don’t think about it. Turn your mind upon the answer of that dear old song, ‘Where do we go from here?’”

“Where are we?” Betty could be practical enough when her nerves were not tried too severely.

“Mmm!” murmured her friend. “That’s the question. I’m not quite sure, but I think we’re on the New York State Reservation over on Pound Ridge. A good ten miles or more from home, anyway.”

“If we’re on the reservation we’re certainly out of luck,” sighed Betty. “It’s a terribly wild place – nothing but rocks and ridges and woods and things. They keep it that way on purpose.”

“Nice for picnics on sunny days, I guess,” affirmed Dorothy. “But not so good on a rainy night, eh? Here, put on this slicker before you’re wet through. Then get down. We’ve got to move out of here.”

Betty stood up, caught the coat Dorothy threw into the cockpit, and after slipping into it, she stared fearfully about.

“What are you waiting for?” Dorothy inquired from below.

“I’m going to stay where I am,” announced Miss Mayo in a quavering voice. “It’s safer.”

“How safe?” Dorothy turned on her flash light. Its moving beam brought into bold relief the jungle of scrub oak and evergreens that walled the little pasture.

“Listen, Dorothy! I remember Father saying that they preserved game on the Pound Ridge reservation. There are sure to be bears and – and other things in these woods. Turn off the light – quick – they’ll be attracted to us if we show a light – ”

“Bears – your grandmother!” said Dorothy’s mocking voice and the light flashed full on Betty. “Don’t be so silly. Come down here at once!”

“No, I won’t. I’m going to stay up here. I – I’m sure it’s safer.”

“Then you can be ‘safer’ by yourself. If you think I’m going to stick around this woodlot all night, you’ve got another guess coming. Snap out of it, won’t you, Betty?”

“But you wouldn’t leave me all alone out here!”

“Watch me.” The light began to move away from the plane.

“I’ll come – I’ll come with you, Dorothy – wait!”

The light came back and Betty scrambled to the ground in a fever of haste.

“Now, then, stop being a goop and take this flash,” directed Dorothy. “Hold it on the plane so I can see. We’ve got to make *Wispy* secure, before we get under way.”

“I s’pose you get that Navy lingo from Bill Bolton.” Betty felt rather peevish now. “You talk just like him ever since he taught you to fly.”

“I wish he was here now,” retorted her friend, and climbed into the cockpit. “Here – take these wheel blocks and stop grouching. And for goodness’ sake, please don’t wobble that light! I want to get these cockpit covers on before everything is flooded.”

A few minutes later she climbed down again and after adjusting the wheel blocks, took the flashlight from Betty.

“All set?” she inquired briskly. “Got your knitting and everything? ’Cause it’s time we were moving.”

Betty began to cry.

“I think you’re mean – of course I want to get out of here, but – but you n-needn’t – ”

Dorothy put her arm about the smaller girl’s shoulders.

“There, there,” she comforted, “cheer up. I won’t be cross any more. Here’s a hanky, use it and come along. Gee, I wish this rain would stop! It’s coming down in bucketfuls.”

“I’m sorry, too, for sniveling,” said Betty meekly. She made a strenuous effort to be brave as they walked away from the dark shape of the plane. “But don’t you think you’d better get out your revolver, Dorothy? Honestly, you know, we’re likely to run into anything out here in these woods.”

Dorothy burst into a peal of laughter. “Bless you, honey,” she chuckled. “I don’t carry a gun when I go calling – or any other time if I can help it. We’ll get out of this all right, don’t worry. I should have looked at the gas before we left home, but I thought there was plenty to take us over to Peekskill and back. *Wispy* eats the stuff – that’s the answer!”

They stumbled along on the outskirts of the woodlot, Dorothy keeping her light swinging from side to side before them.

“But I thought you *always* carried a gun – ” insisted Betty, her mind still on the same track – “you ought to, after all you went through with those bank robbers and then the gang of diamond smugglers!”

“Well, you’ve got to have a license to tote a revolver – I’ll admit I’ve carried ’em now and then – but not to a tea!” replied her friend. “Do try and help me now, to find a way out of this place.”

“But maybe there is no way out. We can’t climb those cliffs, and this meadow’s hemmed in by the woods. Oh, dear, I wish I knew where we are!”

“I’m not certain,” mused Dorothy, more to herself than to her companion, “but I think I caught sight of the fire tower on the ridge just before we sideslipped. That would mean that this meadow is on the eastern edge of the reservation – and that there’s a road on the hill across from the ridge. There must be a trail of some kind leading in here. They could never get the hay out or the cattle in, otherwise; this place must be used for something.”

They trudged along, keeping the trees on their left until the farther end of the meadow was reached. As they rounded the corner the light from the flash brought into view a narrow opening in the trees and undergrowth.

“What did I tell you?” sang out Dorothy. “There’s our trail! This certainly is a lucky break!”

“Where do you suppose it goes?” Betty’s question was lacking in enthusiasm.

“Oh, it’s the tunnel from the Grand Central to the new Waldorf-Astoria,” said Dorothy, squinting in the darkness. “I’m going to take a room with a bath. You can have one, too, if you’re good!”

Betty stumbled into a jagged wheel rut and sat down suddenly. “Oh, my goodness!” she moaned. “My new pumps are ruined – and these nice new stockings are a mass of runs from those nasty brambles!”

“Humph! Just think how lucky you are to be alive,” suggested Dorothy callously. “Look – we’re coming into another meadow. Yes – and there’s a light – must be a house up there on the hill.”

“What if they won’t let us in?” wailed Betty.

They were heading across the meadow, now, toward the hill. Dorothy stopped and turned the flashlight on her friend.

“You certainly are a gloom!” she declared angrily. “Do you think I’m enjoying this? *My* shoes and stockings are ruined, too, and this ducky dress I’m crazy about has a rip in the skirt a yard long. It will probably be worse by the time we get through the brush on that hillside. But there’s absolutely no use in whining about it – and there’s not a darned thing to be scared of. Is that clear to you, Betty?”

She paused, and then went on more gently. “Come on, old thing, you’ll feel much better when we’ve found a place to get warm and dry.”

“I know you think I’m an awful baby.” Betty tried her best to make her voice sound cheerful, but her attempt was not a brilliant success. “But I’m just not brave, that’s all,” she went on, “and I do feel perfectly terrible.”

“I know. You’re not used to this kind of an outing, and I am, more or less. But I can see how it would upset you. Here’s a stone fence. Give me your hand, I’ll help you over. Fine! Now save your breath for the hill. We’ve got a stiff climb ahead of us.”

For the next fifteen or twenty minutes they fought their way up the steep slope through a veritable jungle of thickets and rock. In spite of frequent rests on the boulders that dotted the hillside, both girls were exhausted by the time they came to another delapidated stone wall that acted as a low barrier between the brush and an over-grown apple orchard. Through the gnarled trunks, they could dimly see the shape of the house whence came the light.

Dorothy sat down on top of the wall, and pulled Betty to a place beside her. Then she switched off her flash.

“Some drag, that!” Her breath came in labored gasps.

Betty was too weary to make any reply. For a time they sat, silently. Then Dorothy slid painfully off the wall into the orchard.

“You stay here, Betty. I’m going over to the house and reconnoiter.”

“Say! You don’t go without me!” Betty sprang down with sudden determination.

“Then walk carefully and don’t make any noise.”

A tone of startled surprise came into Betty’s voice.

“What – what are you afraid of, Dorothy?” she whispered excitedly.

“Not a thing, silly. But there may be watch dogs – and I want to get some idea of the people who live in that dump before I ask ’em for hospitality. I’ve got myself into trouble before this, going it blind. I know it pays to be careful. If you must come with me, you must, I suppose. But walk behind me – and don’t say another word.”

She stalked off through the orchard with Betty close at her heels.

As they neared the house, which seemed to be badly in need of repair, it was plain that the light came from behind a shaded window on the ground floor. Dorothy stopped to ponder the situation. A shutter hanging by one hinge banged dully in the wind and a stream of rain water was shooting down over the window from a choked leader somewhere above. She felt a grip on her arm.

“Let’s don’t go in there,” whispered Betty. “It’s a perfectly horrid place, I think.”

“It doesn’t look specially cheerful,” admitted Dorothy. “But there may not be another house within a couple of miles. There’s a porch around on the side. Maybe we can see into the room from there.”

Together they moved cautiously through the rank grass and weeds to the edge of the low veranda. There was no railing and the glow from two long French windows gave evidence that the floor boards were warped and rotting. The howl of the wind and driving rain served to cover the sound of their movements as they tiptoed across the porch to the far window. Both shades were drawn, but this one lacked a few inches of reaching the floor.

Both girls lay flat on their stomachs and peered in. Quick as a flash, Dorothy clapped her hands over Betty’s mouth, smothering her sudden shriek of terror.

Chapter II

TO THE RESCUE

The cold, wet wind of late September howled around the house. Dorothy wished she had brought a revolver.

“Stop it! Betty, stop!” she hissed and forced her friend to crawl backward over the rough boards to the edge of the porch. “Stay here, and don’t make a sound. Do you want them out after us? For goodness’ sake, take a grip on yourself! I’m going back to the window and – not another peep out of you while I’m gone!” With this warning, she slithered away before Betty could voice an objection.

Lying flat before the window once more with her face almost level with the floor, she stared into the room. The scene had not changed. Nor had the three principals of the drama being enacted on the other side of the pane moved from their positions. A sudden gust tore loose the shutter at the back of the house, sending it crashing down on some other wooden object with terrific racket.

“Must have hit the cellar doors,” thought Dorothy.

The man with the cigar, who stood before the cold fireplace stopped talking. She saw him cock his head to one side and listen. The bald-headed man in the leather armchair kept his revolver levelled on the room’s third occupant, and snapped out a question. With a shrug, the man by the fireplace went on speaking. He was a dapper person, flashily dressed in a black and white shepherd’s plaid suit which contrasted disagreeably with the maroon overcoat worn open for comfort. Dorothy took a dislike to him at first sight. Notwithstanding his mincing gestures, the man had the height and build of a heavyweight prizefighter. Now he leaned forward, emphasizing with a pudgy forefinger the point of his oratory which was directed toward the third member of the party.

Dorothy uttered an impatient exclamation. She could not hear a word. The roaring storm and the closed windows prevented her from catching even the rumble of their voices. She continued to gaze intently upon the prisoner, a well set up youth of eighteen or nineteen, curly-haired and intelligent looking. Her sympathy went out at once to this young fellow. He was bound hand and foot to the chair in which he sat. A blackened eye and his shirt, hanging in ribbons from his shoulders, told of a fight. Then she spied an overturned table, books and writing materials scattered over the rumpled rug.

“Whew!” she whistled softly. “He staged a little battle for ’em, anyway, I’ll bet!”

She smiled as she noticed that the youth’s opponents had likewise suffered. For the bald-headed man held a bloodstained handkerchief to his nose, while the other’s overcoat was ripped from collar to hem and he nursed a jaw that was evidently tender.

The room which lay beneath her scrutiny offered a decided contrast to the unkempt exterior of the house. The walls were completely lined with bookcases, reaching from ceiling to floor. The shelves must have held thousands of volumes. Essentially a man’s library, the furnishings were handsome, though they had evidently seen better days.

In reply to a question barked at him from the dapper prize fighter, the young prisoner shook his head in a determined negative. The big man spat out an invective. This time the boy smiled slightly, shook his head again. With a roar of fury that was audible to the watching girl outside, the prize fighter-bully strode over to his victim and struck him across the mouth.

That brutal action decided Dorothy. She wormed her way backward off the porch. Betty was still crouched where she had left her. She sprang up and caught her friend’s arm.

“Isn’t it terrible?” she whispered tensely. “He’s such a good-looking boy, too – don’t tell me they’ve killed him or anything?”

Without speaking, Dorothy led her around to the back of the house.

“No, they haven’t killed him,” she answered when they had reached the shelter of the apple orchard. “This is no movie thriller. But something pretty serious is going on in there. Now tell me –

are you going to pull yourself together and be of some help? Because if you're not, you can climb one of these trees and stay there until it's all over. That's the only safe place I know of – and even up there you'll get into trouble if you start screaming again!"

"Well, I really couldn't help it, Dorothy. He was such a darling looking boy and –"

"My goodness – what have his looks got to do with it? He's in a peck of trouble – that's the principal thing. I want to help him."

"Oh, so do I!" asserted Betty eagerly. "I'll be good, honest I will."

"Obey orders?"

"Do my best."

"O.K. then. I'm going round front. Those blackguards must have come in a car – and I'm going to find it."

"But you can't leave me here alone –"

"There you go again, silly! I'm not going to drive away in the car. I've got another plan. Listen! There's a cellar door, somewhere back of the house I guess. It's one of the flat kind that you pull up to open. I heard that shutter slam down on it."

"I suppose you want me to open it?"

"Bullseye!"

"You needn't be so superior," Betty's tone was aggrieved. "What'll I do if it's locked?"

"Oh, people 'way out in the country never lock their cellar doors," Dorothy's tone was impatient, her mind three jumps ahead.

"But suppose this one is?"

"Wait there until I come back. Hurry now – there's no telling what's going on in that room. So long – I'll be with you in a few minutes. If you hear a crash, *don't scream!*"

She raced away and as she reached the corner of the side porch, a quick glance over her shoulder told her that Betty was marching resolutely toward the cellar door.

This time Dorothy skirted the porch and toward the front of the house she came upon a weed-grown drive which swept in a quarter circle toward the road some fifty yards away. A limousine was parked before the entrance to the house. It was empty.

Dorothy breathed a sigh of relief. She hurried past the car and found that the drive ran round the farther side of the house, out to a small garage at the back. The garage doors were open, and inside she spied an ancient Ford. For some reason the sight of the Ford seemed to perturb her. She stood a while in deep thought.

Then as an idea struck home, she drew forth her flash light and sent its beam traveling over the interior of the garage. She did not take the precaution of closing the doors. The library was on the other side of the house and there was little danger of her light being seen. Suddenly she uttered a cry of satisfaction. Her light had brought into view about a dozen gasoline tins stacked in a corner. She lifted them one by one – all were empty. She hunted about and presently unearthed a short piece of rubber hose from under the seat of the automobile.

"First break tonight!" she said to herself. "Here's hoping the luck lasts!"

A few minutes later, if anyone had been watching, they would have seen a girl in a slicker, her dark curly hair topped by an aviation helmet, leave the garage carrying two gasoline tins. These she took to the orchard and deposited them behind a couple of apple trees.

Her next movements were more puzzling. She walked back to the garage and around that little building to the side away from the main house. Again her flash light was brought into play. This time she focussed it on the land to the side and rear and saw that the low wall which partly encompassed the orchard ended at the back of the garage. There was no obstruction between the drive at the side of the house and a rough field that sloped sharply down the valley whence she and Betty had come. Then she realized that the house and orchard lay on a plateau-like rise of land which jutted out into the valley from the main ridge, the ground dropping steeply on three sides.

“Well, the scenery couldn’t be sweeter!” remarked Dorothy. “Now, I hope to goodness they’ve left the keys.”

It was blowing half a gale now, and rain in crystal rods drove obliquely through the flash light’s gleam. She switched off the light and stuffed it into a pocket of her dripping slicker and beat her way against the storm toward the house. Here she found the limousine, and hastened on toward the side porch.

Lying flat at the window once more, she saw that a fire had been started in the fireplace. The dapper person crouched before it, holding an iron poker between the burning logs.

Dorothy realized on the instant the fiendish torture those beasts were planning. She jumped to her feet and tiptoeing over the boards, raced for the car.

Her hand, fumbling on the dash, brought a faint jangle from a bunch of keys —

“Break number three!” she cried and slipped behind the steering wheel. As she switched on the ignition she brought her right foot down on the starter and when the powerful engine purred she fed it more gas and let in the clutch.

The car rolled forward and she swung it round the corner of the house toward the garage, with her thumb pressed down hard on the button of the horn.

“That’ll bring them out!” she chuckled and slipping into high sent the car hurtling off the drive, headed for the field beyond the garage. An instant later she dropped off the running board while the limousine raced into the field and down the steep hillside to the valley below – and destruction.

At the same moment Dorothy heard shouts from the house and footsteps pounding on the gravel. She wasted no time peering after the car. Turning on her heel, she flew round the garage and over to the rear of the house. The cellar door was open, Betty was standing on the top step.

“Down you go!” panted Dorothy. “Take this flash and switch on the light – quick!”

A slight shove sent Betty stumbling down the stone flight and Dorothy followed more slowly, bringing down the wide door over her head.

“The light, Betty, the light!” she cried.

“B-but we can’t go into the house – those men – ”

“Never mind the men – do as you’re told. I can’t find the lock on this door in the dark. Where are you, anyway?”

“Right here,” said a small voice and the flash light gleamed.

Dorothy shot home the bolt and took the torch into her own hand.

“Come on!”

Without waiting to see if her order was obeyed, she ran to the stairs that led up to the first floor. At the top of the short flight, she found a closed door. She opened it and stepped into the kitchen, with Betty at her elbow. Locking the door behind them, she flashed her light about the room, then walked over to a table and pulled out the drawer.

“Here – take this!”

Betty stepped back as a large kitchen knife was thrust in her direction.

“Take it!” commanded Dorothy and again the smaller girl unwillingly did as she was told.

“But – but you can’t mean we’re going to fight them with knives,” she spluttered, “why, Dorothy – I just couldn’t – ”

“Don’t talk rot!” Dorothy’s tone was caustic. “Please cut the argument, now – I know what I’m doing!”

Betty trotted at her heels as she crossed the kitchen toward the front of the house, passed through a swinging door into the dining room. An arched doorway to their right, brought the hall into view, and beyond it, another door stood open, leading into the lighted library, where they saw its single occupant still tied to his chair.

“Go in there and cut him loose,” directed Dorothy.

She pushed Betty into the room and raced for the open front door. She heard the sound of voices from the drive as she neared the end of the hall. She could see the figures of two men just beyond the front steps. Just as her hand reached the door handle, they turned in her direction and the black night was seared with the sharp red flash from an automatic.

Chapter III

IN THE CONWAY HOUSE

With the detonation of the gun in her ears, Dorothy flung herself against the door and slammed it shut. Her hand fumbled for the key, found it and sent the bolt shooting into place. About the house the rain-lashed wind howled and moaned like some wild thing in torment. Her heart was pumping and her breath came in choking gasps. Leaning against the solid oak door she pressed her ear to a panel.

The noise of the storm muffled all other sound, but she thought she could detect the mumble of men's voices just outside the door. It was impossible to catch the words, of course, but the mere sound told the girl that they were standing on the small front porch. To her right was a sitting room. She hurried into it.

A quick flash of her torch showed two windows facing the drive. She tried the catches. They were unlocked. She fastened them and ran out of the room, down the hall to the rear. The light from the library threw the staircase into silhouette. Dorothy started for the dining room, but stopped short as the young man whom she had sent Betty in to free, bounded into the hall.

"Hello!" he cried. "Do you know where they are?"

Dorothy pointed toward the front door.

"Right out there!"

"Good! I'll fix 'em!"

He raced up the stairs and she heard him running toward the front of the house.

"Betty!" she called. "Come here!"

"What is it?" answered that young lady's voice from the library. "George told me to stay in this room."

"George?" exploded Dorothy. She ran to the door and looked in. Betty was toasting her soaking pumps from a chair before the fire. She turned her head when Dorothy appeared and beckoned toward the blaze.

"Yes – George Conway," she explained smilingly. "He owns this house, you see."

Dorothy's fingers pressed the wall switch and the electric lights went out.

"Well, you *are* a fast worker –" was her comment. "Dash over to those windows and see that they're fastened. Then pile some of these chairs and tables in front of the French doors – anything will do, just so it's heavy. Hurry – and when you've finished, go into the hall and stay there."

Betty stared through the darkness. "But George says –"

"I don't care *what* George says! The hall is the safest place right now."

"Well, why can't you help me?" grumbled Betty. "Suppose those awful men come before I've –"

"They won't if you snap to it. I'm off to fasten the windows in the rest of the house."

This last was thrown over her shoulder as she tore across to the dining room. After making the rounds in there she went into the kitchen. Here she found a window open and the back door unlocked. It took her but a moment to remedy this, and she was passing back to the dining room when there came a terrific crash and reverberation from the floor above, followed by screams and curses from outside.

She went out into the hall and another report from above shook the windows in their frames.

Betty, wild-eyed with fright, rushed into the bright arc of Dorothy's flash light.

"What on earth is it?" she cried in very evident alarm.

"Shotgun," said Dorothy tersely. "If those yells meant anything, I guess we can take it that somebody's been hit."

Then she noticed that Betty's left hand held an open compact, while in her right she clutched a small rouge puff. Her ash-gold hair which she wore long had become unknotted and hung halfway down her back. Her petite figure drooped with weariness.

"Gracious, Betty! How in the wide world did you ever get rouge on the end of your nose? You're a sight!"

"Well, you turned out the light –" Miss Mayo's tone was indignant, as she rubbed the end of her nose with a damp handkerchief. "I think I'll run upstairs and spruce up a bit."

Dorothy looked at her and laughed.

"Come on up with me," suggested Betty. "You don't look so hot yourself."

"No, you run along and pander to your vanity, my child. When you've finished, why don't you go into the kitchen and make us a batch of fudge – that would be just the thing!"

"Why so sarcastic?" Betty raised her delicate eyebrows.

"Well – what do you think we've run into – a college houseparty or something?"

"Oh, I think you're mean," Betty pouted.

"But you do choose the queerest times to spiff up!"

"Do you think those men will try to get in again!" Betty's blue eyes widened.

"If I didn't know that your head was a fluffball – But what's the use. Run along now. It sounds as if George were coming down. Hurry up – you might meet him on the stairs!"

"Cat!" said Betty and flew.

Dorothy went to the door and listened. If the two men were still outside, they gave no sign of their presence. Nothing came to her ears through the panels but the howl of the storm.

Then she heard footsteps running down the stairs from the second story and switched her flashlight on George. He carried a double barreled shotgun in the hollow of his arm.

"Howdy!" he greeted her enthusiastically. "You know, I can never thank you girls enough for all you've done. Gosh! You're a couple of heroes, all right – I mean heroines. When I saw Betty – I mean, Miss Mayo," he amended quickly with an embarrassed grin, "come sprinting into the library and begin to cut me loose, why I just couldn't believe my eyes!"

"Some wonderworker, isn't she?" Dorothy contrived to look awestruck, but there was no malice in her amused tone.

"You said it – she's a whizbang! And she told me you two came in an airplane. I've never met a girl aviator before. I guess she's a second Dorothy Dixon – you must have read what the newspapers said about that girl!" He shook his head admiringly. "Betty sure has nerve!"

"She has, indeed!" Dorothy kept her face straight with an effort. "But tell me – what did you do to that crew outside?"

"Plugged 'em – clean. Got a bead on them through a front window."

"What? You – killed them? Buckshot, at that distance?"

George chuckled. "Not buckshot – rock salt. Use it for crows, you know. It stings like the dickens."

"I'll bet it does!" Dorothy's laugh was full-throated and hearty.

"What's become of them?" she asked when she could speak.

"They beat it around the house to the garage. Do you know what happened to their car?"

"Yes. It ran away – down the lots to the bottom of the valley. And between you and me and the hatrack, I don't think it will ever run any more."

"Gee whiz!" chuckled George. "Who'd ever think a little thing like Betty would have the pluck to pull a stunt like that!"

"Who would?" said Dorothy and joined in the laugh.

"Well, as long as their car is out of the running, they'll probably try to steal my flivver." George tapped his gun significantly, "But I'll put a crimp in that. They've got to pass the dining room windows to get out of here."

“You needn’t bother – the Ford won’t move.”

“Sure it will.” George stopped short in the doorway and turned toward her. “That car of mine runs like a watch.”

“But not without gas,” explained Dorothy. “I drained the tank into a couple of tins.”

“You did?”

“Sure thing. Parked the tins in your orchard. They’ll never find ’em.”

“Say!” exclaimed George. “You must be almost as good as Betty that is, I mean – ”

“Who’s taking my name in vain?” Miss Mayo was tripping blithely downstairs. “You two seem to be finding a lot to talk about.”

George stared at her. “Say, you certainly look swell when you’re dolled up.”

“Well, it’s the best I can do now,” deprecated Betty. “I borrowed a pair of your slippers though – woolly ones. That is, I s’pose they’re yours?”

“Glad to have you wear ’em.” George’s eyes were still glued to Betty’s pretty face when Dorothy broke in.

“Look here, we’ll have to get down to business. George – listen to me. Betty won’t melt, you know – ”

“Oh, I think you’re terrible – ” interrupted Betty.

Her friend paid no attention, but kept on talking to George. “Do you really think they’ve gone?”

He nodded. “I’m pretty sure they have – that is, for the present. You can’t do a whole lot when your hide is full of salt. I’ll bet they’re kiting down the road right now. Maybe they’ll stop in at the Robinson’s or somewhere and get a lift to Stamford or Ridgefield or wherever they came from. They may have some pals about here, of course. I sort of gathered that they weren’t working on their own – that there was somebody in back of them.”

“Well, at least we can count on a breather. Let’s go in the library and turn on the light. I’m tired of standing about in this hall and I want to dry out by the fire.”

In the library, George pushed a couple of easy chairs before the comforting blaze. Dorothy cast aside her slicker and helmet and dropped into one of them. She kicked off her sodden shoes and stretching her legs toward the warmth, drew forth a comb and proceeded to make herself neat. George perched on the arm of Betty’s chair, and the two stared at the flames without speaking.

At last Dorothy put her comb away, turned to George and broke the silence.

“It’s none of my particular business, of course, but would you mind telling me the reason for all this rough house? Why did those men attack you and tie you up – what were they doing around here?”

George shook his head slowly. “Hanged if I know,” he said.

“You don’t know? But they seemed to be asking you questions – from what I could see through the window, it looked that way.”

“That’s right. But – but – well, you two girls are real sportsmen. You’ve pulled me out of an awful mess. Heaven knows I appreciate what you’ve done, but I just can’t have you running any further risk on my account, Miss – ”

“Dixon,” supplied Betty. “I forgot you hadn’t been introduced.”

George leaned forward. “Do you come from New Canaan?” he shot out.

“Of course, we live there,” said Betty. “And I want you to know that Dorothy is my best friend. We’re seniors at the New Canaan High – if that interests you.”

“So *you’re* Dorothy Dixon, the flyer!” he exploded. “Suffering monkeys! I didn’t know I was entertaining a celebrity. Why, you’re the girl I was talking about – who – ”

“Here, here – don’t make me blush,” laughed Dorothy.

“But don’t you see? Your being Dorothy Dixon makes all the difference in the world.”

Dorothy’s eyebrows drew together in a puzzled frown.

“I don’t get you,” she said. “I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Why, if what the newspapers say is true, you simply eat up this gangster stuff – a whiz at solving all kinds of mysteries.”

“Nice lady-like reputation, what?” she mocked.

“Well, that’s all right with me. Because now – I have no hesitancy in telling you all I know about this queer business. You’ll probably know just what to do – and you’ll be a wonderful help.”

“How about me?” Betty was a direct little person and seemed at no pains to disguise her feelings. “I don’t think you’re a bit polite, George!”

“Oh, I feel differently about you – ” stammered that young man, then stopped short and looked painfully embarrassed.

Dorothy thought it time she took matters into her own hands.

“Don’t be silly, Betty, George knows how clever you are!” She flashed a mischievous glance at her friend, then went on in a serious tone. “And of course we’re keen to hear all about it, George, and we’ll do anything we can to help you. But your story will keep a while longer. I hope you don’t mind my mentioning such a prosaic thing – but do you happen to have anything to eat in the house?”

“Oh, my gosh! Of course I have – ” he threw a glance at the clock and jumped to his feet. “It’s nearly eight o’clock. You girls must be starved! Sit right here and I’ll bring supper in a jiffy. I was just about to eat mine when those two thugs dropped in and put an end to it for the time being.”

“I’ll help you,” offered Betty, hopping out of her chair.

“That’s a good plan,” decreed Dorothy. “While you’re starting things in the kitchen, I’d like to use the phone, if I may.”

“There it is, on that table in the corner,” said George. “Hop to it. I’ll drive you home later in the flivver.”

“Thanks, but I’ve got to have gas for my plane. We’ll talk it over at supper, shall we?”

She took up the telephone and the others hurried from the room.

Presently she joined them in the kitchen.

“I called up your mother, Betty, and told her you were spending the night with me,” she announced. “Dad is away, so I got hold of Bill Bolton and he’ll be over here in about twenty minutes.”

“Oh, fine – ” began Betty and stopped short as an electric bell on the wall buzzed sharply.

For a moment they stared at it in startled silence. Then George spoke. “Somebody’s ringing the door bell,” he said slowly.

Chapter IV

VISITORS

“You girls stay in here – I’ll go,” continued George, his hand on the swinging door to the dining room.

“No, you shan’t!” Betty sprang before him, blocking his way.

“Don’t make such a fuss,” said Dorothy. “Somebody’s got to go. Come here!”

Her long arm shot out and Betty was held in a light embrace that seemed as unbending as tempered steel.

“Stop wriggling,” she commanded. “This is George’s job. Did you leave your gun in the library, George?”

“Yes. I’ll pick it up on the way.”

“Better not do that. Maybe it’s one of your neighbors.”

“Haven’t any. None of the people around here come to see me.”

The bell buzzed loudly again, and continued to do so. Someone was keeping a finger pressed on the button beside the front door.

“I have a plan,” Dorothy announced suddenly. “Betty, you stay here, and – ”

“And have them break in the back door while you two are in the front hall? No thanks – I’m coming with you, that’s all.”

Dorothy did not stop to argue. She hurried into the dining room and across the hall to the library, followed by the others.

“Look here,” she whispered, picking up the shotgun. “Slip on your jacket, George. That shirt will show anyone you’ve been in a fight. Betty and I will go into the front sitting room. It’s dark in there. Turn on the hall light and open the door as though everything were all right, and you expected a friend. If it is someone you know, they won’t see us in the sitting room. If it isn’t – and they try to start something, jump back so you’re out of line from the door to that room . . . and I’ll fill ’em full of salt!”

“Swell idea! A regular flank attack!” enthused the young man, struggling into his coat. “All set?”

He switched on the hall light. The girls ran into the sitting room. Dorothy stood in the dark with the shotgun pointed toward the hall and saw him turn the key and pull open the door.

“Good evening, George,” whined a high-pitched voice. “Mind if I come in for a minute or two?”

“Walk in, Mr. Lewis. Bad night, isn’t it?”

George’s face showed surprise but he swung the door wide and closed it with a bang as a tall figure, leaning heavily on a cane, shuffled into the lighted hallway. The man’s bent back, rounded shoulders and the rather long white hair that hung from beneath the wide brim of his soft black hat, all bespoke advanced age. Immensely tall, even with his stoop, the old man towered over George, who was all of six feet himself. Although the night was not cold, he was buttoned to the chin in a long fur coat. Dorothy caught sight of piercing black eyes beneath tufted white eyebrows. The long, cadaverous, clean shaven face was a network of fine wrinkles.

“What say?” He cupped a hand behind his ear.

“I said it was a bad night to be out in,” shouted George. “What can I do for you?”

“Yes, that’s it, my lad – there’s something I – Yes, it’s a bad night – bad storm. Listen, George!”

“Yes, sir.”

“What say?”

“I’m listening, Mr. Lewis.”

“Well, listen then.”

The sharp eyes peered up and down the hall. Dorothy moved further back into the dark room.

“Your father had a lot of books, George – a very fine library.”

“Yes, he had.”

“What say?”

“I said he had.”

The old man shook his head. His high voice became querulous.

“I know he’s dead,” he snorted. “I’m talking about his books.”

“They are not for sale,” said George.

“Bless you – I don’t want to buy ’em. But there’s one I want to borrow.”

“Which one is that?”

“What say?”

George’s reply *sotto voce* was not polite. He was getting impatient.

“I want to borrow a book called Aircraft Power Plants; it’s by a man named Jones.”

Dorothy pricked up her ears.

“All right,” shouted George. “I’ll try to find it.”

“What say? Listen, George! Speak distinctly, if you can. I’m not deaf – just a little hard of hearing. Don’t mumble – you talk as though your mouth was full of hot potato. That’s a bad eye you’ve got – been in a fight?”

George ignored this last. “Listen – ” he said, then stopped, controlling a desire to giggle as he realized his plagiarism. “Come into the library, Mr. Lewis. I’ll try to find the book for you.” He took the old man by the arm and led him down the hall.

Betty crept over to Dorothy.

“Do you know who he is?” she asked in a low tone.

“Mr. Lewis, I gathered,” said Dorothy, straining her ears to catch the muffled sounds coming from the library. “*He* talked loud enough, – quite an old gentleman, isn’t he?”

“Old skinflint, you mean.”

“You’ve seen him before?”

“Certainly. I’ve seen him at our house. Daddy knows him – says he’s made a fortune, foreclosing mortgages and loaning money at high rates of interest. He’s terribly rich, though you’d never know it by his looks.”

“That’s interesting – wonder what he wants with George?”

“Came to borrow a book – that’s plain enough.”

“Almost too plain, if you want my opinion,” Dorothy said thoughtfully. “There’s no use guessing at this stage of the game.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing much. Can you hear what they’re saying in the next room?”

“They seem to be having an argument – but it’s not polite to listen – ”

“Polite, your grandmother! I’d listen if I could – but all I get is a mumble-jumble. I vote we go back to the kitchen. I want my supper. I’ll feel better when I’ve eaten. This house gives me the jim-jams for some reason.”

“Me, too,” Betty admitted ungrammatically. “Fancy being alarmed at the sound of a doorbell!”

“My word – and likewise cheerio!” Dorothy turned the flash on her friend. “How do you get that way, Betty? Been reading the British poets or something?”

Betty blinked in the glare. “Turn it off. No, I haven’t. Don’t you remember the movies last night? The English Duke in that picture – ” She broke off suddenly and caught at Dorothy’s arm. “Listen – Dot, listen!” she whispered.

From the rear of the house came a muffled pounding.

Dorothy shook her off. “I’ll dot you a couple, if you take liberties with my name,” she snapped. “And for goodness’ sake, don’t hold on to me that way, and stop that listen stuff! This isn’t an earthquake – somebody’s at the back door, and I’m going to see who it is!”

“But suppose those men have come back?”

“They’re too well salted down,” Dorothy flung back at her. “I *fancy* you’d better stay in here – if you’re *alarmed!*”

She crossed the hall to the dining room again and hurried through the kitchen with Betty close on her trail. That young person apparently preferred to chance it rather than be left alone.

Dorothy went at once to the back door.

“Who’s there?” she called, as the knocking broke out again.

“It’s Bill Bolton,” returned a muffled voice. “Is that you, Dorothy?”

She drew back the bolt and flung the door open.

“Hello, Bill!” she hailed. “You’re just in time for supper.”

A tall, broadshouldered young fellow wearing golf trousers and an old blue sweater which sported a Navy “N” came into the room. He was bareheaded and his thick, close-cropped thatch of hair was brown. When he smiled, Bill Bolton was handsome. A famous ace and traveller at seventeen, this friend of Dorothy’s had not been spoiled by notoriety. His keen gray eyes twinkled goodnaturedly as he spoke to Dorothy.

“Well, I should say you look pretty much at home,” he grinned. “But then you have a faculty of landing on your feet. And how’s Betty tonight? Thought I’d find you girls in a tight fix and here you are – getting up a banquet. Terry Walters was over at my house when you rang up, so he came with me. He’s outside, playing second line defense. All sereno here, I take it?”

“Quiet enough now,” Dorothy admitted, “though it was a bit hectic, to say the least, a while back. Call Terry in, will you? I’m going to do some scrambled eggs and bacon now.”

She reached for a bowl and began to crack eggs and break them into it. Bill stuck his head out the door and whistled.

A moment later, a heavy set, round faced lad of sixteen made his appearance in the doorway. Under his arm he carried a repeating rifle.

“H’lo, everybody,” he breezed, resting his rifle against the wall. “This is some surprise, – Bill and I were all set to play the heavy heroes and we find you making fudge!”

“Not fudge,” corrected Betty. “Honest-to-goodness food! Dorothy and I haven’t had a single thing to eat since lunch, except a lettuce sandwich and some cake at Helen Ritchie’s tea over at Peekskill this afternoon. We’re getting supper now.”

“*We?*” Dorothy’s tone was richly sarcastic. “Then, old dear, suppose you do some of the getting. I think I heard the front door shut just now, so that means that old Mr. Lewis has shoved off. You can go into the dining room and set the table. – Bill, you’re a good cook – how about starting the coffee? Terry, be a sport and cut some bread – you might toast it while you’re about it!”

“Whew! – some efficiency expert!” Terry winked at Bill. “Where do they keep the bread box in this house, anyway?”

“Barks her orders like a C.P.O. doesn’t she?” laughed Bill, opening the coffee tin. Then he drew forth a wax-paper wrapped loaf from an enameled container, held it up: “Here’s your bread, Terry – catch!”

The door from the dining room swung open and George came in.

“Well, George!” Dorothy turned to the others. “Here is our host,” she explained and introduced him all round.

“It’s certainly white of you fellows to hustle over here,” he said as he shook hands. “I appreciate it.”

“Oh, don’t mention it,” grinned Bill. “We seem to be rather late for the excitement.”

“Well, if it hadn’t been for Betty and Dorothy – ” began George.

“You’d have pulled yourself out all right,” interrupted the latter young lady. “Look here, supper’s nearly ready, and since I’ve set everybody else to work, suppose I give you a job, too? Take Betty into the dining room and show her how to set the table, and you’ll be a fine help.”

“Say, it’s great, the way you’ve pitched in here – did you have a hard time finding things?”

“No, not at all. Except – ” here Dorothy looked stern, “I don’t approve of your housekeeping methods – I had to scour the frying pan twice, sir, do you realize that?”

George hung his head. “Gee, I guess I’m pretty careless, but – ”

The cook giggled: “Mercy, you look downcast. I was only kidding, George. I think you’re a fine housekeeper, honestly, I do. Now you get a wiggle on with the table, please. These eggs are nearly finished. They’ll be ruined if we have to wait.”

When the two had disappeared, Dorothy dished the scrambled eggs into a warm plate and turned to Bill and Terry.

“He thinks Betty ran this job,” she informed them. “They’ve got a crush on each other, I guess. So don’t put him wise, will you?”

“Mum’s the word,” smiled Bill, while Terry nodded. “Far be it from me to mess up love’s young dream.”

“Don’t be silly,” retorted Dorothy. “But you know, Betty’s a darling. I had to be terribly cross with her all the time, just to keep her bucked up. But she’s my best friend and I’m crazy about her.”

“She is nervous and high-strung, I know,” supplemented Terry. “I’ll bet you had a sweet time with her.”

“Not so bad. Have you boys had supper?”

“Oh, yes, some time ago,” answered Bill.

“That’s good. I didn’t want to use up all George’s food. I’ll let you have some coffee, though – that is, if you’re good and don’t kid those two in the other room.”

“Cross-my-heart-hope-to-die-if-I-do.” Bill’s face was solemn.

“Likewise me,” declaimed Terry. “I must have my coffee.”

“Table’s set,” announced Betty, popping in to the kitchen, closely followed by George.

“Eggs are finished and the bacon’s fried,” returned Dorothy. “How about the coffee, Bill?”

“Perfect – though I sez so.”

“*And* the toast!” Terry was busy buttering the last slice. “You know, lovers used to write sonnets on their lady’s eyebrows – now, if they’d seen this toast!”

Dorothy shook her head at him. “That will be about all from you. Come along, all of you – everything smells so good, and I’m simply ravenous.”

It was a merry party that gathered about the old mahogany dining table. Bill began by teasing Dorothy about her lack of foresight that sent her up on a flight without enough gas. She returned his banter with interest: the others joined in and for a time everybody was wisecracking back and forth.

George was the first to bring the conversation back to current events.

“I don’t know Mr. Lewis very well,” he replied in answer to a question of Betty’s. “He was a friend of my father’s – at least father had business dealings with him. I thought I’d never get rid of the old boy tonight.”

“Did you find the book he wanted?” asked Dorothy. “Jones’ Aircraft Power Plants, wasn’t it?”

“Some book, too!” affirmed Bill. “Have you read it, Conway?”

“Didn’t know I owned it. The book – in fact, the whole library, was my father’s. About all he saved from the wreck. When I couldn’t find the book for old Lewis, what do you think he said?”

“Listen!” Dorothy’s voice mimicked perfectly the old gentleman’s querulous tones. Everyone burst into laughter.

“Yes, he said that,” George told her, “and a whole lot more.”

“I hate riddles,” cried Betty. “Do tell us – ”

“Why, he wanted to buy the entire library – and when I turned him down, he made me an offer on the house providing entire contents went with it!”

Betty laughed. “A good low price, I’ll bet. Mr. Lewis is a terrible old skinflint.”

“I thought so, too, until he made me this offer.”

“Do you mind saying how much?” Dorothy never hesitated to come to the point.

“Twenty-five thousand dollars!”

“Seems like a lot of money to me!” was Bill’s comment.

“A lot of money! I should say so.” George cried excitedly. “Why, this place isn’t worth more than eight – possibly ten thousand dollars at the outside.”

“I smell a rat,” said Terry, “or to put it more politely, the old boy’s offer has something doggoned stinking crooked mixed up in it.”

“To add to our cultured brother’s oratory,” said Bill, “There certainly seems to be something pretty darned putrid in the kingdom of Denmark!”

“A whole lot nearer home, if you ask me,” broke in Dorothy. – “That old man – ”

“Just a moment,” begged Bill. “Your deductions, Miss Dixon, are always noteworthy. In fact, at times, the press of our glorious country has frequently referred to you as Miss Sherlock Holmes, but – ”

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