

Book Title: The Girl Scouts at Rocky Ledge
Nora's Real Vacation

Author: Lilian Garis

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THE PICTURESQUE FIGURE STOOD IN THE CENTER.

THE GIRL SCOUTS AT ROCKY LEDGE

OR

Nora's Real Vacation

By LILIAN GARIS

Author of

“The Girl Scout Pioneers,” “The Girl Scouts
at Bellaire,” “The Girl Scouts at Sea Crest,”
“The Girl Scouts at Camp Comalong,” etc.

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By LILIAN GARIS

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THE GIRL SCOUTS AT CAMP COMALONG
Or, Peg of Tamarack Hills

THE GIRL SCOUTS AT ROCKY LEDGE
Or, Nora's Real Vacation
Other volumes in preparation

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The Girl Scouts at Rocky Ledge

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CONTENTS

- I. Jim or Jerry: Ted or Elizabeth
- II. The Attic
- III. A Broken Dream
- IV. Transplanted
- V. The Woods at Rocky Ledge
- VI. A Prince in Hiding
- VII. Cap to the Rescue
- VIII. The Story Alma Did Not Tell
- IX. A Misadventure
- X. A Novel Initiation
- XI. Too Much Teasing
- XII. A Diversion Nobly Earned
- XIII. Crawling in the Shadows
- XIV. Circumstantial Evidence
- XV. Waif of the Wildwoods
- XVI. Lady Bountiful Junior
- XVII. A Picnic and Otherwise
- XVIII. The Little Lord's Confession

XIX. A Deserted Tryst
XX. The Worst Fright of All
XXI. Strange Disclosures
XXII. The Danger Squad in Action
XXIII. Raiding the Attic
XXIV. Fulfillment
THE GIRL SCOUTS AT ROCKY LEDGE

CHAPTER I—JIM OR JERRY: TED OR ELIZABETH

“Do you mind if I call you Jim?”

“Why no—that is——”

“And may I call the lady Aunt Elizabeth?”

“Elizabeth?”

“If you don’t mind; I’d love to.”

“But the fact is——”

“You see, I have always wanted a man named Jim to protect me, and now that I’ve got you I’d love to have you as Jim. Then, I have perfectly loved the Aunt Elizabeths. They’re always so lacy and cameo like.” She stood off and critically inspected the smiling woman in the most modern of costumes.

“You’re really too young,” continued the girl, “but you’ll grow old soon I hope, don’t you think so?”

“I’m afraid I shall——”

“Then that’s that. And I’m glad we are settling things so quickly. Could I see my attic room now, Aunt Elizabeth?”

“Attic room?”

“Isn’t it?”

“Not exactly. We were giving you the yellow room; it’s so cheerful and pretty.”

“Well, of course, I don’t want to be too particular, and it’s lovely of you, dear Aunt Elizabeth, but all girls taken in are put in attic rooms, aren’t they?”

“Taken in?”

“Yes, sort of adopted you know. The attic always gives the shadowy ghost business.” There was just a hint of disappointment in the child’s manner now.

“We’ve got a first rate attic room,” suggested the man who was tilting up and down in a heel and toe exercise. “And what do you say, Ted, I mean Elizabeth,” he chuckled, “if we give——”

“Jerry, don’t talk nonsense,” interrupted the young woman not unkindly but with some decision. “I am sure she would rather have the pretty——”

“But, please, could I see the attic room?” came rather timidly the very thread of a voice from the little girl.

“It’s ghostly.” This from Jerry.

“That would be just perfect. Does the roof slant so it gives you the nightmare on your chest, you know? And does the moon sort of make faces in the windows?” Interest was overcoming timidity.

“That may be the trouble,” replied the man, with a chuckle. “But I’ll tell you, little girl. Suppose we take the yellow room until you have a chance to inspect thoroughly.

You see your—er—Aunt Elizabeth has had it all planned and fixed up——”

“Oh yes. Do excuse me for being impolite. You see, I’ve been thinking about it so long. The school was lovely, and the teachers all very kind, but it was sort of a regular kindness, you know, and did not have any of my dreams coming true in it. Do you dream an awful lot here?”

“Day dreams or night dreams?” asked the man.

“Oh, wake-dreams, of course. The other kind don’t mean anything. Just stickers in your brain sort of pricking, you know. But the wake-dreams can come true, if you plague them long enough. I guess they get tired fighting you off and they have to give in and happen. What do you want to call me?” This was a sudden digression and marked with a complete flopping down of the talkative child.

“Your name is Nora, isn’t it?” replied the young woman who seemed rather glad to sit down herself. They were on the big square porch and rockers were plentiful.

“Yes, my name is Nora, and it’s pretty good, but hard to rhyme easily. Then I would rather have you call me the name you have always called your dream child.”

“Mine was Bob,” blurted the man, “but Bob wouldn’t exactly suit you.”

“Oh, yes it would,” she jumped up again and left the rocker swaying wildly. “Bob would be splendid for me. Would it suit you, Aunt Elizabeth? What was your pet name?”

“I think Nora too pretty to drop. Besides, don’t you really think a name is a part of one’s self and ought to be loved and respected?”

“That’s just it. I want to—that is, if you don’t mind, I want to be the self I planned, not this one I didn’t have anything to say about. It’s just like religion. When we grow up big as I am, we ought to be allowed to choose.” Her manner was even more babyish than her appearance.

“Big as I am!” Jerry repeated this to a rosebush.

As a matter of fact she was not much bigger than a child of eight years might be, but she claimed a few more birthdays and she looked about as substantial as a wind flower. Her eyes were blue, her hair light and fluffy, and she wore such a tiny white slip of a dress, socks and sandals and a white lace hat! Grown up? She looked just like an old-fashioned baby.

“Then, shall I be Bobbs?” asked Nora a moment later, with hope in her voice.

“Ye-e-s, and if—the auntie wants to soften it she can call you Babette,” ventured Jerry. “And now, if the christenings are over, suppose we go inside and freshen up. Come along Bob, you are going to be my helper now, aren’t you?” Jerry’s eyes twinkled with his voice. He was, plainly, enjoying himself.

“I’d love to help—especially with outdoor work,” replied the girl. “And you measure land, don’t you?” she asked.

“Yes, that’s about it. In other words I’m a surveyor,” explained Jerry.

“And Aunt Elizabeth helps. Isn’t that lovely? We won’t, any of us, have old pesky house work to think about. I haven’t ever dreamed a dream, not a single one, about housekeeping. Some one always does that for me, or I just don’t think about it at all and it’s all done beautifully,” boasted Nora. “I love your place. It’s so romantic,” she expanded her arms and fluffy little skirt to fill the big chair. “I feel, somehow, everything is going to come true now.” Relief toned this statement while she looked wistfully out of blue eyes, and any one might have easily guessed that something very dear was included in that word “everything.”

The young woman, who was threatened with being made over into an old Aunt Elizabeth with laces and cameos to boot, gazed intently at the small personality. She realized it was a personality, a little dreamer, a big romancer, and a very weird sample of the modern girl, self-trained.

He who was to become “Jim” on the spot, seemed tickled to death over it all, and kept snapping his brown eyes, first at the newly named Bobbs and then his life’s partner, until glints of fun-sparks charged the very air.

“It might be a good idea to put on tags for a day or two,” he suggested playfully. “I would hate to spoil the program by calling Elizabeth here just Ted.”

“Oh, do you think it will be hard? I didn’t mean to make trouble, and, if you say so, I’ll just put the dream back again on its peg and let it stay there. It really doesn’t have to come true right now. There are so many new things to talk about,” temporized Nora, considerately.

“I think it would be lots better to try things out for a little while under our own names,” suggested the young woman, eagerly. “And I have always loved the name Nora, so you see, *my* dream will be coming true, at any rate,” she smiled.

“Goody—goody! It’s all right, then. I’ll be Nora, and you’ll be Ted, that’s pretty: what does it mean?”

“Theodora,” answered the man promptly.

“Then it is prettier than the old-fashioned Elizabeth,” agreed the child. “Really, things are different when you think about them than what they are when—you run right into them, aren’t they?”

“Sure thing, especially water wagons and book agents,” joked Jerry.

“And Jerry is lovely, too, just as nice as Jim. I knew a lovely old tramp dog named Jerry.” Again the wistful blue eyes dreamed.

“That’s real nice,” added the owner of the popular name. “Was he—gentle?”

“As a lamb. I used to ride on his back!”

“And was he—er—handsome?”

“He had the loveliest ears, all little pleaty wrinkles, and such big, floppy feet——”

“All right, I’ll be content to be his namesake, only don’t expect me to howl when the phonograph plays. I can’t undertake to do that,” demurred the affable Jerry.

They all laughed a little at this protest, for Jerry Manton seemed good natured enough to “howl” if occasion demanded it. Even the moon might have inspired him “doggerly” so to speak.

Mrs. Manton picked up the little hand satchel that Nora kept at her side when the other baggage was being disposed of, and gently urged the little visitor into the Nest, there to settle that other question of attic or guest room.

The short bright curls bobbed up and down incredulously, as their surprised owner looked in on the yellow room, a moment later.

“Golden! Perfectly golden!” exclaimed the child. “But, of course, one could never get the nightmare in this lovely bird cage.” She stopped, apparently reasoning out bird cages, nightmares and ghostly attics. “And I have simply got to have a strange experience,” she scratched her heels together anxiously. “I just couldn’t give that up,” she decided.

“But you do think this is a pretty room?” asked the hostess, her own soft eyes

embracing affectionately the golden space before them.

“Glorious!” declared Nora rapturously. “And I’m afraid it has been rather silly to get set on certain things without really knowing about them. Dreams are uncertain, after all.”

Jerry was just coming up the rustic stairs.

“But the attic is a real spook parlor,” he chimed in, “and I’ve always loved it myself. I have a corner for my trash, and the sleeping quarters aren’t bad. You see this place was built with government money, and that’s always—well, real money,” he finished, significantly.

“But Jerry,” again came the opposition from Mrs. Manton, “you know we have scarcely had time to look that attic over since we came here. It seems perfectly absurd to let Nora go up there,” she paused. “I know it’s clean, for Vita takes a pride in fixing attics, but why——”

“Now Ted,” the voice was as soft as a boy’s, “why not let our little girl have her way?”

“I really am not objecting,” said the wife with a smile, “I’m just qualifying.”

“But who dares qualify day dreams?” asked the man, with a comical twist in his voice.

Nora stood on the threshold, uncertainly. “I guess maybe,” she pondered, “we think a lot about dreams when we haven’t real things to think about, like playthings, for real,” she finished.

“That’s exactly it, dear,” said Mrs. Manton, “and day dreams are not always healthy, either.”

“All the same,” insisted Jerry, “I’m strong for that attic. It smells just like the woods after my men have made a good, clean cutting. Come along, girlie, and let me show it to you.”

CHAPTER II—THE ATTIC

“How’s this?” asked the man.

“Oh, wonderful! Those beams, they slant just like the story books say,” declared Nora, ecstatically.

“Good enough to give you the right sort of nightmare, eh? Well, that’s nice. Ted is always after the cobwebs, but I don’t let her spoil them if I’m around. You see, cobwebs have a lot to do in my business.”

“Cobwebs?” Nora poked her little head in between two chummy beams. “What do cobwebs do in surveying?”

“They make a cross line on my object glass. I’ll show you when I get around to it,” replied Jerry. “Now see here, here’s the secret chest,” he was opening a big wooden box, “and by a miracle,” he continued, “it does hold clothes, duds, et-cet-tee-ra.”

“The people who had this place gave a big party, I believe,” explained Mrs. Ted, “and they left a lot of their costumes here. We have never had any chance to make use of them,” she finished, slapping her hands on the work apron that partly covered her own mannish costume. Apparently she disdained the frivolous things.

“But just look!” Nora was almost in the big cedar chest; in fact, nothing more than a bump of white, ending in two small brown spots that waggled like sandaled feet, was visible. Presently the curly head emerged in a cloud of brilliant, spangly stuff, very

evidently the costumes. "Aren't these just wonderful!"

"Oh yes," agreed Jerry, "they're nice and shiny. But just look at this spook cabinet. Do you know what a spook cabinet is, Nora?"

"No, what?" She dropped the costumes back into the big chest instantly.

"They're just a box of tricks. But this is the box empty. See here," Jerry opened, with some difficulty, the long narrow closet that was built in a corner of the attic room. "I have always wondered why this had a ventilator at the top——" he began.

"Jerry!" called his wife rather sharply. "Please don't do all the exploring in one day. Nora must change her things and come down stairs. She may want something to eat after her journey." Mrs. Ted's tone of voice was plainly against that cabinet.

"All right, Ted, I'll subside," replied the jolly man. "The fact is——" he whispered to Nora, "our Ted hates ghosts; and every time I talk about this here upright coffin, she objects," and he gave one of his boyish twisted yelps, as if he wanted to yell but didn't dare so gurgled instead, and it was very plain he said this out of pure mischief; nevertheless, it did cause the little girl to clench her small fists and start suddenly.

"Come right down stairs," insisted the hostess imperatively. "I'm very sure, Nora dear, you will find something more interesting in Vita's cake box than you could dig out of that dusty hole."

"Vita! What a queer name!" exclaimed Nora, following Mrs. Manton out from the interesting attic.

"Her whole name is more than that. It's Vittoria, but since she does our cooking and is both vital and vitaminous, we cut it down to an easy word implying both," explained Ted. "You see, Nora, we are keen on short cuts."

The little girl was thinking something like that. In fact, she was so fascinated with the realities of her visit she had almost lost the last shred of faith in her picturesque dreams. "If I had ever named a cook," she was deciding, "I should surely have given her Susan or Betsy or maybe Jennie. But Vita means more and makes you think of good victuals."

The open stairs were built winding from the big field stone hearth in the first room, clear up to the attic chamber, and, as they descended, Nora looked about the quaint, rustic place in rapturous admiration. Indeed, no dream of her great life series had ever included this. Gone with the Jim-Aunt Elizabeth idea was going the rag-rug four-poster plan, that had seemed almost indelibly outlined on her whimsical picture plate. She sighed a little, as she felt she should, on the "grave of her dreams;" but there was Jerry calling from the open door:

"Here you are, Nora! Come and meet Cap."

"Cap! A boy!" she asked excitedly.

"Not the regular kind, but he's some boy just the same." Jerry was clapping his hands like a boy himself, just as a big shaggy dog bounded down the path and up the few steps to the square porch.

"Oh, what a beauty! I have always loved a big dog!" exclaimed Nora. "What's his name?"

"Captain," replied the proud master. "Here Cap, come shake hands with Nora."

The dog cocked one ear up inquisitively, looked over the small girl with majestic indifference, walked around her twice and finally flung his bushy tail out with a swish that fanned Nora's cheek as she bent over to make friends.

“Isn’t he lovely! Just like the picture in my first story book; the big dog that dragged the lost man out of the snow drifts,” said Nora, almost breathless with delight.

“He is exactly that sort,” explained Jerry. “He came from the other side and was a Captain in the big war.”

“Oh,” sighed Nora wistfully. “He must know an awful lot.”

“He surely does, eh, old boy?” and the big shaggy head was patted affectionately.

Meanwhile Vita, the Italian woman who held the office of housekeeper, was depositing a mess of freshly-picked dandelions in a pan on the kitchen table. She smiled pleasantly at the little stranger, and at a single glance Nora knew she and Vita were sure to be friends.

“Now, you know us all,” announced the hostess. “Vita and Captain complete the circle.”

“Not counting the crow, and the rabbits and the cat and the——”

“The animal kingdom is not included,” Ted interrupted her husband. “When we get to checking up the animals please, after Captain count in Cyclone.”

“Cyclone! A horse?” asked Nora.

“Yes, the horse,” answered Jerry. “He can climb trees, crawl through gullies and swim the river like a bear, according to Ted.”

“Well, hardly all of that,” qualified the smiling owner of the saddle horse Cyclone. “But he is a wonderful horse, Nora. I am sure you will want to ride him.”

“Oh, I’d be dreadfully afraid,” demurred the girl. “But perhaps——”

“You aren’t going to be afraid of anything around here, Bobbie,” Jerry assured the small girl, who looked smaller by contrast to the big man and the robust, athletic young woman; both perfect models of “America’s best.”

Considering the very short time little Nora had been at the Nest, it appeared much, in the way of acquaintance, had been accomplished.

“If you will just run off, Jerry-boy, and manage to find something to keep you busy for a half hour or so,” begged his wife finally, “perhaps Nora and I will be able to settle down to the comforts of home.”

“Am I not included?” he asked teasingly.

“Sometimes, but just now we need space,” replied she, who was affectionately styled Teddy.

“That being the case——. Come along Cap,” and the next moment a very happy, boyish man and a wildly happy dog went scampering off through the “flap-jack” path in the clearance. The path was made of selected flat stones scattered at stepping intervals, and it was Jerry who insisted they reminded him of Vita’s best flap-jacks.

The coming of Nora to the lodge in the wilderness was the result of what seemed a necessity. The child was the daughter of Theodora Crane’s best friend Naomie Blair, an artist so highly temperamental that, after a series of nerve episodes, she finally seemed forced to go to Western mountains and leave little Nora at a select school. The school was select to the point of isolation, and the teachers had advised Theodora, who was in charge of Nora, that the child was so nervous, high strung and fanciful, that the doctors had ordered a complete change of surroundings.

These characteristics were already showing in Nora’s conduct; but with that understanding of childhood always a part of pure affection for it, Theodora was pleased, rather than worried, over the prospects ahead.

Nora herself seemed bewildered and fascinated. Her love of “dream things” was plainly a part of her nature, at the same time she was quickly learning that only happy realities can make happy dreams.

In the small satchel that Nora clung to was found no suitable change of anything like practical clothing, in fact her dress was so fussy, be-ribboned and be-frilled, that Teddy hesitated about offering any of it to the briars and brambles of the timberland.

“I pick out all my own dresses, you know,” the little girl explained. “Nannie wasn’t able to do any shopping so she had the catalogues sent to me by mail.”

“Nannie?”

“That’s mother, of course. But she is so little and delicate I could never think of calling her mother,” declared Nora. “She likes Nannie better.”

“You have quite a talent for names or re-names,” joked Teddy. “I am wondering how I should have liked the ‘Lizzie’ you chose for me.”

“Not Lizzie! Elizabeth,” in a shocked voice.

“Same lady, I believe. But let’s hold on to Ted until we get acquainted or things may go on end,” advised good-natured Mrs. Manners. “Besides, there’s our auto, that’s ‘Lizzie’ to Jerry.”

Nora did not ask why. She was in the yellow room, changing, and the blue roses in the filmy little dress she selected were not bluer than her own wondering eyes.

“I tell you what would be just the thing for you, dear,” said Teddy suddenly. “You must join the Girl Scouts!”

“Girl Scouts!”

“Yes, you know about them, don’t you?”

“I’ve read about them, but I really never could, Aunt Teddy. I couldn’t be one of those wild, uncultured girls.”

A delicious laugh escaped Teddy.

“Wild and uncultured!” she repeated. Then, seeing the pitifully blank look on Nora’s face she dropped the subject. “Here’s your closet,” she explained next, opening the door of a built-in wardrobe, “and you better slip these little pads on the ends of hangers when you put pretty things on them. You see, we have very few fancy things out here, and these hangers are cut from our birch trees. I had a visitor last year who was so afraid of snakes she spent all her time around the lodge, so she made these pine pads with fancy stocking ends. I have never needed to use them.”

The pads were little cushions of pine needles sewed in silk stocking ends, with a long open seam along the side. These slipped onto the hangers and were tied with tapes at the hook. Nora quickly adjusted one for her dotted swiss dress and another for her pink rose silk. These, strange to tell, she had carried in her hand bag.

“And here is your dresser,” Teddy further introduced. “See what lovely deep drawers.”

“Aren’t they? I’d love to put lavender and rosemary in the corners. Do you—like those perfumes?”

“Well, yes, as perfumes. But I’m so used to the odor of freshly cut trees I’m afraid my finer taste is disappearing,” said the other quietly.

Into the drawer Nora was placing such an outlay of finery as any young bride might have boasted of. Selecting from catalogues was only too evident in the lacy garments, with little ribbons, and tiny rose buds; pretty in themselves but absurd on the

undergarments of a growing child. Then, there was an ivory set, mirror, comb, brush, etc. As the surprised Teddy glimpsed the display over a khaki covered shoulder she had difficulty in choking back a laugh.

“Naomie would be as silly as that,” she pondered, silently, reflecting that the same sort of whims in dress and finery had been a real part of Naomie Blair’s young girlhood.

Nora was placing her pretty things on the big dresser, with skilled little fingers, and that the fancy, private, exclusive school had helped to make silly traits even more pronounced in little Nora, was too evident.

Wisely, however, Mrs. Ted said not a word in opposition. Things must move slowly, she realized, if the quaint little dreamer was not to be too rudely shocked out of her fancies.

It was all very exciting even to the placid, well balanced young woman. To have the daughter of her girlhood friend come into her very arms, like a little bird battered in the storm of life’s uncertainties, with tired wings falling against the bright window pane of love; then to see the dreams unfolded with the Jims, Elizabeths, ghosts and attic fancies, ready to reel off like an actual moving-picture—it was all very surprising, not to say astonishing, for the sensible, modern Mantons.

But could this same bright-eyed lady have looked into the summer ahead, and forseen the new fields of fancies that Nora was about to explore, she might have been still more amazed. Playing mother to a butterfly is not often a very satisfactory experience, but there was Nora, and if ever a child needed a mother this little “whimsy” did.

“To think of calling her mother Nannie,” reflected Mrs. Manton, “and if only I could have called such a child ‘daughter.’”

Jerry was back from his enforced trip to the lumberland, and his whistle trickled in the window on a flood of sunshine.

“Oh, let’s go down,” exclaimed Nora, brushing things hastily into the dresser drawer and neglecting to tie her sash in an even bow. “I’m so anxious to see your outdoors, I could easily believe there are fairies in these thick, tangly woods.”

“Our birds and little animal friends are just as interesting as fairies,” remarked Mrs. Ted, “but you must know them and they must know you.”

“How ever could one get acquainted with birds?” asked Nora, stopping a moment on her way out to answer Jerry’s whistle.

“We don’t know how, but we know we do,” replied Mrs. Ted, giving the flying window curtain a jerk to let the sun stream in. “Some day I must tell you about the poor little blue-jay we took in and nursed. He got so fond of us I could hardly get him to fly away.”

“I had a canary once, Nannie sent it for Christmas, but I had to let him go,” said Nora. “He was just breaking his heart in that tiny, little cage. I never wanted a bird again.”

“They are pathetic when caged,” agreed Mrs. Manton, “but when out in their own woods they seem to be the very happiest little creatures of all creation. Run along,” she said, as Nora waited politely. “That Jerry-boy is getting impatient.”

As the child fluttered off, her yellow ringlets dancing and her dainty little skirts swishing around the half tied ribbon sash, Mrs. Ted smiled and pondered:

“Another little blue-jay to love; but she will surely want to fly away in her sky of dreams, and I pity the tired wings when night comes,” sighed the potential mother.

CHAPTER III—A BROKEN DREAM

It was evening at the Nest, and the quiet settling down on the woodlands vibrated with a melody, at once silent and musical.

Little Nora fairly trembled with expectation. What would the night bring? She was determined to sleep in that attic under the big, dark rafters. As a matter of fact Nora was fascinated with fear; just as one may stop on a river bridge and feel like jumping in.

“Just pound on the floor, Kitten, if you get scared. We’ll run up and get you, quickly enough,” declared Jerry, secretly proud of Nora’s pluck.

“But really, dear,” objected Mrs. Ted, “I would rather you would——”

“Now Ted, you know well enough you had a heap of fun the night you and Jettie slept in the haunted house. Never mind the trouble you made in the neighborhood, you had your fun,” and he clapped his brown hands on his knee and laughed, until Cap, the big dog, rolled over in his sleep and grunted inquiringly.

This reminder caused Ted to smile indulgently, and when Nora twined her warm little arms around the same Teddie’s neck, it seemed to the adopted mother she could not deny her anything—she might sleep on the roof if the whim occurred to her just then.

While the family, which included Vita and the big tiger cat, besides Cap and a cage of newly adopted birds, were either talking or listening to talk, Vita, from the kitchen door, was acting rather queerly. She would shuffle back and forth, start to speak and hesitate, cough, spill pans and make other unusual noises, until Ted called out:

“What’s the matter, Vita? You seem to be having a lot of trouble.”

“Not trouble, just worry,” replied the elderly servant in good English, but strongly accented.

“Worry?” repeated Jerry. “Why Vita, you never worry. What’s wrong? Come in and tell us about it.”

At this invitation Vita showed herself in the comfortable sitting room, towel in hand and head wagging.

“It’s like this,” she began, “that attic——”

“Oh, that’s it, is it? Now don’t you go worrying about the attic,” interrupted Jerry. “If our little girl wants to dream one dream out up there, why shouldn’t she? I like her spirit.”

“But when—there’s the pretty room——”

“Why Vita!” It was Ted who interrupted this time. “I’m surprised that you should interfere!”

“Now, you know, dear, Vita means no harm,” Jerry broke in, always eager to smooth things out. “But there really doesn’t seem any cause for all this anxiety.”

“I would say, please,” ventured the housekeeper, “a little girl might get scared up in that black garret,” and she made her dark eyes glare, plainly with the intent of frightening Nora out of her plans.

“Then it will be over, anyhow,” spoke up the child, “and I might as well get scared tonight as any other night,” she concluded loftily.

“Right-o!” sang out Jerry. “I can tell sure thing, Kitten, that you and I are going to have a heap of fun in these diggings. When you get through with one scare we’ll invent another, and in that way we’ll be able to keep things interesting.”

Vita threw back her head, rolled her eyes again and made a queer sort of gurgle.

Then she swished her dish towel in the air with such a jerk it snapped like a whip, and realizing further argument would be useless, she turned back into her own quarters.

As she went out, man and wife exchanged questioning glances. They plainly asked each other why their maid should be so concerned, but with Nora present it was unwise to put the query into words, so it remained unanswered.

Nothing but sheer pity prevented Mrs. Jerry Manton, better known as Ted, from bursting into delicious laughter at the sight of Nora in her boudoir finery, as, an hour later, she picked her way up into that attic.

Jerry kept discreetly at a distance, but he too saw the figure, so like the model of an old time master painting, as she climbed the stairs, unlighted candle in hand, with Cap at the little pink heels that just peeked out from under a very beautiful, dainty night-robe.

Her candle was not lighted—Cousin Ted, (the latest name given the hostess) would not permit the lighting, as she argued it was dangerous to carry the little flame so near to the flimsy robe: never-the-less, Nora wanted the candle, and she carried it along to complete the picture.

At the door Ted touched a button and the convenient big electric bulb, ordinarily used by Jerry when he went to the attic workroom, showered a welcome light over the dark rafters and the queer eerie, lofty quarters.

“Isn’t it wonderful!” said Nora, in a voice so shaky the wonder part seemed rather awful.

“If you get the least bit nervous, dear, you come right down to the yellow room,” cautioned Ted. “We will leave the hall lights on, and Cap wanders about all night. So if you hear him don’t be alarmed.”

“It would be nice——” Nora paused, then continued, “if Cap would sleep up here on this lovely landing. Couldn’t we give him a pillow?”

“I’m sure he wouldn’t stay long,” objected Ted. “Our Cap is a wonderful night watchman and has a regular beat to cover. He will be sure to visit you more than once before morning.” She was turning away reluctantly. The circumstances exacted full strength of her own courage—to leave that little wisp of a child up in the lonely attic just to satisfy a whim.

But Ted knew the only sure way to effect a cure for the fanciful nonsense was to let it burn out: it could never be successfully suppressed. Hence the decision and the attic quarters.

“Good night, cousin Ted,” said Nora bravely. “And don’t worry about me. I’m sure to sleep and dream beautifully in that nice, fresh bed.”

“It is fresh; I changed it all as Vita seemed so opposed to letting you come up here,” said Ted, thoughtfully. “But while Vita is very queer in some respects, she is loyal and faithful, always.”

Nora threw her small arms around Ted’s neck impulsively.

“If only Nannie liked housekeeping,” she sighed. “Couldn’t we have perfectly lovely times in a little house of our own?”

“Your mother is sure to change her ideas when she grows stronger,” replied the young woman, charitably. “Naomie has what is termed the artistic temperament. As a rule it is greatly and sadly in need of discipline.”

Nora sighed and pressed a loving pair of trembling lips on Mrs. Manton’s brown cheek.

“I’m so glad I found you, anyhow. And Cousin Jerry is just the very loveliest big jolly man! I’m sure I’m going to be very happy here,” she finished with an impressive sigh.

“I know you are, dear. We have more kinds of things to do in this big woodland! Just wait until you go out surveying with us!” Ted promised, “then you will see some of the wonders of the great outdoors. There’s Jerry’s whistle now. I must run away and get him his bread and milk. Would you believe that great, big baby has a bowl of milk and two cuts of home made bread every night? He says his mother always told her children a story when they took this extra meal, and he insists he would break up the family circle if he failed to take his nightly supply.”

“Break up the family? Do they come here?”

“Oh, bless you, no. Jerry just fancies the other two brothers in Canada and the sister who is a nurse in the mountains, all eat bread and milk at nine-thirty P. M.” She laughed a little, caressing ripple. Even Nora knew that this young wife cherished any filial view held up by her husband.

Ted was gone, and presently it was time to turn out the big bulb light that dangled from the rafters. Nora peered into the looking glass at her own little face to make doubly sure of herself. Then she made a complete survey of the room.

“Just to know that any noise isn’t here,” she apologized to herself, poking her yellow head into a nest of cobwebs and jerking back with a little gasp.

“Oh!” she panted, “Cousin Jerry wants cobwebs for his surveying instruments. I must be sure to remember where that nest is.”

Over by the chimney a line of paper bags hung and these now seemed “spooky” in the shadowy light. Other hanging things in the low parts of the attic that were set away from the center, the latter which was forming the unfinished bed room, all added to the grotesque outline.

“But I’ve got to do it,” declared little Nora, crawling at last under the fresh bed covering Cousin Ted had provided.

“I’ll leave the light on for a little while just to try it,” decided Nora, her yellow head buried so deeply beneath the covers that it was quite impossible to tell light from darkness.

A little click from somewhere brought her up straight in the bed, a moment later. She listened with all her alert senses but nothing else happened. With a new feeling, somewhat akin to disappointment, Nora once more settled down, first, however, she actually turned off the light, and only the slim streak from the far away hall showed a single beam that framed the chimney line.

Being brave—as brave as all this—was really a new experience to Nora, but she had promised herself to “hold out”; and then Cousin Jerry had seemed so proud of her pluck she would never disappoint him.

“Makes me feel almost as big as a boy,” she encouraged herself, “and won’t I have a wonderful story to write Barbara.”

Now she thought of Barbara, the tom-boy girl at school: she who could climb and romp, laugh and cry, defy the prim madams who conducted the school, it was certainly conducted not “run,” and the Misses Baily were types of teachers such as the most carping critic might depict, black string eye-glasses and all.

The vision flitted before the blinking eyes of Nora. She was so glad to get away

from school restrictions and perhaps—well perhaps Cousin Jerry and Cousin Ted might get to love her so fondly they would not send her back.

What was that!

Over by the big chest!

Quickly Nora struck a match and lighted her candle.

A figure moved, there was no mistake about it, a person, a real live person was surely over by the spook cabinet.

Nora almost stopped breathing.

She was afraid to call out and still more afraid to remain quiet.

There it was again!

“Oh! Oh! Cousin Ted!”

She did call, but in such a thread of a voice she scarcely heard it herself.

The next moment Cap sniffed his big, warm nose up under her arm.

“Oh, Cap, I’m so glad! Stay with me. I’m frightened!” she whispered, drawing his tawny head closer.

Then it occurred to her that the big dog had not barked. She knew he could scent a stranger in any part of the house, and she was equally sure a real person had moved over by the cabinet. Who could it be?

Her first sudden fright was now giving place to reason. The intruder must be human, and perhaps whoever it was, he was giving Cap something he liked. But that would not account for his submission, for Cap was not a dog to take things from strangers.

Horrible thoughts of chloroform stifled the girl. She even fancied she did detect a strange, depressing odor. What if she should be drugged!

An attempt to move found her too frightened to put one foot over the side of that bed. Why had she waited so long? A sickening fear was coming on. Oh, suppose it should be unconsciousness?

There was a stir. Cap was knocking things about. Now he dashed over and was surely bounding up on someone.

“Down!” came the command.

It was given in the voice of Vita!

CHAPTER IV—TRANSPLANTED

Nora was too surprised now to even think coherently. That Vita should be up in her attic!

“Down, down Cap!” the housekeeper was ordering, while the dog, evidently realizing something very unusual was occurring, added his part to the confusion.

“Vita!” called Nora in a subdued voice, “Come over this way!”

“Hush! Don’t wake the folks,” cautioned the maid, now beside Nora’s bed.

“I—just—come to—shut the window——”

“Oh, is there a window over there?”

“A little one,” evaded Vita. “But why do you come up to this dirty place?”

“It isn’t dirty, and I like attics.” Nora’s was confident now and her voice betrayed some resentment.

“You like it?” Vita sniffed so hard the candle almost choked to death.

“Why yes; why shouldn’t I? I’m romantic you know.”

“Roman——”

“Oh, you don’t understand. I’m sort of booky, like a story, you know,” explained Nora loftily. “I love things that are like the parts of a story.”

It was difficult to make certain that this lusty Italian understood; but even in the dim light, her dark eyes seemed kind and full of smiling glints, and her ruddy cheeks dimpled all over like a big tufted pin cushion, giving Nora a feeling of security mingled with curiosity.

Why did Vita come up? There was no draft from any window. Was there even a window?

“I tell you, baby,” the woman began, as if answering Nora’s silent questions, “you be a very good little girl and go down to the pretty sun-gold room; yes?”

The big warm arm was cuddling the little form in the bed, and Cap was so happy he put both paws gingerly on the coverlet, snapping a very short bark of a question right into Nora’s face.

“Quiet, boy!” whispered Nora. “We are having a lovely party but we must not wake our neighbors.”

The big shaggy head burrowed down into the covers, and Nora felt like a little queen on a throne with her servants bowing at her feet.

“Go on, Vita,” she ordered grandly.

“I tell you a nice little story, then you go downstairs on tippy toes, yes?”

“But Vita dear, I did so want to stay up here,” pouted Nora.

“It is no good up here. All crazy like, and make you scared—awful.” This was said in a very positive tone.

“Why? What should I be afraid of? I slept alone at boarding school and the winds made dreadful noises sometimes.” protested Nora.

“Never mind. You be Vita’s good baby and Vita give you nice—very good cake tomorrow,” coaxed the woman, who now seemed anxious to leave the attic herself. She stirred uneasily.

“Well,” sighed Nora, “I suppose I can’t have any peace if I don’t.” She threw down the coverlet. “But see, my little clock says eleven, and I don’t want to disturb anyone on my very first night. You go down whatever way you came up, Vita; and I’ll creep down the front way.”

The woman’s relief was so evident Nora scarcely knew whether to be grateful or suspicious.

“Now everything be all right,” whispered Vita happily, “and you sleep just like the angel. Here Cap, you go very still,” and she patted the dog with a little shove that urged him toward the door. He understood, evidently, for very quietly indeed he shuffled down, his four feet softer than velvet slippers, as he carried his huge body down the darkened stairway.

Nora first poked her head out to make sure the coast was clear, then with a motion to Vita, who stood with candle in hand at the attic door, she swept down the stairs and entered the yellow room, into which a soft light from the hall fell in a welcoming path.

The bed covers were turned down—Vita must have been determined that Nora should use that bed, and the window was properly opened, for the soft breeze stirred the scrim curtains, and a wonderful woodland scent stole into the room.

“It is much better down here,” Nora was forced to admit as she snuggled into the

gold and blue coverlet. "I guess I was a nuisance to be so obstinate."

A few minutes later a step in the hall glided to the electric light button, and the click that followed turned off the light.

That must have been Ted, of course, and she must have known that Nora was now safely tucked in the comfortable bed in the guest room.

"She was waiting for me too," mused Nora with a twinge of compunction. "I do wonder why they made such a fuss about me staying in the attic?" It was delicious to have every one anxious about her,—so short a time ago no one but the Circle Angel at the Baily School seemed to care whether she slept in her bed or out on the old, tattered hammock, that Barbara wanted to make a tree climber out of; and now in this lovely little bungalow, called The Nest, there were so many beds for her she couldn't choose.

All the same, with the insistence of her fancies, visions of goblins and goo-gees up in the attic pranced through her excited brain and made the queerest pictures. She shivered as she remembered them.

"But Vita is nothing like a spirit worker," mused the child. "And she is so kind and seems so fond of me." Then she had an inspiration.

"I have it," she all but exclaimed aloud. "Vita knows what is wrong and is afraid I will find out. She is not frightened at it or she would not go prowling around in the dark," continued the reasoning, "but she has a secret and it is in that attic."

As if this conclusion settled all disturbing doubts, Nora humped over once or twice and then gave in to the sleep her tired little self was so sorely in need of.

It was the end of a long and too well filled day. She had left the select school with all the instructions of the Misses Baily fairly hissing in her ears. Then there was Barbara's fun making, in the way of a train letter with all sorts of wild premonitions (they were funny but somehow the train incidents took on the threats of danger Barbara had outlined). But after all, no one had kidnapped her and here she was—yes, asleep in the big fluffy bed in the lovely yellow room.

A whistle—Jerry's—brought her back. The daylight was streaming in through that wonderful dew laden vine. And oh, the scent!

It was not flowers but woodlands. A bird chirped a polite good morning, and without the usual eye rubbing Nora was sitting up straight and silently thanking the Maker of good things for such a wonderful day.

For the first time in her life she felt that her clothes were not appropriate, and it was some moments before she could decide just which little gown to appear in. They really seemed out of place in that rugged country—her laces and ribbons and fine fussings.

"I suppose the Girl Scouts do wear practical things," she reflected, "but that horrid khaki!" The thought sent a little shudder through the small, frail shoulders, and Nora, donning her Belgian blue, with brown sandals and two colored socks, was ready, presently, to meet her newly adopted relations. Cap was at her door when she opened it, and this, more than anything else, sent a thrill of joy to her heart. Even a wonderful big dog to welcome her when any dog would surely want to be out doors with Jerry on such a morning!

"Come along, Bob," called a man's voice from the lower hall. "We can hardly spare time to eat—there is so much to see this morning."

Nora was beside him as he continued:

“The kittens are tumbling out of their box, the puppies are fighting over a feather, the chicks are testing their strength on a nice, lively, fat little worm, and oh yes! the calf jumped over the moon—the moon being Ted’s home made gate,” he finished, with that boyish laugh that always made the house ring merrily.

Vita was just coming into the dining room with the muffins as Nora passed her. There was no mistaking the sly wink—the big dark eyes fairly sparkled glints as the maid signalled Nora not to say anything about the attic episode. Nora smiled and nodded, and then the muffins were placed before Mrs. Ted.

“Sleep well, dear?” asked that lady presently.

“Wonderfully,” replied Nora, just a bit cautiously.

“I heard you come down stairs and was rather glad you changed your mind,” continued the hostess, while she poured Jerry’s coffee. “It is much pleasanter on the second floor.”

For a moment Nora wondered whether this was being said to disguise the real happening. Did Mrs. Manton know that Vita had gone up to rouse her?

“Maybe rain today,” interrupted the maid, although the sun shone brightly at the moment.

“Now Vittoria!” objected Jerry. “You ought to know better than to say rain when I have to go away out to the back woods, and I want to have some real work done today.” He glanced over his shoulder at the streaming sunlight. “You’re a fraud, or else you are not awake yet,” he went on. “There is no more sign of rain than of snow.”

“I agree with you for once, Jerry,” chimed in Ted. “The grass was knitted with cobwebs, the sun came up grey, and besides all that the jelly jelled. Now Vita, you see you are completely left. It is not going to rain.”

Vita laughed good naturedly. “Then I say it is goin’ to shine,” she added, and Nora now felt certain her talk had been made to interrupt the comment on the night before.

Breakfast passed off in a gale of pleasantries. The home of the Mantons seemed jollier every moment, to Nora.

“How about the woods?” asked Jerry, while they lingered over the coffee.

“I’m ready,” replied Ted, “and I’m sure Nora will want to come.”

“Oh yes,” with a glance at her inadequate costume. “Will this dress be all right?”

“If it’s the strongest you have with you,” replied Ted. “But we have some very saucy briars and brush. We must see about a real woodsy outfit for you.” She paused a moment, then continued, “I am sure you will like the Girl Scouts when you get to know more about them. I know a group of the girls and to my thinking they are the real thing in girls.”

Nora flushed slightly. One point she had made up her mind on. She was not going to lose her identity by joining in with a group of girls who, she imagined, just did as they were told, and apparently had no ideas of their own. Nora had seen some of the Girl Scout literature and it had not impressed her favorably. It was plain and practical, while she longed for novelty.

“Well, Bob is going to be my scout, at any rate,” chimed in Jerry, quick to sense possible embarrassment. The shade of Nora’s cheeks gave him his cue. “We won’t talk about the regular Scouts until—well, until later,” he finished, in the foolish way he had of making a boy of himself. It was rather foolish, but so jolly. He would wind up everything

in just the way Nora never expected, as if his words said themselves.

The visitor was conscious now of something unpleasant stealing in upon her. Would Mrs. Manton oblige her to be different? Couldn't she dream and play and fancy all the wonderful things she had been storing up for so long? Wasn't this her dream vacation?

Nannie, that play mother of hers, *she* knew would not want her to change her peculiar characteristics.

This sort of reasoning flashed before her mind as the party prepared for a day in the woods.

So the little girl in Belgian blue went along with the big man in his knickers and brown blouse, and with the young woman in her service uniform.

Nora made an odd little figure, but she was, as she had always been, a picture of a girl.

CHAPTER V—THE WOODS AT ROCKY LEDGE

Out in the woods!

Forgotten was the dread idea of a Scout uniform or the possible program of a Scout ritual. Nora romped with Cap, discovering new delights at every few paces and only pausing to exchange salutations with birds, bees and butterflies. The sky was as blue as her gown, and her eyes matched the entire scheme. Her golden hair tossed in the wind like new corn silk, and when Jerry and Ted slyly inspected their charge at a safe distance, a most comprehensive nod of a pair of wise heads told volumes to the woodlands and the surrounding Nature audience.

Yes, Nora would do. Now life at the Nest seemed complete. Even this dreamy, romantic little bit of humanity was a real child, and to the pair of adopted parents she seemed as beautiful as a wild flower.

“Now Ted, you just hold back on that Scout stuff,” Jerry had the temerity to suggest. “We don’t want to scare her off, first shot. And you can see she’s opposed.”

“She doesn’t understand,” replied Ted. “But, of course, there is no need to urge her. No hurry, at any rate.”

“I don’t know as I like the tom-boy idea,” continued Jerry. “She’s very pretty just as she is.”

Ted laughed knowingly. “You’re the boy who pulls down the shades rather than say ‘no’ to the peddlers,” she reminded him. “It is easy to understand why you are opposing the Scouts.”

He adjusted his tripod and seemed to have found something very absorbing at that moment. Nevertheless, his big shoulders shook, and his curly head wagged a little suspiciously.

They were surveying the end of a big strip of woodland. All over the young forest could be seen the yellow stripes that marked the trees that were to be spared, while those unmarked were doomed for the woodman’s ax. Birds liked the yellow-banded trees best, to judge from the perches they made upon such, but of course, they could not have known that the other, not so fortunate, needed their musical sympathy to make less gloomy the approaching execution.

“See! Just see!” Nora called, running back from the wild grape-vine cave. “Do come over and see this—little play house. It’s perfect as can be, with vine draperies, and moss carpet, and real wild-rose decoration. Cap led me to it, I guess it’s his secret place.” She was panting with sheer joy. The woods were new to the girl from the boarding school, where walks were confined to the limits of neuritis and neuralgia as “enjoyed” by the Baily Sisters.

“Cap’ll show you,” replied Jerry. “He has nothing to do but hunt while Ted and I work for our living.”

“Oh, could I help?” Nora felt like an intruder upon their industry.

“Not just today, but pretty soon. Perhaps the day after.” This was another of Jerry’s characteristic replies. Nora understood them better now.

“But it is real fun—fun to look through that spy glass. Do you have cobwebs in there?”

Asking this brought back to her mind the cobweb nest in the attic. Jerry’s reply, however, forestalled further reflection in that direction at the moment.

“Some day, pretty soon, perhaps the day after tomorrow,” he laughed again, “I’ll show you all about this and the cobwebs. Ted has some town stuff to attend to; and listen, Bobbs” (he stepped over and whispered in Nora’s ear), “Ted is a perfect terror if she is held too late in the woods. She would starve us to death, like as not, if I didn’t get back before the clock cooled striking. So you and Cap just run along and find out what the fairies want from the village, while we mark a few more spots.”

Was there ever such a jolly man? Once again he had quickly avoided embarrassment to Nora. He would not even let her think she should be useful.

“Yes,” called Mrs. Manton from her position astride a small white birch, “you and Cap have a good time, Nora. He will teach you to explore.”

Willingly Nora ran back to the bower she had discovered. Surely it had been fashioned by elves and fairies, for it was perfect in every detail. Unconscious of time, she flitted about making a little window in the wild grape vine, and fashioning a door between the hazel-nut boughs.

A murmuring song escaped her lips, while Cap now and then yelped sharply, impatient to be understood and receive attention.

“Why, Cap!” asked Nora in reply to one of these outbursts, “I don’t quite understand your language. What is it?”

The big dog was vainly trying to make Nora see a nest of late sparrows. The tiny feathered babies could just stretch their little heads above the rim of the straw cup of a nest they cuddled in, and when Cap found them he knew he should notify somebody. The bush was so low, although it was safely sheltered by the thick vines, and a wild trumpet vine loaned two beautiful flowers to cheer the little birds during their mother’s absence. Still, Cap felt certain it was dangerous for such tiny creatures to be there in the very path of any wild, rough animal happening by.

Nora had never seen such baby birds before. First, she wanted to fondle them, but Cap gave warning and she desisted. Then, she wanted to feed them, as if birds could eat the black berries she offered them. But presently the mother bird flew into the bower with such a wild, shrill call, Nora knew her own presence was not desired so near the baby birds, so she followed Cap out into the clearance. As she did she saw approaching a group of girls, and they wore the Girl Scout uniform.

At the sight something within Nora seemed to tighten up. The girls were coming straight to the bower and their laughing voices had the strange effect of all but chilling Nora.

Without waiting to exchange so much as a smile she called Cap and ran off to the surveyor’s camp.

“Well,” she heard one girl exclaim, as she sped away, “one would think we were—Indians.”

Nora’s ears stung as her cheeks flamed.

“There! Wasn’t that just what one might expect? As if a girl couldn’t do just as she pleased in the woodlands! And they were her own Cousin Jerry’s lands too,” Nora scoffed.

“What’s the matter, Nora?” asked Mrs. Manton, as she panting, sank down on a freshly-cut stump. “You don’t mean to tell me you are actually afraid of those little girls, just because they wear uniforms?”

“Oh, no, Cousin Ted, I am not afraid of them,” her voice would shake somehow,

“but I didn’t know them.”

“I see. Well, we must all get acquainted in these pretty parts. The birds and the furry things never wait for an introduction,” replied Ted, kindly.

“Come along with me, Bobbs,” called Jerry, who was packing up his instruments. “I need help with this chain; it is bound to snarl.”

“Jerry!” called out Mrs. Ted rather sharply. “You really must not interfere every time I attempt to tell Nora something useful. I want her to know the Girl Scouts, and the sooner she makes up her mind to do so the happier she will be. The Scouts are all over this place you know, Jerry,” and the laughter of the girls up at the bower attested to the truth of that statement. “Anyone who is not interested in Scouting will have a poor chance of a real vacation in the woodlands,” concluded Mrs. Manton.

“But we are going to scout,” insisted the man with the tripod on his shoulder. “The only thing is, we are going to do it in our own way. Isn’t that so, Bobbs?”

Young and simple minded as was Nora, she was fully conscious of a difference of opinions regarding her management. Jerry was surely siding with her, even in her whims, whereas Ted, mother-like, felt the necessity of giving advice.

That was it. She had never before known anything the least bit mother-like. Would she find the relationship too irksome?

There was the hint of a tear in her blinking eye when she pulled the kinky tape out for Jerry and felt it snap back into its leather case. After all, things were not exactly as she had pictured them at the Nest. First, she was dragged down from her attic—she felt now she had been dragged down in the very middle of the night by that great, big Vita, and now, there were those horrid Girl Scouts being held up as examples for her to follow and imitate. Well, she would never be a Scout. Each time the question presented itself she felt more decidedly against it. She would always have big Cousin Jerry to stand by her, and if Cousin Ted—

“Want to come to town with me, dear?” called the owner of the name she was opposing.

“Sure she does. She is going to ride Cyclone. Aren’t you, Bobbs?” This was from Jerry.

“I couldn’t ride a big horse,” faltered the confused girl.

“We will go in our handsome ca—our little tame flivver,” interrupted Ted. “When you want to ride a horse you will have plenty of time to practice.” Mrs. Manton had assembled her tools. Nora marvelled at the strong hands that could so skillfully wield the sharp hatchet and the dangerous-looking trimming knife. Into the loop at her belt Ted carelessly slipped the glittering tools, and as she did so Nora recalled the sight of the dainty hands she had been accustomed to admiring. What would the ladies who visited the school say to a person like Cousin Ted?

They were ready to leave for the cottage. Over the hill the Girl Scouts were calling their mysterious “Wha-hoo,” and to Nora it sounded like a call to battle. What had at first been merely an indifference was now assuming the proportions of actual dislike. How was Nora to know she was a very much spoiled little girl? And how was she to guess what the cost of her change of heart would mean to her?

She was a total stranger to the word “snob.” Her training had been one straight line of avoiding this, that, and the other thing; but as for doing this, that and everything, no place was given in the curriculum.

Mrs. Manton, herself a product of the most modern college, knew the weakness of little Nora's character at a glance, but to introduce strength and purpose! To bend the vine without crushing the tendrils!

This very first day was marked with a danger signal. If Nora slighted the Scouts, they who came almost daily to Ted for information and companionship, there was sure to be trouble. It was this surety that prompted Ted to say with decision:

"The sooner Nora gets acquainted the happier she will be."

Meanwhile the girls of Chickadee Patrol had all but forgotten about the stranger. They were after specimens and had discovered more than one new bird's nest. Cameras were clicking, notes being taken, and so many interesting matters were being attended to, it was not strange that the sight of one little girl in a pretty blue frock, with a disdainful expression on her otherwise attractive face, might have been forgotten for the time.

If there were really fairies in those woods they should have intervened just then, for it would have been so much easier for Nora to have met the Scouts as companions, whereas she, holding away from the very idea of organization, kept building up a dislike which threatened to cause her much unhappiness.

The woodlands were broad enough for both to roam, but it was inevitable that both should meet some day, and, under what circumstances?

CHAPTER VI—A PRINCE IN HIDING

When Nora wrote to Barbara she drew word pictures of the beauties at Woodland Wilds. She shed a tear of real joy when writing about Cousin Jerry and Captain, and when she fondly recited the virtues of Cousin Ted she felt she put more in that one word "Motherly" than could otherwise have been conveyed.

It was in the writing of that letter that she took account of her actual self, for in wording it she had naturally summed up.

"I am not just sure whether I entirely suit or not," she told Barbara. "Sometimes I feel so different. Of course they all love me, even Vita the cook, and I love them fondly, but don't you know, Babs, you always told me I saw 'foohey' and you would not explain what it was to be that way? But I guess I am, whatever it is, for a lot of alterations have already been ordered," she wrote.

"My new outdoor clothes have arrived," the letter ran, "they are of brown cloth" (she avoided the use of the word khaki) "and they will stand a lot of hard wear. Cousin Jerry says we get them that color and so we won't scare the birds and other woodland creatures. They are supposed to think we are part of the landscape."

Nora then told of the attic, and its chest of treasures, and added she expected to try on a couple of outfits the very first day she was free from accompanying the surveying party.

All of which showed the visitor was "taking root," as Jerry would have said.

A long tramp out in a marshy territory was to be undertaken by the two veterans, Ted and Jerry, but because of the bad footing Nora was not asked to go along. This provided the very opportunity Nora had been waiting for, and hardly had the reliable old flivver "fluvved" away, then she hurried up to the attic in search of a costume.

"Come on, Cap," she whispered, eluding Vita, but unwilling to go up in the attic alone. She had not forgotten the suspicions of her first night.

Too glad to obey, Cap led the way, and presently Nora forgot even the "spook

cabinet” in her interest over the open costume chest.

Things were mussed and musty, rumped and wrinkled and crinkled; but what colors and what a lot of bright tinsel!

“Oh joy,” she exclaimed, dragging from the tangles a real Fauntleroy costume. “I have always wanted to see how I would look dressed in this sort of outfit,” she thought, for the black velvet “knickers,” the little velvet jacket, and the lace blouse were all there, and yes, there was a wonderful, bright silk scarf to go around the waist.

The cap was prettiest of all, and it was resting on Nora’s yellow curls before Cap could possibly make out what the whole proceedings meant. He stood over in his corner and blinked, but Nora insisted on having his opinion.

“Isn’t it wonderful, Cap? And don’t you like Nora in it?” she demanded. He gave one of his peculiar exclamations rather louder than she had expected, and to prevent the sounds from reaching Vita’s ears, Nora put both arms around Cap’s neck and hugged him into silence.

She was very much excited. Ever since her arrival at the Nest she had been planning a private masquerade, and now the time had come for her to indulge in it.

Fanciful dream child that she was, the character of little Lord Fauntleroy had always strongly appealed to her, and as for most girls the boy’s costume had a peculiar charm for her heroic ventures into the world of make-believe.

“We’ll take them down stairs,” she told Cap. “We can dress much more comfortably in my room.”

Poking her head out to make sure Vita was not around, she tucked the velvets and laces into her arms and hurried to the next floor. Seldom had she locked the hall door, but she did so now, dismissing Cap peremptorily, for there was no need of his protection on the second floor.

“I suppose it’s too big,” she reasoned, when the little knickers were pulled up as high as the button and button hole line. Yes, it was big, this costume had been worn by a gay lady at a big country club dance, and little Nora was scarcely a sample of the personality for which the jaunty outfit had been created.

But mere size did not worry her. It was effect that she craved. The lacy blouse fell into place quite naturally, and it did look boyish, while the overblouse of black velvet completed the Fauntleroy picture.

“If the buckles would only stay buckled,” she sighed, trying for the third time to fasten the knee straps and keep them that way. It was not pretty at all to have them slink down below her knees, like an untidy schoolboy; and a pin had no possible effect on the heavy, velvety finish.

“I know,” breathed Nora, “I’ll roll them.” And she did that skillfully; for in the season just past many and many a sock had she rolled and they had stayed, although Barbara never could acquire the same knack.

It was all finally finished, and she inspected herself in the mirror, slanted to the very last angle to show the full length. A pat of the cap, a brash of the tie and a swish of the flying scarf gave the finishing touches.

Really Nora made “a perfectly stunning” little Lord Fauntleroy. Had she been more accustomed to the sayings of the day she might well have exclaimed, “All dressed up and no place to go,” but her culture admitted of no such expressive parlance. Instead, she asked herself in the looking glass: “Wonder if I dare go outside? It is so comfortable

to wear this style”; and she skipped around as every other girl on earth has ever done the very moment she felt relieved of the trammel of skirts.

The morning was unusually quiet. Vita must be away picking greens, the surveyors were miles out, and there was no one but Cap to criticise. Why shouldn’t she stroll out grandly in her princely costume?

She did. The birds twittered and the rabbits scurried and the pet squirrel stood up and begged. But Nora was not feeding the animals this morning, instead, she flounced her lace sleeve in a most courtly gesture and passed on to the cedar tree grove. Cedars seemed more appropriate for velvets than did the other wild trees; besides, no underbrush grew in the cedar grove, and it was much safer for costly finery.

On the rustic seat Nora felt exactly as she had felt the day Miss Baily took her to sit for her picture, except that she crossed her legs comfortably now, whereas, then, she was not even allowed to cross her hands.

Presently the actress removed her (his) cap and poised it on the arm of the chair. Did Lord Fauntleroy go out in his grounds alone? Perhaps she should have called Cap to go along.

Then came thoughts of Nannie. Why must she, little Nora, always be so far away from that pretty mother? And why did the picture life—the make-believe—charm her like some secret failing? Did other girls really like the horrid brown uniforms never pictured in books, that is, never, until very lately? So raced her unruly thoughts.

Everything was so still, but Nora was not lonely—her own reflections kept her such noisy company that isolation had no terror for her. Just outside the cedar grove a strip of road waited for traffic. Few persons passed, but even woodlands must have roads, just as skies must have clouds.

Feeling more at home in her costume every moment, Nora stepped proudly outside the grove into the clearance. A fat little hoptoad crossed the path, but otherwise the prince was lord of all he surveyed. The whole world was busy, evidently, and even a visiting prince attracted no attention in the wild woodlands.

Nora wanted to whistle. She felt a prince, with hands in pockets inspecting his domain, would surely whistle, but she had never made much of a success at the wind song—it was Barbara who did all the whistling for both. Still, she tried now, and the sound wasn’t any worse than the cracked call of the blue-jay, except that it did not carry so far.

What would Barbara say to this game of characters? A companion would add to the possibilities of good times, Nora secretly admitted, but what companion could she find in these wilds?

Just as a sense of loneliness came creeping over her she heard the leaves somewhere crackle. The next moment a girl appeared a few paces up the road, and called to her quickly: “Oh, I say boy! Have you seen the Girl Scouts——”

The voice stopped as suddenly as it had started. The girl in uniform looked so surprised, Nora was conscious of scrutiny, even at the distance between them. She turned her head instinctively and so evaded a direct look; but presently the girl called again:

“I am looking for the girls who are going over to the Ledge. Did you happen to see them pass this way?”

“No,” faltered Nora, in a voice not her own. “I just came along. I’m looking for a car——”

“Oh, I saw one. It drove down the turn——”

“Thanks,” jerked out Nora, taking the cue to escape, and waving her hand in lieu of further conversation. She dodged behind the heavy elderberry bush and almost gasped in fright. What would a Girl Scout think of her in such a costume? Of course, she had no possible opportunity of seeing her face, and she surely could never recognize her again. Making positive she could get back to the Nest without again stepping out into the roadway, Nora sped back as quickly as her feet could carry her. It was always these Scouts; a sense of humiliation was now added to that of dislike. Would they all talk about her? Perhaps make fun of her or think her odd and foolish?

Too inexperienced to realize that the entire blame was her own, Nora crept up to the flap-jack path that led directly to the cottage door.

Here she was stopped again, for Vita sat out by the big stump, either counting or selecting something from her apron. So engrossed was she in her task she did not hear Nora’s footfall, and this gave the “prince” another chance to escape detection. She darted back into the arbor and waited. The only other way to enter the house was at front and she might meet almost anyone in that way.

Her game was losing its charm. She would have given much to be free of the finery and garbed again in her own simple clothes. It was rather mortifying to be considered queer, and that one saving grace, a sense of humor, was entirely lacking in the girl’s make-up. Otherwise she might have jumped down from a tree and frightened Vita out of her wits, thus making a lark out of a difficulty.

She waited impatiently. What could Vita be doing that so held her attention? Then the attic memories flashed back to Nora’s mind and she wondered.

“Cousin Ted leaves too much to that maid,” she was deciding. “I might be able to help by keeping a lookout.”

But for what? Vita was surely trustworthy and even extremely kind to Nora, the intruder.

A burr pricked the knee that refused to hold fast to the buckled finery. It must have been rather a nuisance to dress like that. Nora rolled the band tighter and lost her fancy hat in the effort.

Voices!

Girls’ laughter. The Scouts, of course, and coming back toward the cottage!

Without waiting to consider Vita’s opinion, Nora sprang from her hiding place and darted up the path into the cottage.

Voices within as well as without!

Cousin Ted was back from the woods and had company. How could Nora reach her room without being seen?

She crouched behind the kitchen cabinet, hoping the voices would leave the hall and enter the living room, but, evidently, there was a reason for delay, and the big seat was right at the foot of the stairway!

Now Vita’s flat slippers patted the stones and she was coming into the kitchen.

Disgusted with the entire affair, Nora turned into the back stairway. She had never mounted those stairs, they were used only by the maid, but just now there seemed no other avenue of escape. She heard the shuffling feet of Vita as she climbed the bare treads.

They were narrow and dark, only a small window cut in an opening somewhere

allowed enough light to penetrate to make sure the steps were those of stairs. A narrow landing marked the line where the second floor must be. Then there was another turn, a sort of sharp twist in the queer ladder-like climb.

Nora was too far up now to hear Vita's step in the kitchen.

"But this must lead to the attic," she reasoned. "I may as well go on up as to go—down."

Cobwebs a-plenty here. She jerked back from their tangles, fearing spiders and other crawling things.

"Oh," she exclaimed. "I do wish I had not come this way. It's so—spooky!"

At every step the darkness increased and the light dwindled. Reaching a good-sized platform, Nora stood, thankful to draw an easy breath. She could just about see that she had only one short flight of steps to go to reach a door.

"I would never have believed this house was so high," she pondered. "I feel as if I came up from a cellar to a tower."

Then, resolutely, the pilgrim started on again. Only a few steps and she found herself face to face with two doors. They were unpainted and each stood at angles from the landing.

"Which?" she asked instinctively; for, while she wanted to reach the attic, she was careful to remember which way she had come in this crooked, gloomy place. Besides this, the attic was a mysterious part of that pretty house, Nora realized.

"It must be all right to go in here—all of the rooms are ours and Cousin Ted said they were all kept clean."

With this caution she pushed open one of the unpainted doors and stepped inside. She gasped! The place was in almost total darkness!

CHAPTER VII—CAP TO THE RESCUE

Where was she? What could be so black?

Nora gasped—it was so stifling. Fumbling in the strange place her hand found the door and as she pressed against it she heard it shut!

"Oh mercy!" she exclaimed aloud. "I'm shut in this awful place!"

Now her eyes could make out the rafters. It was the attic, but what part of it? The faintest gleam of light breaking in from above followed the rough beams. The frightened girl fell back breathing hard and feeling faint. To faint in the attic! Surely that would be romantic! But she didn't want to faint all alone up there and maybe die and not be found for years, as she had read happened once to a bride who went up to look for her grandmother's quilt.

She was so dizzy. She really must sit down. Not even a hazy fear of rats roused her, for it was unbearably hot and stuffy.

"O-o-o-h!"

That was the end of Nora for the time being. She succumbed to the first faint she had ever performed, and there was no one to see her, no one to rescue her, not one even to know where she was!

Such a little prince!

Velvets and ribbons brushed cobwebs and dust, as she slumped down, down——!

Of all her life's dreams what she dreamed when she breathed again seemed the strangest. But it was all broken up like pieces of stars mashed into flashes of dazzling

light, and there was no more head nor tail to it. All she could think of was how tired she was, and she knew she just had to sleep.

If spiders had any talent for observing, those in that cubby hole would have had a wonderful story to tell to the crawling things in roof and rafters, but even they did not so much as try, with a web, to arouse the half-conscious child, and one lacy net was so near Nora's face her gasps of breath swayed and rocked the baby spider in its cradle.

So there she was asleep now, and glad not to know!

Downstairs supper had been prepared and everyone was waiting for Nora.

Who had seen her? Where had she spent the afternoon?

"Vita," said Jerry sharply, "you know you were not to let the child go off these grounds alone."

"I no see her, never. She no come out from the house," protested the frightened Vita.

"Well, we have got to search," decided Ted, her bronzed face plainly showing alarm, and her brown eyes blinking with unnamed fears.

"Where has Cap been?" again demanded Jerry. "He should have been with her."

"He went with the Scouts; they asked for him, and of course, I let him go as usual. I did not know Nora was going out, in fact, I thought she was going to write to her school mates," replied Ted. "But don't let us waste time. I'll take the north way, Vita you go by the Ledge, and Jerry, I suppose you will jump on a horse and scout every way."

"Yes, I'll take Cap and send him on ahead." All the laugh was gone from Jerry's voice now. How quickly the cloud of Anxiety can darken the brightest home?

More than an hour later all three searchers returned to the Nest and admitted they could not find Nora.

"She couldn't be in the house, could she?" asked Ted, disconsolately.

"We looked hastily, but it was best to do all the outdoor looking first," replied Jerry. "Do you suppose she went to visit anyone? Did she make friends with Alma and Wyn, our pet Scouts?"

"I wish she had. There's that about the Scouts, they go in groups," answered Ted, with feeling. "Let us look over the house more carefully. But why should she hide?" A loud bark from Cap answered that question.

"Here! Cap knows where she is. Let him find her," exclaimed Jerry, joyfully.

"It's at the kitchen door," added Ted, hurrying in that direction.

"Quick, open the door, Vita!" commanded Jerry, while the dog barked wildly.

Vita put a trembling hand on the door that led to the back stairs and opened into the kitchen. No sooner had she done so than Cap bounded past her, and the next moment the big dog and the forlorn little prince tumbled into the room.

"Nora!" exclaimed both Jerry and Ted.

"It isn't! It can't be!" faltered the surprised maid. "This is boy——"

"Boy nothing!" almost shouted Jerry, so glad to see Nora in any guise that her strange costume interested him not at all.

"The poor little darling," cried Ted, gathering the black velvet form up into her arms. "What ever happened to you, dear?"

Nora brushed a dusty hand over her blinking eyes. "Oh, I am so glad I am saved. I thought I would surely die."

"Up attic. Why baby! No one could die in our attic. Cap knew you were up there

and if you had not tumbled down just when you did he would have gone through the wall to find you, wouldn't you, old fellow?" Jerry asked fondly.

The Saint Bernard was in his native element at the rescue work, and he licked Nora's hand contentedly. Ted had gathered the child up into her arms and Vita was already busy getting a refreshing drink. Jerry, manlike, just looked on, happy beyond words, for in the bad hour previous he was a prey to keen anxiety, and during the process made up his mind in the future to keep Nora closer to the family circle at all times.

Nora had not yet come to the point of talking. Her swoon and its consequent haziness left her in a daze, and with the mother-like arms about her, and the breath of Cap reviving her, and Cousin Jerry's big soft eyes encouraging her, the relief from her fright was slowly creeping over her and it was so delicious she had no idea of dispelling it with mere words.

"I know," said Teddie softly, "you were playing parts, dressing up in the duds from the big chest."

"Did you go to sleep in the trunk?" ventured Jerry, slyly.

"No, I don't know just where I was—I was——" faltered Nora, now beginning to feel a little foolish in her boy's outfit.

"She went up wrong stairs and I guess, maybe, she got lost in the big open attic," Vita volunteered, apparently anxious to forestall further questions.

"No, it was not opened. It was shut tight—very tight," snapped Nora. She resented Vita's explanation. Somehow she felt Vita was to blame.

"Then you must have struck the spook closet," said Jerry, his old happy tones ringing through the small kitchen. "Say Ted, let's get into the other room. Can you walk, Bobbs, or shall big Cousin Jerry carry you?"

"Oh, I can walk all right," replied Nora, slipping to the floor from Teddie's lap. "But I was so stiff and cramped and—I guess I must have fainted."

"You must have been up there all the time we were hunting for you, and the attic is always hot," added Ted. "I never thought of looking there."

"But Cap did. He knew where you were the moment he came in the house," said Jerry proudly. "I tell you, Cap is a regular life-saver. He will have to get another medal for this; even if he didn't drag you out of the spook cabinet, he did tumble in the kitchen with you."

Both Jerry and Ted were too considerate to show surprise at Nora's appearance, but Vita could not or did not attempt to hide her astonishment.

"Guess she thinks the fairies had you," said Jerry softly, when Vita stood in the doorway, her hands on her capable hips and her mouth wide open in a gasp of surprise. But Nora had an uncertain feeling that Vita, as sole tenant of the back stairway, should have made better arrangements than to have a door that would spring shut like that, right at the very top of the dark place.

It was at this point a mistake was made. Nora did not express herself and Vita had no idea of explaining. Mr. and Mrs. Jerry were supposed to know all about the Nest, but did they! In the excitement of finding Nora, the actual hiding place was not being considered.

Quickly as the little girl recovered her self-possession and took part in the conversation, everyone enjoyed a good hearty laugh, naturally led by Jerry.

"What special kind of prince were you, Bobbs?" he asked jovially. "I did not

know they hid in dark attics.”

“Oh, yes they did,” contradicted Ted. “Don’t you remember the princes in the tower?”

“I don’t, but it doesn’t matter. They must have been in a tower or you would not have included the fact in your college course,” replied Jerry, always ready to tease on that score. Whenever Ted found a new specimen in the woods, or questioned about a strange bird, he would invariably ascribe the matter to “her college course.”

Nora was anxious to get out of the ill-fated costume. She wanted to run upstairs and change, now that her knees had stopped shaking, but Ted insisted she take her supper just as she was, and readily made a merry time out of the near catastrophe. Again Nora missed the point—no sense of humor was a sad lack in so active a girl.

Cap regarded her with an eye almost twinkling. Did he know the attic secret that she had been unable even to realize was a secret?

“Your clothes fit pretty well,” said Jerry, “but I think I like you best in your Little Girl Blue dress. Guess, after all, girls really shouldn’t wear——”

“Now, there you go again, Jerry Manton,” interrupted Ted. “As if the costume had anything to do with Nora getting lost.”

And all the while Nora was thinking: “If they only knew.” But she had never had any one to confide in, except Barbara, and now she did not know exactly how to tell her story. Besides, how silly it would be to say she had actually been out in the roadway in the Fauntleroy clothes? And if they ever knew she had been seen and spoken to by a Girl Scout!

The fear of humiliation crushed back any desire to tell the whole story and so it remained as it appeared, an incident of no more importance than a case of being lost in the attic.

All the horrors of the black hole, all the terrors of her fright and faintness, besides what actually happened when she finally burst through that door and all but fell head-long down the dark stairs—this Nora crushed back from her lips, and only dared to think of it as something she would write in her secret diary.

Perhaps she would tell Barbara. It was too thrilling to remain a secret with no one but herself to ponder upon it.

A refreshing bath, more beef tea and a bedtime story told by the affectionate Cousin Teddie one hour later, all but dispelled the trying memory.

The story was one read from a favorite woodland series, in which children, birds and furry things found days of happiness in the carefree hours, far away from artificial restrictions of “Do” and “Don’t.”

The girls mentioned in the story were not spoken of as Scouts, but Nora suspected they must have been very much like such in ideals.

“You see,” said Teddie gently, when she had finished the interesting story, “girls who love nature find real joy in studying the woods and learning to love the woodland creatures. You have had no chance to know what such pleasure means, dear.”

“No,” said Nora faintly. And at that moment she decided to put on her new uniform the very next morning, and then go forth with Cousin Ted and Cousin Jerry in quest of the adventures promised.

“I guess,” she began timidly, “it is better, Cousin Teddie, for me to go along with you every day, if you don’t mind.”

“Why, I can’t bear to leave you home, either with Vita or to your own resources,” declared Ted. “But I didn’t want to urge you. Your experience today may be a good thing in the end—it may help to cure you of the artificiality you have been absorbing so deeply. I will have to write your mother a bit of advice. I do not believe her little daughter is getting the sort of education best for her. Now, roll over and go to sleep.” She pressed a fond kiss on the warm cheek. “And Nora love, don’t bother about dreaming,” finished Mrs. Jerry Manton, in a tone of voice not learned during her famous “college course.”

CHAPTER VIII—THE STORY ALMA DID NOT TELL

Under a canvas tent sheltered by a particularly broad chestnut tree and surrounded by a group of beautiful white birch, the girls of Chickadee Patrol, Girl Scouts, were listening, all attention, to the very wildest tale they had ever given ears to.

Alma was talking. “Honestly girls,” she insisted, “he was a real prince, dressed in black velvet and a beautiful jaunty cap——”

“Alma! Alma!” shouted her companions in derision.

“Where did you see the fairies? Just imagine in broad daylight in the woodlands——” teased one.

“Then, I shall not tell you anything more about it,” desisted the abused one. “As if I wasn’t surprised. Why, I was so dumfounded I could not ask him if he saw you, and I was miles behind the crowd.”

“Now girls, let Alma tell,” chirped Doro, in her lispy voice. “Go ahead, Al. *I* believe you saw Prince Charming.”

“Was he old enough to ride a horse?” asked Laddie, christened Eulalia. She was defying her dentist on a piece of fudge two days old.

“Honestly, girls,” began Alma again, “I never saw a boy so beautiful. Light curls——”

“Oh!!!” came a chorus that stopped the narrator and sent her pouting over to the bed couch, where she pouted still more.

“Then, all right, I am absolutely through,” she declared quite as if she meant it.

“Now just see what you have done,” mourned Treble. She was so tall the girls always considered her in that clef. “Don’t you mind them, Allie. I know perfectly well there are even flying cupids in the big woodlands, and I fully expect to bring a couple home to lunch——”

Cushions in one big bang stopped Treble. At this rate Alma’s story would never be published, orally or otherwise.

In the Scout tent the evening was being spent in recreation: hence the fun they were having with Alma. At a table fashioned from an upside-down packing case, with real hand carved legs where the boards were knocked out and the hatchet braces left standing, sat three of the Chickadees, discussing the new Girl Scout stories.

“I just love the first,” insisted Thistle whose name was as Scotch as the emblem. “I liked the mill story and I just loved that wild, exciting time the girls had trying to win back—was it Dagmar?”

“Oh, yes, I remember,” chimed in Betta. They were referring to the first volume, “The Girl Scout Pioneers,” but others of the group spoke up for their particular choice of the series, naming, “The Girl Scouts at Bellaire” and “The Girl Scouts at Sea Crest.”

“You may have those,” offered Doro, “but I perfectly love this.” She held up the

last book published. It was entitled “The Girl Scouts at Camp Comalong.”

“Why is that such a prize?” inquired Pell.

“Oh, haven’t you read it? Well, it is a real story of the most interesting girl, Peg of the Hills.”

This brought about a general discussion of the entire series, and although the method being used is not usually employed to remind readers of the other books of a series, perhaps, since the girls were speaking for themselves, it will be accepted.

Alma was whispering her Prince Charming story into the ears of Doro. Doro was accredited the very best listener among the Chicks and she had not the faintest idea of interrupting the story teller. Of course, it was Nora whom Alma had encountered, and it was not difficult to understand why her companions should discredit the tale. A prince in the woodlands, indeed!

“Louder, Alma,” begged Treble, catching only enough of the story to make her curious.

“Well, you won’t believe me.”

“We will! We will! Hear! Hear!” shouted Betta, whose full appellation was none other than Betta-be-good, given because she had a habit of lecturing.

“She did see a real prince,” chimed in Doro. “And he did wear buckles and laces and everything.”

“Where, oh where, fair maid? Lead me thither and hither and yon,” moaned Pell Mell. “Next to a movie star I love a prince best,” she finished dramatically, although it was common knowledge that Pell loved nothing so well as rushing about and falling over adventures. She actually fell over the Ridge, that is as far down as the big flat rock, before her chums decided she was hereafter to be known as Pell Mell.

“That is all there is to tell,” announced Alma, in a tone tinctured with finality. She knew perfectly well the girls would never rest until they had sought out the darling prince, and she also knew it would be lots of fun to make them “sit up and beg” for the details they had been scoffing at.

“Where, Alma?”

“Near the bend, Alma?”

“Wasn’t it over by the Nest, Al?”

“She said she saw him over by the Ledge.”

All this and much more was thrown out as bait, but in the parlance of the tribe, Alma did not “bite,” she merely picked up a discarded book and proceeded to read.

“Well, there was a prince, I’m sure of that,” persisted Pell, determined to make Alma repeat her story.

“Let’s go prince hunting tomorrow,” suggested Betta.

“With Treble’s moth scoop?” joked Wyn.

“I suppose none of you happen to know that Mrs. Jerry Manton has a visitor,” spoke Doro. She gave the statement a tone implying: “Why wouldn’t the prince be the visitor?”

“Oh, that’s so,” drawled Thistle. “Maybe it’s the duke.”

This brought out a new shout of nonsense.

“Duke!” roared Betta. “Keep on and we’ll have him on the throne.”

“There are no more thrones,” informed Pell. “Don’t you know the war made every thing democratic?”

This turned the joke into a serious moment, for even the rollicking Scouts did not feel inclined to enlarge upon so serious a thought.

Presently everyone was speculating upon the possibility of the little stranger being the one entertained by the Mantons.

“Couldn’t we call?” suggested Wyn. “Mrs. Manton is always lovely to us, and if she has such a little cherub on her hands we ought to help her care for him.”

“Cherub, Wynn timer! Why, we would have to get a cage for anything like that in this camp. He would be eaten by bugs, moths and beetles.” A dash at a flying thing confirmed this opinion from Treble.

“Now, if you all have finished your skylarking I would like to study,” announced Alma. “I have to learn all that new class lesson, and I hope to get out of the Tenderfoot tribe before next week. No fun swimming in a barrel.” She referred to the water restrictions of “Tenderfoots.”

“Hush girls! Alma is thinking,” joked Pell. “Please don’t interrupt the spell——”

Poor Alma could stand the teasing no longer. She picked up her manual and headed for the tent occupied by those very studious Scouts who chose the company of the leader to that of the distracting girls.

“Chickadees never scratch,” fired Betta as Alma stepped over protruding feet and reached the tent flap. “Now Chick-a-dee, Peep! Peep! Pretty for the ladies——”

But the girl with the manual was gone.

“What do you make of it?” asked Pell, when the titters subsided.

“She saw something different, that’s sure,” replied Treble.

“She told me all about it,” put in Thistle proudly. “And it was really a wonderful child all done up in black velvets and ribbons,” she declared.

“I see nothing to do but ask Mrs. Manton about it,” suggested Wyn. “It looks like a first class lot of fun.”

“Ask her if she is entertaining a boy in velvet pants?” said Treble, so foolishly, the girls all but rolled under the table and the oil lamp shook dangerously in the merriment.

“When they’re velvet they’re never pants,” spoke Wyn, as soon as speaking amounted to anything.

“Trousers,” amended Treble.

“Nor those,” objected Pell. “When they have cute little buckles and go with a jaunty cap——”

“They’re knickers,” finished Betta.

“Not a—tall,” shouted Treble. “I know better than that myself. You’re thinking of golf. Didn’t I see Lord Fauntleroy play his Dearest?”

“Did you really? Well, what did *he* call call them?” demanded Thistle. She had been so busy enjoying the fun that this was her first attempt at making any.

“I have it,” sang out Laddie. “They’re bloomers.”

“Oh no, rompers,” insisted Thistle. “Rompers are much prettier.”

“What ever would you girls have done this evening if Alma’s little story did not furnish you with debate material,” scoffed Doro.

“The story Alma never told,” chanted Lad.

“All the same,” declared Treble, “it is perfectly delicious. Who’s going to make the call on Mrs. Jerry Manton?”

The shout that followed this question brought a protest from the next tent where candidates were studying manuals.

“Let’s take a vote on it,” suggested Thistle, when quiet seemed possible. “Since every one wants to go and we haven’t heard the Mantons were going to give a picnic or anything like that—why—the best thing to do is to draw lots.”

“How tragic! Draw lots! I say we make it numbers from Doro’s cap. Here girls, get busy and numb.”

A page of note paper was quickly numbered and torn into squares. Then the lot was tossed into Doro’s cap—it was the deepest for the little girl did not wear her hair bobbed. When the cap was filled she was the one chosen to hold it, and upon the highest chair she presently stood while the girls jumped for numbers. The four highest were to constitute the committee and the lot fell to Betta, Pell, Wyn and Thistle.

It was arranged that these four should go in the morning to call upon Mrs. Jerry Manton, their good friend and erstwhile preceptor in woodlore, and it was fully expected that the young visitor would then naturally be introduced.

And this was the very day that Nora donned her new service suit.

CHAPTER IX—A MISADVENTURE

The idea of meeting a prince (the girls easily believed the pretty boy in the velvet suit was at least a near-prince) brought to the Chickadees a delicious thrill.

“You know,” reasoned Thistle next morning, “the Manton’s are government people, and there are lots of foreign nobles down at Washington.”

“That’s so,” agreed Doro. “He might have come up to the woods for his health.”

The tent was quickly made ready for inspection and when the woodcraft class was dismissed, the girls were free to make the all-important call.

It was but a short distance from Camp Chickadee to the Nest, and the four girls, constituting the committee, covered the ground speedily.

Vita answered the knock and told Pell, who was spokeswoman, that: “Mrs. Manton no come back yet.”

Nora not only heard the voices but she had seen the girls coming, and feeling that she, as a member of the family, should “do the honors,” she summoned courage to greet the callers.

“Cousin Teddie will not be back before lunch time,” said Nora sweetly. “Won’t you come in and wait?”

“Oh, no, thank you,” faltered Thistle, observing one truant curl that had escaped the confines of Nora’s field hat. “We may come over later in the afternoon—after drill,” finished the Scout.

Pell was more composed. “Are you visiting Rocky Ledge?” she asked cordially.

“Oh, yes. I expect to stay quite a while,” replied Nora. She liked the roguish smile Pell bestowed upon her—it was, somehow, a little like Barbara.

“Then perhaps you would like to visit camp,” pressed Thistle. “We love callers, don’t we, girls?”

This provided an opportunity for general conversation, and presently, no one knew just how it happened, but the Scouts and Nora the rebel, were having a perfectly splendid time on the side porch, talking about the things girls love to discuss, but which always appear to the onlooker or listener as a series of giggles and gasps.

Nora was so glad she wore the khaki suit. All her old love of finery was, for the time, lost in the joy of feeling “in place” instead of “out of place.” And the girls at close range did look very well in their uniforms. Betta and Thistle especially were just like models—Nora remembered that wonderful Girl Scout poster, and her former dislike for the uniform now threatened to turn to keen admiration. Just so long as anything “made a picture” the artistic little soul was sure to be satisfied. Changing an opinion was as simple a task for Nora as changing a hair ribbon, but it had been rather unpleasant to have the Scouts always held up as paragons.

Admitting she had not yet visited the Ledge, Nora was straightway invited to do so, as the four Scouts expected to meet the other troupe members out gathering sweet fern there.

“Vita,” she called back to the maid in the kitchen, “you keep Cap home, I’ll be back in a little while.”

“Oh, no,” objected Vita. “Mr. Jerry, he say you don’t go never without Cap——”

“But I am with the girls now,” declared Nora a little sharply. She was so afraid the others might guess that it was she who wore the velvets! Looking very closely at each, however, she had not recognized the one who accosted her on the fatal dress-parade day. Alma was not in the party this time, so of course, Nora was correct in her opinion.

“Doesn’t Mr. Manton like to have you go out alone?” asked Thistle, innocently.

“Well, you see,” stumbled Nora, “I am not very well acquainted yet.”

“Was there a little boy visiting the Mantons the other day?” ventured Betta. She was almost consumed with curiosity, and as they turned their backs on the cottage the chance for unravelling the prince mystery seemed lost to them.

“A boy? No,” replied Nora. “I am the only one who has been here.” A flame of color swept her face and although she stooped to pick up an acorn at the moment, at least two of the Scouts noticed the flush.

“Light curls,” whispered Wyn. “She has very pretty ringlets——”

“Lots of girls have, of course,” scoffed Betta. “You surely don’t think she’s twins?”

“No,” faltered the other, never dreaming how much closer than twins Nora was to the little prince.

But Wyn was not easily satisfied. What was the sense of being appointed a committee to investigate and not do it? She picked a wonderful spray of pink clover before she asked Nora again:

“Do you ever see a little boy, a very fancy dressed boy, around the cottage? One of our girls dreamed she saw one and we have been trying to persuade her she had a vision.”

A sigh of relief escaped Nora’s lips. It should be easy to laugh the story over, since only one girl had seen her and that one had but a glimpse of her. She felt she would die of embarrassment now, if ever she were really found out. And only a few days ago it had seemed so trifling a thing! As she was about to reply to Wyn her hat fell off and down tumbled the curls.

“What wonderful curls,” exclaimed Wyn innocently. “Why do you hide them under a hat?”

“Oh, I don’t,” replied Nora bravely, shaking out the golden cloud that tossed about her ears. “But when we go into brambles it is more comfortable to have one’s head

tidy," she finished.

"Say, Wyn," charged Thistle, "do you suppose Nora has no other interest than in your visionary prince and yellow curls? Please allow her to listen to some of my woodland lore."

"Oh, yes," mocked Betta. "Tell her all about your little fish in the brook that wouldn't go near Treble's hook."

A scamper brookward responded to this sally.

"Oh, there's Jimmie," cried Thistle. "Hey Jimsby!" she hailed to a small boy in a big boat. "Wait for us. We are going up to the Ledge. Give us a row?"

Everyone, including Nora, ran towards the edge of the stream that rippled through willows. Jimmie with his boat was rare good fortune to come upon, and the Scouts were instantly eager to procure seats in the big, old skiff.

Nora's timidity forced her to hold back, but she was too self-conscious to admit it.

"Come on, little Nora," called out Thistle good naturedly. "I have a place for you right alongside of me."

"Oh yes. Thistles never sink, you know," added Wyn.

Nora's heart beat fast. Could she say she would so much rather walk to the Ledge?

"Hurry up, Sister," sang out Betta. "Thistle wants to get out of rowing and you are her excuse."

Taking her fright literally in her hand and casting it into the brook, Nora stepped into Jimmie's boat, smiling as if she were expecting the best good time of her life. A thought of her nervous mother barely had time to shape itself before all were seated, and the freckled faced Jimmie handed over the oars, without so much as uttering either a protest or agreeing to the piracy.

"Don't you love a little lake like this?" asked Betta, noticing how silent was her companion.

"I have never been on the water," said Nora truthfully. "At our school we are not allowed to take part in any dangerous sports."

"Oh," exclaimed Thistle. "How you must miss good times."

"But we have many lovely parties and dances and all that sort of thing," explained Nora. Her voice was entirely friendly and the difference of opinions by no means clashed.

It was delightful. The girls sang, whistled, shouted and coo-heed, as occasion demanded, the occasion being that of answering bird calls from shore. Imitating birds was counted as the latest outdoor sport, and the Chickadees vied with one another in the accomplishment.

"She's leakin'," said Jimmie without warning or apology.

"I should say she is!" cried Wyn, jerking her feet up from the bottom of the boat. "Jimmie Jimsby! Why didn't you say so?"

"Oh, you didn't give me a chance," replied the lad frankly.

"Oh, is it dangerous?" gasped Nora. Her cheeks went pale instantly.

"No, just gives us a chance to show who is the best swimmer. You can swim, of course?" asked Wyn.

"No, not a stroke," replied the frightened Nora.

"Don't you mind Wynn, Nora," spoke up Betta. "There's no possibility of any one having to swim. This boat would sail the rapids, wouldn't she, Jimmie?"

“Here’s another hat,” offered Thistle. “Say, Jim! At least you ought to bring a tin can,” she said in her jolliest tone.

They were actually bailing out. The water managed to make cold little puddles in the bottom of the boat, and with the “large party aboard” as Pell charged Wyn because she happened to weigh a few more pounds than the others, the inflow threatened to bear the little craft down to the water’s edge, uncomfortably close.

But the girls were making a lark of it. Every time a hat emptied a shout went up, and every time a hat leaked a groan moaned out.

“All in a life time,” boomed Thistle. “But don’t any one dare tell that story about the philosopher and the boatman.”

“Never heard it,” responded Betta, lifting a particularly well filled hat to the boat’s edge.

Jimmie was now rowing. “Assisting him in that capacity,” as Pell expressed it, was Wyn.

“We gotta reach the Ledge,” joked Thistle, “and I for one hate walking on the water.”

“We betta——”

“Betta-be-good,” went up the shout as Betta attempted to preach. She never got farther than that first mispronounced two syllables nowadays.

Nora was now regarding the situation with more calmness. After the first fright it did not seem so dangerous, and the skill with which the jolly Scouts handled the task of bailing, was fascinating.

But suddenly something happened; no one shouted, no one even spoke, but in a twinkling the entire boatload of girls were scrambling in the water.

CHAPTER X—A NOVEL INITIATION

“Quick girls! Get Nora!”

This was the order given by Pell, who in emergencies assumed leadership.

“Here Nora,” called Betta, “just put your hand on my shoulder. We can almost walk in. Don’t be frightened.”

But Nora was terribly frightened. That water! And not being able to swim a stroke!

“Look!” called out Thistle, who was now standing in the more shallow water, “it is only up to my shoulders. Just bring Nora out here and she can wade in,” announced the Scotch girl.

The sight of Thistle actually standing on her feet brought to Nora the first free breath she had breathed since that awful thing happened. Now she had courage to stop choking and do as she had been told.

“Why, you swam that time,” puffed Betta to whom Nora had struggled. Did she really swim? She felt herself buoyed up for a moment somehow, in fact she had never gone down.

Before that supporting move had lost its endurance her hand was safely on Betta’s shoulder, and both were moving slowly but securely towards the bank.

“That’s it,” Pell encouraged. “No need for any trouble if you just keep—cool!”

“Cool enough,” grumbled Thistle. “I hate lakes for that,” she continued to call out.

“How’s that!” asked Betta when she reached the shallow water from which point all were wading in.

“Wonderful!” exclaimed Nora. Her relief was so great it seemed to her pure joy.

“Your first?” asked Wyn.

“First?” repeated Nora.

“First ducking,” added Wyn. “If so it is your official initiation. You are now a full fledged member of the Chickadees.”

It was easy for Nora to laugh—she felt she would never do anything but laugh, it was so good to be safe within reach of shore once again.

Thistle and Wyn threw their wet heads back and emitted a “coo-hee.” The call was taken up by the others, and instead of the incident being of an alarming nature it was thus turned into a lark.

“Coo-hee! Coo-hee!” sounded along the little lake basin, while shouts of laughter and expressions of opinion about bobbed heads after an unexpected ducking, were snapped from Scout to Scout as the party waded in.

So near the edge they were loath to emerge. No possibility of getting any wetter or spoiling anything more generally, but there was a possibility of more fun.

“Where’s that Jimbsy boy?” demanded Pell. “We didn’t leave him to the sharks, did we?”

“Look,” replied Thistle, pointing to a little slash in the lake’s outline. It was a pocket full of water just about big enough to float the upturned boat that Jimmie was pushing in through it.

“Poor boy! And we never asked him what he was out after,” reflected Betta.

“Maybe he had an order to bring a boat load of passengers from the Ledge.”

“We’ll take up a collection for him,” proposed Pell.

“What’ll we collect?” asked Wyn.

“Opinions,” replied the first. “They’re most plentiful.”

Nora was out of water and shaking herself like a poodle. Now that it was all over, the thrill was unmistakable.

“Look who’s coming!” called out one of the girls, and turning around Nora glimpsed Ted coming down the narrow path.

“Quick, Nora, hide!” exclaimed Wyn. “Then spring out and surprise her.”

Obedying, Nora jumped behind a big bush.

Even in the excitement she realized what companionship meant. It was so much more fun than playing at foolish dressing up and imagination games. Could she have but understood more clearly she would have recognized in that situation the theory of having girls “do” to learn, and that active sport of the young is one of the standards of Scout teaching.

She listened as the girls greeted Mrs. Manton. No gasps of alarm nor expressions of fear were exchanged, for Cousin Ted was of the Scout calibre herself.

“Better hang on the hickory limbs and dry, before your leader sees you,” she cautioned. “Those uniforms won’t be fit for parade.”

“And mine was all beautifully pressed,” whimpered Pell.

“So were all our suits, Mrs. Manton,” asserted Thistle, “because we were calling on you first.”

“Really! Did you see my little girl?”

“Oh, yes,” drawled Betta.

“I so want her to grow into scouting,” continued Mrs. Manton, and at that Nora felt she could make her presence known. But a quick snap of a stick from Betta, as she swished it back of Nora’s bush, kept her from stepping out.

“Does she like the water?” asked Wyn, with a suppressed giggle.

“I am afraid she has had little chance to get acquainted with it,” replied Ted.

“Nora has been developed at one angle. This sort of experience would probably give her nervous prostration.”

That was the cue. Nora jumped out!

“Child!”

“The very same!” pronounced Thistle grandly, waving a dripping arm.

Mrs. Manton was too surprised to do more than look at Nora. Her brown eyes were twinkling and her mouth twitching in a broad grin. Presently she jumped past Betta and threw her arms around Nora.

“You darling baby!” she exclaimed, all unmindful of the water she was blotting up from Nora’s new suit. “How ever did you—come here and get—like—this?”

“Chick-chick-chick-Chickadees!” sang out a chorus. “Cluck! Cluck! Cluck!”

If one could look pretty after a ducking in a strange lake, Nora did. Her curls liked nothing better, and her cheeks pinked up prettily, while her eyes—they were as blue as the violets that listened in the underbrush.

“You don’t mind her initiation, do you, Mrs. Manton?” asked Wyn.

“Why no. In fact, I’m delighted,” replied the young woman. “But why the secret? I have been left out in the cold,” she said, genially.

“Only candidates are informed,” said Wyn, keeping up the joke.

“Was that really it? Was this a private initiation, and am I intruding?”

“All over,” sang out Betta. “The bars are down and the guests welcome.”

“Betta be goin’ up the hill a bit,” suggested Thistle. “This is no place for dripping chicks.”

“The sun *would* be helpful,” agreed Pell. “I don’t mind the water when it’s fresh, but I hate to get mildewed.”

“Hey!” came a call from somewhere. “Wanta get in again?”

“We certainly do not,” yelled back Wyn. “Jimbsy James, you’re a fraud. What ails your yacht, anyway?”

“All right, then,” called back Jimmie good naturedly. “I’ll be goin’. So long!”

“So long yourself,” called back Wyn, “and send your bill to headquarters.”

“Were you—in his boat?” asked Ted, a light beginning to break through the girls’ perpetual nonsense.

“We were, momentarily,” replied Betta. “But we needed exercise so we decided to walk,” she finished. Nora saw how friendly the girls all were with Ted, and felt a pang, not of jealousy, but of regret. Why had she never known such companionship?

“I must go back to my trees,” said Mrs. Manton, when the girls had found a clear path of sunshine. “I have some important marking to do. Nora, you follow directions and you need not fear earth, sky or water. These little Scouts are impervious to all catastrophes.”

And Nora had almost expected to be sent home for a rub down, a hot drink and all the other coddling!

“Oh, I’m all right,” she hurried to reply. “I’ll be home——”

“When the ceremonies are over,” interrupted Thistle. “We are due at the Ledge long ago, and if we don’t soon make it I am afraid we will all be kept in tonight.”

“In those wet things?” protested Wyn. “Not for me. I’m going back to camp and change. Come along Nora. We have an extra outfit in our box and we’ll lend it to you. Thistle is a regular fish, she is never happy when dry skinned.”

Mrs. Manton had disappeared in the winding path and Nora was secretly glad of Wyn’s invitation. She could not as yet actually enjoy wet clothes. The girls had managed to save their hats and caps, but even these still dripped and could not be comfortably worn to keep off the strong sun’s rays that beat down in the clear spots along the lake’s edge.

“We’ll have some trouble explaining to the general,” remarked Thistle as they started back to camp. “And this was the day we were to finish our collection.”

“But look, what we did collect,” answered Wyn under her breath, referring to Nora. “Did you ever see anyone so pleased as our friend?”

“She looked happy,” assented Thistle. “But say, Scoutie; whatever are we going to tell the girls about the prince?”

“Let’s say we drowned him,” suggested Wyn, foolishly. “That will give Alma a lovely murder mystery to work upon.”

Nora overheard the word “prince” and surmised correctly it was meant for her Fauntleroy. She longed to turn back to the Nest rather than meet the other girl who might recognize her.

“It’s so near lunch time——” she began.

“Oh, no girlie,” protested Betta. “You are the only specimen we have collected

today, and if you don't come back with us we will all get dreadful marks. Come along. Be a sport and help us out."

"Yes, we will be considered life savers, perhaps," added Thistle. "Of course, we won't say we did anything noble——"

"Nor say we didn't," drawled Wyn.

Thus urged, Nora had no choice, so she set off with her new companions towards Chickadee Camp.

CHAPTER XI—TOO MUCH TEASING

Swept off her foolish feet of fancy and landed safely on the more practical ground of girls' life, Nora presently found herself in the canvas tent, actually donning a Scout uniform.

No ivory dressing comb nor shell-back mirror, instead a wooden box for a dressing table, and a bowl of cool, clear water fresh from the velvet-rimmed pool, and a glass—the piece that fell from a wagon and was splintered up so no one would touch its "bad luck," so Pell rescued it and painted a four-leaf clover on its jagged edge! That was a Scout mirror.

It was a revelation to the pampered child. And like so many others who are blamed for their circumstances, Nora was fascinated with the glimpse given of a real world. Here girls lived as human beings privileged to invent their own tools which would be used in modelling the skilled game of a happy life.

"Of course," explained Pell, "we go through quite some formality before we really become Scouts, but necessity knows no law, and this is necessity."

"It's just wonderful," admitted the stranger, all the while fighting down a sense of guilt that she should ever have disliked the Scouts and their standards.

"Now we want you to meet Alma," announced Wyn. "She's one of our little Tenderfoots, and so romantic? She will be sure to want to adopt you, for just wait until you see if Betta doesn't say we found you in the lake!" she predicted.

Alma came from the leader's tent. She had been studying—those tests were soon to be held.

"Just see our little pond-lily," began Thistle, while Nora, now somewhat accustomed to the girls' jokes, managed not to blush too furiously.

"Oh!" began Alma, then she stopped.

Nora felt in that moment she was discovered and that the prince would soon cease to be a mystery.

"Well, Alma, this is Nora—Nora——"

"Blair," added Nora, realizing her full name had not been given the girls before.

"Oh, how do you do?" faltered Alma. "I thought at first I had met you before."

"No. Nora is the visitor at the Mantons," explained Wyn, "and we all had a ducking—we initiated Nora and had a lovely time. You missed it, Al."

"Sorry," said Alma, still eyeing Nora.

"But we spoiled our uniforms," rattled on Wyn. "That wretch, Jimmie Freckles, dumped us right out into the lake."

"And I was brought back to your camp to be redressed," Nora managed to say. She felt if she did not say something the girl with the lovely, glossy, brown hair, who was staring at her, would penetrate her secret.

“Alma has visions,” went on Wyn. “She saw a real prince in your woods one day; didn’t you, Alma?”

“I saw a little boy in a velvet suit——”

“And he had curls.”

“And he had dimples.”

“And he had lovely gold buckles on his slippers.”

“And he had——”

But Alma turned on her heel and left the girls to finish their description without her aid.

Nora was greatly relieved when she left.

“Honestly,” explained Thistle, “Alma insists she did see a little boy in your woods. Did you ever come across such a child?”

“Never,” replied Nora, then, “I really must hurry home, I am afraid I am late for lunch now.”

“Won’t you stay? We are to have——”

“Thank you, Pell, but Cousin Ted and Cousin Jerry will be so anxious to hear all the news——”

“But you must keep secrets—make secrets if you haven’t any to keep,” advised Betta, who had taken a fancy to Nora. In fact all the girls showed unusual interest in the little visitor.

“Oh, I know how to do that,” Nora replied truthfully.

Then, with many invitations and a number of suggestions as to spending some days and even a few evenings, Nora finally managed to race off toward the Nest, after Betta walked with her out of the camp grounds and watched while she hurried down the road. It was a very short distance to Wildwoods, and before Betta turned back to Camp Chickadee she had seen faithful Cap run out to meet Nora.

“Now, are you satisfied, Alma?” asked Wyn. “You would insist the visitor was a boy.”

“It may be her brother,” replied the brown-haired one, “but honestly, girls, and no joking, he had curls just like hers,” said Alma.

“But isn’t she sweet?” asked Wyn.

“Princes aside, I like her most as well as Alma’s vision,” declared Thistle. “And did you notice how matter-of-fact she donned Bluebird’s outfit? What are we going to say to her if she happens back tonight?”

“Gone to the tailor’s to be pressed,” suggested Pell, glibly. “There come the others. Now for a lecture.”

But instead, Miss Beckwith, the leader, came up smiling. “We heard all about it, girls,” she began. “Met that precious James Jimmie Jimsby of yours, and he said it was in no way your fault.”

“Bless the boy!” murmured Pell. “We shall certainly have to adopt the list of Jays. First we capsize his boat and then he pleads for us. Now isn’t that gallant?”

“But Becky,” began Thistle, sidling up to the popular leader, “we have had such a wonderful experience. We have converted a real rebel.”

“Rebel!” exclaimed Wyn. “How do you know Nora was anything like that?”

“Well, Mrs. Ted Manton said as much, didn’t she?”

“She didn’t,” replied Pell crisply. “She merely said that Nora had very little

experience in girls' sports."

"I know," interrupted the leader. "Mrs. Manton has mentioned her to me, and I am very glad you have succeeded in interesting her. I fancy she is a very capable child, with too much time on her hands."

"Oh," sighed Betta. "If we had only known it we could have borrowed some. What ever shall we do to get in a day's work now?"

"Lunch first and then do double quick duty," suggested the young leader. "It has been rather a lost day, counting by the usual results, but then, we have to figure in the new friend."

"You're a love, Becky," declared Treble. "I am sure you are going to help me with my basket. It has to be done tomorrow, if I am to get full credit for it."

"Where's Alma?" asked Miss Beckwith, suddenly.

"Pouting," replied Wyn. "You are not to know it, of course, but Alma's in love!"

A shout corroborated the statement. "She may be hanging up wet clothes," suggested Pell. "When they're in love they do foolish things like that, I've heard tell."

"Girls! Didn't you hang up your wet things yet?" Miss Beckwith asked in real surprise.

A rush to the back of the tent, where the garments had been hastily heaped, gave response. Presently there was a contest being held to see who could hang up the most material in the smallest space and with the fewest clothes pins; at least that appeared to be the attempt the happy four were making; but when the lunch bell sounded, each and all were ready for the fresh corn, new potatoes, string beans and macaroni—a menu especially designed for culprits who fall in lakes and forget to hang up their uniforms to dry.

Everyone talked of the little stranger, and also everyone praised her beauty. She was so cute, so sweet, so adorable, and Pell even went so far as to whisper to Thistle that she was "peachy," although all slang was taboo at the table.

"And Alma," confided Wyn, "we were so sorry not to be able to locate your prince——"

"Girls," Alma exclaimed. "If you say prince to me again I'll scream."

"You did this time," said Betta, "and we don't mind it at all. You scream really prettily."

"Hush," spoke Doro. She was down at the far end of the table and had not been with the girls on their eventful trip. "I think we have teased enough, really. Let the poor little prince rest."

"Good idea," chimed another who also had missed the expedition. "We have a new plan to propose, and with all that prince stuff we can't get your attention. Becky is going to take us to the Glen tomorrow morning, and we want volunteers to make up the lunch baskets."

"Call that a new plan?" mocked Wyn. "Why, that's as old as the Scouts. First thing I ever did was to volunteer to make up a basket for my big sister, and she picked it up and walked off with it."

"Didn't even thank you?" asked Miss Beckwith, who always took part in the girls' fun.

"Well, she may have," replied Wyn, "but that didn't impress me. It was those sandwiches and those cakes——"

“You didn’t make those, Wynnie?” demanded Treble. “If you did we won’t ask for volunteers. We’ll wish the job on you.”

Alma was quiet during all the merry chatting, but Thistle, who could not resist one more thrust, said next:

“Thinking of him, dearie?” she asked. “And his little velvet coat——”

But the joke had a most astonishing effect. Alma sniffed, breathed in quick little gasps, and the next moment asked to be excused from the table.

“She’s crying!” declared Betta.

“Horrid girls!” murmured Doro. “I told you she had had enough of princes.”

“But to cry! Alma isn’t like that,” said Wyn in real surprise.

Miss Beckwith, who had reached the end of her lunch and was waiting for the others to finish, slipped away after Alma.

This left the girls to wonder, and they did that in all the ways known to girlhood.

Then it was definitely decided the first girl who mentioned the word prince should be made to pay a heavy fine.

All felt truly sorry for little Alma, but it was the wise and understanding Janet Beckwith who gathered the sobbing girl into her arms and soothed the sighs, tears, and protestations.

“Just teasing, dear,” she insisted. “You must not mind their nonsense. They, every one, love you dearly.”

“But I did see a real prince, Becky. And—and they won’t believe me,” sobbed out Alma.

Miss Beckwith wondered. “A real prince?” she repeated.

“Yes. I was near enough to see all his pretty—things,” Alma paused in her sobbing to relate. “He had all velvet clothes, and such a pretty black cap. Oh Becky!” she sobbed afresh, “can you ever imagine what it is to have the—girls—all making fun of you?”

“Now, Alma dear,” again soothed the leader, “I am really surprised that you should take this so seriously. You know the girls are not making fun of you——”

“They—said I had—a vision,” she sobbed as heavily as ever. “And I am determined to find out who that was—and prove it to them.”

Miss Beckwith was sorely puzzled. Naturally she supposed the girl was romancing. But why should she take it so seriously?

“Come, now, dear,” she urged. “We have talked it all out and the only thing that worries you is that the girls do not believe you, isn’t it?”

“Yes, that’s the worst of it.”

“Then, let’s sleep over it and see what the morrow will bring in the way—of light.” Becky scarcely knew just what to propose so she threw the responsibility on the “morrow.”

Alma was over her “spell” presently. But the prince had, by no means, lost his real personal identity to the sensitive little Scout.

CHAPTER XII—A DIVERSION NOBLY EARNED

Ted’s pleasure, shown when Nora’s transformation was revealed to her in a dripping little “pond lily” on the edge of Mirror Lake, was not to be compared with Jerry’s joys when he first beheld his Bobbs in the Girl Scout uniform. They were waiting

for Nora when she returned at lunch time.

“Pretty kipper, nifty, all right and no kiddin’.” These were some of the exclamations he gave vent to.

“But I thought you didn’t like little girls in anything but skirts,” Ted reminded him.

“I didn’t but I do,” he replied Jerry-like. “Now what do you say Bobbie, to a try at horse back ridin’?” He always dropped his g’s when perfectly happy.

“I’d like to try it,” admitted Nora proudly. She might not have realized it but the trim little service costume had already emancipated her. She was no longer the creature of catalogued toilet accessories, “send no money” and “we guarantee money’s worth or money back,” etc. The new Nora was like a butterfly leaving its cocoon—although the drying process had been facilitated by the loan of a new blouse and bloomers from the Chickadees’ wardrobe.

Vita came out to announce lunch and she stood dumbfounded. Vita was not Americanized to the point of diplomacy.

“You lose your good clothes? Those t’ings not yours?” she asked blandly.

“I have one like this,” replied Nora. She did know how to respond to interference, and had not yet quite forgiven Vita for the attic episode.

“Don’t you like it, Vita?” asked Jerry, his brown eyes twinkling. “We were thinking of getting you one like it—for your tramps through the woods, you know.”

The Italian woman scowled. She lacked a sense of humor as well as some other details of Americanization.

“Don’t tease her, Jerry,” Ted ordered. “He is only fooling, Vita,” she assured the perplexed maid, while visions of the fat woman in a jaunty little Scout uniform filtered through the brains of both Ted and Nora.

During lunch time conversation ran to the important occurrence of the morning, but Ted did not know all about the ducking in the Lake, and since Betta had cautioned Nora to keep secrets and if necessary to make them, it seemed unwise to tell every single detail: thus Nora reasoned. So it happened neither Ted nor Jerry knew whether the first swim was intentional or accidental, and both respected the “secrets of the order,” as Jerry put it.

“The girls are coming over this afternoon with a manual,” the candidate said as tea was finished, “and then I’ll have to do some studying.”

“I see where Cap and I will have to paddle our own canoe hereafter,” lamented Jerry. “That’s just the way with you girls. I get you all broke in and you race off and join up with the Indians. Well,” he sighed deeply, “I suppose Ted and I and Cap will have to go on our picnics alone, in spite of all our plans.”

“Oh, Cousin Jerry! Did you have a picnic planned!” eagerly asked Nora, leaving her place at the table to join Jerry on the big couch.

“I did but I haven’t,” he replied, with pretended disappointment. “What good are picnics for Girl Scouts? They want big game with real guns and elephant meat for supper,” he finished pompously.

“Oh, Cousin Jerry!” pouted Nora. “If you really had a picnic planned couldn’t we have it, and couldn’t I invite my Scout friends?”

“Course you could, Kitten,” Jerry gave in. “I’ll fix up the finest little picnic those Scouts ever heard tell of. Just you wait and see.”

“But we are going to celebrate privately this evening, Nora,” Ted added. “How would you like to go to a picture play?”

“Oh, I’d love it, of course. I do so love motion pictures, and the Misses Baily are so fussy about letting any of us go.”

“I’ll bet,” agreed Jerry. “Want you to see Mother Goose and Little Jack Horner——”

“Both of which are each,” interrupted Ted. “Guess you had better read up your nursery rhymes, Jerry.”

“Well, I didn’t take your college course, Theodora, but I went to Sunday School a lot—had to,” he admitted, shamelessly.

“Then, it’s all settled for this evening,” continued Ted, quite as if there had been no break in the conversation. “We will ride into Lenox and see the ‘movies.’ I know it’s a good picture this week and it isn’t Mother Goose either.”

“Glad of that. I hate the old lady myself,” scoffed Jerry. “This afternoon I must go out to moorlands, Ted,” he said next, seriously. “Suppose you and Nora take the day off and loaf? You did a lot of hard work this morning——”

“But I want to finish pegging off the west end,” Ted interrupted.

“Oh, could I help you, Cousin Ted?” begged Nora. “I would just love to do some real surveying.”

“And I would love to have you, certainly. We will rest for one full hour, then I’ll let you carry the chains and drops, and off we go to the West End. How’s that?”

“Lovely. Will Cap come?”

“Sartin sure,” declared Jerry. “I never let the youngsters go out on location without the big dog, do I Cap?”

Cap brushed his plumy tail against Jerry’s elbow and made eyes at his master, agreeing with everything he said, as usual.

Later, when the hour’s rest had been taken, Nora and Cousin Ted made their way to the grounds that were to be surveyed. Nora carried the “chain” which she wanted to call a tape line until Ted explained that carpenters had tape lines and surveyors used “chains,” and the term really meant an exact land measurement. The heavy instruments were already in position, and when the work of measuring the land with her eye, as Nora declared the process to be, was actually begun, the apprentice was quite fascinated.

“Now, show me the cobweb,” she insisted as Ted adjusted the delicate eye piece.

“There. Do you see that mark outside the little drop of alcohol?” asked Ted.

“The very small line like that on Miss Baily’s thermometer?”

“Yes, the line that frames the drop,” explained Ted, “that’s the finest substance we can get, and it’s cobweb.”

Nora peered through the telescope. She was seeing a drop of alcohol shift from level to level as Ted moved the transit, but she was thinking of the night she discovered the cobwebs in the attic. Somehow attic fancies clung to her, tenaciously, and had she been at all superstitious she surely would have called the attic unlucky. Just see the trouble that Fauntleroy acting got her into.

“It wouldn’t take many webs to make such tiny marks,” she said finally, as Ted moved off to “spot a tree.” “I guess I won’t have to gather many for Cousin Jerry for that little marking.”

Ted had moved off and with her small hatchet was hacking a piece out of the bark

of a tree—spotting it, as she termed it. Then she returned to the telescope and sought the level.

“What’s the little weight on the string?” Nora next asked.

“Oh, that’s our plumb-bob,” replied the surveyor. “Bob shows us just when a line is straight. Now watch.”

Over a peg in the ground Ted swung the heavy little pendulum, first to right then to the left, and so on until it fell directly on the mark.

“Now see, that is plumb,” said Ted.

Nora gazed intently at the drop. “Everything has to be just exactly, hasn’t it?” she queried, wondering why. “First, you strain your alcohol with cobwebs, then you drop your bob on the little peg straight as the string——”

“That is just where we get the expression from,” her companion assured her. “Nothing can be straighter.”

“And how do you get the mark on the tree?”

“Look through the glass again.”

So the first lesson in surveying went on. It was fascinating to Nora, and when Ted decided enough land had been “chained off” Nora wanted to mark a few trees for her own use.

“Couldn’t I chop a nick in this one? It is so beautiful, and when we come another day I can add another nick—just like a calendar.”

Mrs. Manton readily agreed, so long as Nora did not use a mark that might confuse the surveyors; and so interesting was the work, time flew and the afternoon was soon waning.

While in the woods more than once Nora had reason to be thankful for her practical Scout uniform, for she climbed trees, sought wild grapes from high limbs, gathered wild columbine and enjoyed the wildwoods as only a novice can. Birds scarcely flew from the path, and she marvelled they were so tame, but Ted explained they had no cause for fear, as the woods were their own and danger would be a new experience to them.

When finally Cap came back from his rambles and it was decided that no more surveying nor “play-veying” should be indulged in, instruments were gathered again, and reluctantly Nora followed Mrs. Manton out into the path, newly beaten down by those who had been following spots, bobs, cobwebs, chains, telescopes, compasses, transits and all the other skilled implements used.

“Are you really a surveyor?” she asked Ted, just wondering what she would call herself in Barbara’s letter.

“Yes, that or a civil engineer,” replied Ted. “That is really what I studied in the famous college course Jerry is always teasing about.”

“It is sort of artist work, isn’t it?”

“A wonderful sort. Just see what good times I have out among birds, flowers, wildwoods, and the whole clean, untamed world,” said Theodora Manton. “Some women may like indoors, but give me the woods and the fields and all of this,” she finished, sweeping her free brown hand before her with a gesture that encompassed glorious creation.

Nora pondered. How many worlds were there after all? How different this was from that which she knew at school? Would she ever enjoy the other now, after all this?

She glanced at her scratched hands and smiled. What manicuring would erase those, and yet how precious they would seem when Cousin Jerry would hear what she had done to help with his wonderful surveying?

“And we must fix up and look pretty for tonight,” said her companion, as if reading Nora’s thoughts. “I so seldom want to go out evenings I really have to think what to wear.”

“Do we dress up?” queried Nora.

“A little, that is we don’t wear these,” indicating the khaki. “But all the Lenox folks are professionals in one line or the other, and you know dear, they always claim a social code of their own.”

Nora was not positive she entirely understood, but she guessed that professionals, if they were anything like her Cousin Ted, would wear just such clothes as they liked best and felt most comfortable in, and she wondered how such would look in a theatre.

“Another rest, then an early dinner and we’ll be off,” announced Mrs. Manton when they reached the Nest. “Nora darling, you have made me very happy today,” the brown eyes embraced Nora while the hands were still burdened with instruments. “I will write at once to your mother and ask her——”

But a shout of Jerry’s interrupted the most interesting clause.

CHAPTER XIII—CRAWLING IN THE SHADOWS

“You jump in the car and wait a few minutes,” said Ted to Nora.

It was almost dusk and the moving picture party was about to set out for Lenox in the trim little car which, Ted insisted, was tamed, educated and “fed from her hand” when it went out of gas.

Nora willingly complied with the order to take her seat and wait. Dark shadows fell from the trees to the narrow roadway, and while alone there Nora was just wondering if everything was going to happen in one single day.

Cousins Jerry and Ted had many things to look after before setting out, for while Vita was a capable houseworker, she knew nothing of home management. Some minutes passed and the others had not yet come to the car where Nora sat so quietly that the squirrels had no idea a single human being was in the black car. One gay little furred skipper had the audacity to hop on the running board, but Nora from the depths of her cushions, never stirred.

A rustling of the leaves, much heavier than the tread of squirrels could possibly have been, gave her a start. She just peeked out in time to see something crawl across the road and continue on toward the path to the cottage.

“Oh, what was that!” Nora barely whispered. Then she raised her head and gazed intently at the crawling thing, that now was not more than an outline in the coming darkness.

For the moment she was too surprised to jump out and follow. Could it be a bear or some big animal? Certainly it was no small woodland creature, and as it passed the car she could hear queer, jerky breathing.

Being so near the house there was no need for alarm as to her personal safety, so she did jump out now and ran to meet Ted and Jerry who were just turning in from the barn drive.

“Oh,” Nora exclaimed breathlessly. “Did you see—anything?”

“Anything?” repeated Jerry.

“I mean did you see—anything queer?”

“Why no,” replied Ted. “But Nora, you look as if you had.”

“I did, really. Something stole out of the bushes and crept across the path, toward the kitchen.” Nora was still short of breath from her fright.

“Now Bobbs! You don’t mean to say that some wild, roaring lion——”

But Nora interrupted Jerry. “Honestly Cousin Jerry,” she declared, “I did see something, and we can’t go out and leave Vita alone until we find out what it was.”

“Bravo! Spoken like a Scout!” sang out the irrepressible Jerry. “Now let’s all have a look.”

“Over there,” directed Nora, and while neither Mr. nor Mrs. Manton appeared to take the matter seriously, they did, never-the-less, follow Nora’s directions and quietly prowl along the path.

“There,” exclaimed Nora. “I saw it again!”

“I thought I saw something scamper off myself,” admitted Ted. “What do you suppose it can be?” She stepped out squarely in the driveway and stood watching.

“Give me a look and I’ll announce,” said Jerry, his cap in one hand and a great stick, more like a tree limb he had hastily snatched up, in the other. He was going to have some fun out of it, at any rate. He never could miss a chance like this.

Thrashing down the bushes from the drive to the garden path took but a few moments, then they were within sight of the door.

“What’s the matter?” called out Vita. “You find big snake?”

“No, we’re looking for it,” answered Jerry. “Did he come your way?”

“I no see, not any,” said Vita fully. She never depended upon the scant Englishothers were apt to employ. While speaking she kept moving from one spot on the path to another, and her actions seemed so absurd Ted questioned the maid again.

“Now Vita, you know perfectly well you have seen something,” she insisted. “And we are not going away until we find out what is around here. Just look at Cap sniffing! He knows,” continued Mrs. Manton, moving up nearer to Vita and closer to the house.

“Nothing a-tall. Everything all right—good,” persisted Vita backing to the doorway.

“Say Vi,” called Jerry in his cheeriest voice, “who’s your friend? Are you trying to hide him behind your skirts? I told you, Ted, she should wear a uniform.”

“Oh, Jerry, do stop your nonsense,” begged Ted. “We shall be late for the pictures. Just run in and look around the house. Of course everything is all right, but we don’t want Nora worrying while we’re away and Vita’s alone.”

Nora had been looking sharply from one dark spot to another but no further disturbance appeared.

“Nothing could get into the house with Vita right at the door,” she reasoned aloud. “I suppose it was just something from the woods. Maybe one of those ’possums you told me about, Cousin Jerry.”

“Maybe, and again maybe not,” he answered. “But just wait until I shake this stick over the premises. Vita will feel a lot safer when I wave the wand of warning over the place,” and he entered the house with Vita so close to his heels that both Nora and Mrs. Manton looked surprised.

“Queer, how she acts,” admitted Mrs. Manton. “I just wonder—— But of course she is only hurrying to get us off. She knows we will miss the first show if we do not get away at once.”

Jerry was soon out, stick in hand, and a broad grin on his handsome face.

“Nary a thing,” he announced. “Nora, I am afraid your scouting has gone to your head. That, or you are seeing things.”

Before Nora might have replied Ted insisted they hurry off or give up the trip to Lenox, entirely.

“I’m ready,” Nora said, instead of commenting on the moving shadow. “I shouldn’t like to miss that picture.”

“All aboard!” sang out Jerry, and when the little car shot out of the woods into the splendid turnpike—the pride of all motorists for many miles around—Vita might have entertained her mysterious visitor (if she really had one) to her heart’s content, for all of the party bound cityward.

Since her arrival at Woodlands Nora had little chance for auto rides, there were so many more interesting things to do, so that the short trip to Lenox now seemed something of a luxury.

But the evening’s entertainment was even more delightful. The attractive little theatre was so prettily made up with colored paper flowers over the lights, with breezy electric fans and such simple contrivances as, in the larger city, Nora had not seen, it all appeared new, novel and attractive. It was quaint and cosy, and such an effect was ever delightful to the fanciful daughter of a woman who called herself Nannie instead of mother.

All about them people greeted the Mantons, and it was plain they were held in high esteem by many, farmers as well as more cultured folks, plain or dressed up—all had a pleasant word or a cordial greeting for the government surveyor and his attractive wife.

Nora wondered if the Girl Scouts ever came in to see the pictures, but Ted expressed the opinion that when they did come they came in a crowd and made a regular party of the occasion.

“But they have so many pleasures of their own for evenings,” she told Nora, “I shouldn’t fancy they would want to come under an ordinary roof often during the summer months.”

After the big picture with all its wizard scenes had been enjoyed, they started back towards Wildwoods. It was then that the fear of that crawling thing again crowded down on Nora and caused her to shiver until she actually shook.

“Too cool?” inquired Ted, unfolding a soft knitted scarf from her end of the seat.

“No, just shivery,” truthfully answered the imaginative Nora.

It was very dark along the country road, and only the flashing lights of passing cars penetrated the dense blackness of the tree-tunnels through which the party rode. It may have been this or it may have been the accumulated fatigue of her big, full day, but at any rate, Nora felt very much inclined to huddle up to Cousin Ted and hide.

The humming of the motor was like a lullaby, and the voices of Ted and Jerry mingled so evenly that presently Nora forgot, then she forgot to think, and then she stopped thinking.

She was sound asleep in the cosy comfort of Theodora Manton’s encircling arm.

"I'll lift her," she heard a voice whisper.

It had seemed only a minute since she entered the car and here she was home, at the very door, with Vita standing there, lantern in hand.

"Oh, thank you, Cousin Jerry," spoke up Nora bravely. "I am wide awake now. How perfectly silly to fall asleep?"

"How perfectly sensible," he contradicted. "I wish you had not awakened. I should have had a great joke to tell your Girl Scouts," he teased.

Nora laughed lightly. She was on the ground and anxious to get into the cottage. Why she felt so timid was not clear even to herself, but somewhere within her dread lurked, and when Ted proposed lemonade and crackers Nora excused herself on the grounds of being deliciously sleepy. For once she accepted Vita's offer to light her lights and make the window right for the night.

"You go quick asleep?" Vita remarked, turning down the soft summer covering from the little bed.

"Oh, yes. I fell asleep in the car," returned Nora, yawning.

"That's good. Then you hear no storm——"

"But there is no sign of a storm, Vita."

"Oh, but maybe. Or maybe, yes, some big birds fly and make screech——"

"Vita!" exclaimed Nora sharply. "What ever are you talking about? Are you trying to—scare me?"

"Oh, no. No get scared at—any t'ing." mumbled Vita while her own excited manner seemed real cause for alarm. "I just like to know when my little girl sleep very good, like baby."

Truth to tell Nora was too sleepy to argue, otherwise she might have demanded an explanation. Vita was plainly excited, and this fact coupled with that of her strange actions earlier in the evening was unquestionably enough to cause suspicion; but rest to a girl afflicted with "nerves" is a precious thing, and when it came to Nora she had no idea of risking its loss by any sort of argument.

But Vita seemed to want to linger longer. First she looked at one window, then at another. She even plumped a cushion—as if that were necessary to a night's comfort!

"Where do you sleep, Vita?" asked Nora, drowsily.

"Oh, in a good bed, in the little room by kitchen," replied the maid.

Nora recalled the maid's room. It was on the first floor just off the kitchen. So it could not have been Vita who slept in the attic.

"Would Vita get you a nice cold glass of water?" asked the solicitous one, still anxious to please.

"Oh, Vita," a yawn interrupted, "I am so sleepy——"

"Then I go——"

"Yes, you go. Good night, Vita," said Nora sweetly, "and I hope I sleep as soundly as I threaten to and as well as you want me to," finished Nora. "Isn't that being a very good girl?"

"Very, very good," said Vita happily. Then she went out quietly and left Nora to her coveted slumber.

CHAPTER XIV—CIRCUMSTANTIAL EVIDENCE

But being converted to scouting could not at once cure Nora of her dream habits.

Being so long alone in school, and having a brain insatiable for creative material, she usually went to bed to think and she went to sleep to dream.

“I never felt so deliciously tired,” she murmured. “But I do wonder what ailed Vita.”

Presently blue eyes cuddled in their white satin blankets with brown fringe borders (a way Nora had of describing eye lids and lashes), and then the panorama began.

First it was the Scout memory. She, as the bravest Scout that had ever joined a troupe, dramatically saved someone from drowning. Next, Nora as the actress in the picture shown at Lenox, performed the daring feat of swinging from the great rock with strikingly better effect than had she whose name graced the program. The third dream installment had to do with something very indistinct but horribly terrifying. It revealed a crawling thing that first crossed the path, then climbed the morning glory vine right up to Nora’s window, and now—yes now—it was choking her!

Had she screamed?

She found herself sitting up straight in bed and she felt as if her very curls had straightened out in fright.

There—was a noise! She listened, put her hand out and switched on the light. It was nothing in her room, but seemed somewhere—Yes, there it was again and it surely was up in the attic!

Was that someone moaning?

Dream dizzy still, Nora could form no definite resolve, either to call or to remain quiet. She simply lay fascinated with fright. The noise ceased. Still she lay—listening. Then other sounds penetrated the night. That was feet—shuffling of feet and they seemed just above her head! Quickly Nora reached out again and touched the button that switched off the light. She would rather lay hidden deeply in the bed clothing than be exposed to whatever was prowling in the attic, should it come down the stairs.

Then she thought she heard whispering, but that might have been her excited imagination. She drew the covers closer and with her head buried from sound she could no longer listen, and not possibly hear.

But after, what seemed to the frightened girl, a very long time she ventured to poke her head out again, just as she heard a stealthful step on the stairs.

“Oh!” she gasped aloud. Then “Vita!” she called faintly.

“Yes, I come. Sh-s-!”

Nora had not expected to hear that voice. She merely called Vita because she did not want to call Cousin Ted, and she felt the intruder was dangerously near. But there was Vita!

“What is it? You have bad dream?” asked the maid in a whisper, standing now beside the bed.

“No, it was no dream.” Nora’s voice was not very low, in fact she was angry. “I did hear things and there’s no use telling me it was the wind. It wasn’t,” she snapped.

“Sh-s-!” again Vita warned. “It is no good to wake cousins. I was up the stairs for that old window. It slam—you hear it?”

“What could slam a window tonight?”

“I do-no!” in the way foreigners have of not understanding when ignorance is more convenient. “I must go to bed now. You all right?”

“Say Vita!” charged Nora. “If you don’t tell me the truth I’ll—I’ll—just shout!”

“No, not too much noise,” coaxed the big woman, who in her night robe looked like a masquerade figure. “What do you want I should get you?”

“Nothing. I don’t want anything but for you to tell me who is up in that attic!” demanded Nora sharply.

“Me—Vittoria, is up attic.”

“Who was with you?”

“Cap.”

“Where is he now?”

“He go down—back way.”

“Now Vita—” Nora stopped. She was baffled. This woman could confuse her so and then walk off demurely, just as she had done that other night. Finally Nora began again:

“All right, Vita, but you just listen.” She was shaking a small finger toward the face with the black flashing eyes. “If you don’t tell me all about your secret I shall tell Uncle Jerry. Now do you understand?”

“Secret? What is ‘secret’?”

“The thing up in the attic is a secret,” persisted Nora, although she feared her voice might disturb the others now.

“That thing big Cap. He always at night sniff so much,” said Vita. “Now, I go to bed,” she spoke this very emphatically. “I go to bed and you go to sleep.”

“All right, go,” ordered Nora. “And don’t you dare go up in that attic again tonight. I was just having the most——”

But her audience had vanished and the house was empty, so to speak, so why orate or harangue?

All sleep and its delightful attributes had flown. Nora was so wide awake she felt she would never sleep again, and worse still, she was angry. What did that old Vita mean by her attic tricks? If it were she who was up there why did she moan? And if it were something else why did the woman try to conceal it?

“Now, I have a Scout duty,” Nora promised herself. “I must fathom that mystery and protect Cousin Theodora and Cousin Gerald from that unscrupulous woman.” Visions of crimes hidden in the attic, memory of her own incarceration there when the trap door, as she now regarded the door with the spring lock snapped shut, filtered through her excited brain, and when she remembered how she had almost died up there, and how it might have been years before her skeleton would have been discovered, just as so many others had fared on secret attic trips, it did seem to Nora that she should arise at once and immediately start her investigations. Humor and tragedy hopelessly mixed.

“But it’s so late,” she figured out, “and would it be fair to wake Cousin Ted when she is so tired and after her taking me to that beautiful picture?”

Convincing herself that this was why she did not immediately begin her brave Scout work, she once more attempted to quiet her nerves by thinking of all the sheep Miss Baily had recommended to skip over fences and lull one to sleep.

But sleep was far out of the reach of frisky sheep, and Nora lay there thinking of so many things, her head threatened to ache and a miserable day promised to dawn upon her if she did not soon succumb.

“Perhaps I wronged poor Vita. There may not have been anything wicked in the attic after all,” she soothed herself. “Why couldn’t she go up there if she wanted to? And

maybe she stubbed her toe.”

It was not very consoling but the best Nora could work up in the way of consolation. One thing certain, Vita was honorable. She was a trusted servant, and in the short time Nora had been at the Nest, many small favors, peculiar to good cooks, had come Nora’s way through Vita’s intervention.

Such happy thoughts finally dispelled the other unfriendly mental visitors, and when Vita stole past the door again and looked in through the darkness, all she heard was the even breathing of little Nora Blair, who might or might not have been dreaming of horrible attic noises.

The day brings wisdom, and when Nora again dressed in the borrowed khaki suit (she had suddenly taken a dislike to her own fancy dresses), the glorious sunshine of the bright summer morning mocked the terrors of the night.

A step in the hall. “I bring your fruit,” said Vita kindly through the open door; and there she stood with a small dish of such delicious berries to be eaten off stems by hand—surely Nora had wronged this kind, tender-hearted foreigner.

Nora was somewhat conscience stricken as she accepted the peace offering. “Oh, thank you, Vita,” she exclaimed. “I was just coming down.”

“But the Jerries are out early and you no need hurry,” explained Vita. “I make nice breakfast when you come.”

“Cousin Ted gone out?” asked Nora.

“Yes, she say you stay home, not go after them, they must ‘bob swamp.’”

“Bob swamp? Oh, you mean use the plumb-bob in the swamp. I understand, Vita.” It was really remarkable how well both understood today and how dense both had been last night. “Very well, I’ll eat my fruit here by the window, and later try your lovely biscuits,” said Nora, with a smile rarely used outside the family.

The housemaid shuffled off. Looking after her, Nora wondered.

“I do believe she is trying to keep on good terms with me for something—something queer,” she decided. “Certainly she is afraid I will tell Cousin Ted about the attic business.” She paused with a big red strawberry half way to her lips. “Well, I have a secret, anyhow,” she decided, “and I like Alma, she makes me think of myself—she is sort of shy and sensitive. Perhaps I shall make her my confidante.”

Of all the Scouts Alma seemed most congenial, and having a real secret was the first definite step in Nora’s summer career. But are secrets wise and are they safe to carry around in so big and open a place as Rocky Ledge?

CHAPTER XV—WAIF OF THE WILDWOODS

It was so much better than dreams. Not only did Nora feel the importance of having a real secret, but she also realized that the same circumstance had actually made Vita her abject slave. Not a wish was expressed by the visitor in Vita's presence but the maid would, if it were possible at all, see to its fulfillment.

"I believe I'll tell Alma," Nora decided one morning after a visit and return to and from Camp Chickadee. Almost daily she made those trips and the Scouts had become such friends with her she was now regarded quite as one of their number.

Expecting to join formally as soon as the other candidates of Rocky Ledge were ready and the Counsellor should come down from the city, Nora studied her manual and prepared for the honor. In the meantime she was privileged to enjoy many of the Scout activities.

But "the secret" was really more engrossing just now. It provided her with a personal importance—what girl does not enjoy the possession of a knowledge others have not and everyone would love to have?

It was thrilling. Alma, the Tenderfoot Scout, who from the first had espoused Nora's cause and even confided in her the real story of the woodland prince, met her daily at a wonderful rendezvous, and there the two girls, away from teasing companions, enjoyed confidences and built air castles.

"I'll tell her today," the resolve was repeated as Nora started out.

She arrived first, and while waiting had a race with Cap all the way to the Three Oaks and back again.

"Dogs have to run faster," explained Nora breathlessly, when Cap won by more than he needed to establish his claim. "If you could not run faster than human beings, Cap, you could never have been made a Red Cross messenger, as you were in the awful war."

The arrival of Alma cut short the encomium. Salutations were brief for both were eager to "tell each other a lot of things."

"Alma, do you think you could keep a secret?" The question was so trite and time worn Alma smiled before answering in the affirmative.

"Because," continued Nora, "this is the biggest secret I have ever had, and Barbara and I have had a great many."

"I have to have secrets," returned Alma, "because none of the girls seem to understand me. They tease, you know, they almost made me homesick one night; they kept teasing and teasing about the prince; and Miss Beckwith had a hard time to make me stop crying."

Nora winced. "Well, this isn't that sort of a secret," she said presently. "It's about our attic."

"What about it?"

"Oh, it's a lot to tell. We had better sit on the big log under the chestnut tree and be comfortable before I start."

Then began the story of the first night at Wildwoods when Nora was determined to sleep in the attic. Many an exclamation of surprise was thrown in by the more practical Alma, but this in no way turned the narrator from her course. She sent thrill after thrill up and down Alma's spine, and she even voiced a suspicion that Vita might have a member of "some den of thieves hidden in the attic, although she is the soul of honesty," Nora

was particular to state.

But it was the incident that occurred the night they went to Lenox that really caused Alma to exclaim tragically:

“Nora, you should tell Mrs. Manton! It is not safe to hide anything so serious as that. Suppose the Thing comes crawling down some night and Vita is not there to drive it back?”

“Oh, she doesn’t drive it back,” Nora had not actually visualized the terror in that way. “She just kept me from finding out——”

“What?” interrupted Alma when Nora paused from sheer excitement.

“I don’t know what!”

“What do you think?”

“Well, maybe it’s a—really Alma, I don’t dare think. I did not know how frightened I was till I started talking about it. Why, I am just all creeps,” admitted Nora. “Here Cap,” she shouted, as the dog attempted to wander off, “don’t go away. Come on, Alma. I guess we had better go out by the road. Why, I am just as frightened as if the—Thing were around here!” she gasped.

“Maybe it is,” said Alma cruelly, picking up her knitting upon which she had not taken a stitch, and following Nora out of the little woodland into the more open field that flanked the narrow roadway.

They hurried. Alma tripped and Nora almost screamed.

“Why, what is the matter?” asked the Scout. “You haven’t seen anything?”

“No, but I feel so queer. You know, Alma” (she loved an audience), “I am queer and I do believe I sometimes feel things in advance. Miss Baily always said I did.”

“She must have been queer herself,” retorted Alma. “I had those wild ideas, too, until I joined the Scouts. That’s the reason Mother had me join. She said I was too much alone——”

It was difficult to talk while hurrying over newly-cut stumps with which the field was so thickly strewn. The surveyor’s men had hewn many a fine young birch and numbers of ambitious young maples there, for this was one of the forests lately cleared.

“Here come the girls,” exclaimed Nora, as they looked down the road. “Alma, promise not to say a single word——”

“Why, Nora Blair! As if I would divulge a secret——”

“Excuse me, Alma. I did not mean just that. But when one does not realize the importance——”

“I do realize it. But it’s all right, Nora. I know just how you feel,” conceded Alma, amiably. “There. I have to go with Pell to get some grasses from the Ledge. I’m sorry I can’t walk home with you. You don’t mind——”

“Not in the least, Alma. I was just jumpy while we talked—that way. Besides, I always have Cap. Good bye. I’ll see you tomorrow morning.”

“Won’t you wait for the girls?”

“I’m afraid if I do I’ll stay talking. Hello,” she called out as Pell and Thistle came up. “Alma and I have had such a lovely time out in the oak woods I am late for my—chores,” she finished, laughing.

“What do you chore, Nora?” asked Pell. Her face was beaming with the health of camp life and her voice vibrated youth and happiness.

“She chores chores of course,” Thistle assisted. “I am sure the Nest is a lot nicer

place to live and work in than Camp Chickadee—when Pell Mell is our inspector,” she finished, with a pout.

“Nora, would you believe it that wretched girl left her shoes outside of camp last night and this morning they were gone—to a goat preserve somewhere,” explained Pell. “She has my second best ‘sneaks’ on now, yet she will malign me——”

“Why and whither away?” interrupted Thistle, seeing Nora about to escape.

“Oh, I really must. I’ll see you later,” promised the blonde girl, whose hair, always so fair, seemed to have taken on a shade of pure gold since exposed to the open sunshine of Rocky Ledge.

So with paths divided they separated, and that was how it came to pass that Nora was alone when she encountered the wonderful adventure.

Taking to the lane path, a walk she seldom thought of following, Nora, keyed up with her excitement following the telling of her story to Alma, felt she must get off somewhere and “collect herself” before going back to the house.

Perhaps her head was down, and she may have ventured along as do much older and more serious folk when engaged in some perplexing problem, at any rate Nora was down the lane and into a strange grove before she realized it.

She looked up with a start. “Where ever am I?” she said, if not aloud, certainly loud enough for her own hearing.

The place was a veritable camp of low pines, and so dark it was beneath the thickly woven boughs, Nora felt as if she had stepped from day to night.

“But so pretty,” she commented. Then she looked about for Cap. It would not be wise to stray into such a lonely place without his reliable protection. He marched up with a very military air as she called his name. Evidently the place, strange to Nora, was familiar to him, for he did not so much as raise his shaggy head to glance around him.

“Stay here,” she whispered. Then, turning to survey the place, she almost froze with fright. Over in under a very low tree she saw something move—it was like a bundle of rags and it—yes, it had a head!

“Oh, mercy!” she gasped. “What’s that?”

The black bundle rolled over and sat up. Two big, brown eyes glared at her! The head was covered with a shawl. Was it a woman?

Frozen now with genuine fright Nora tried to move, but felt more like sinking down.

“Oh!” she breathed. Then she saw how small it was. There! It was humping up. Like a queer sort of animal the bundle took shape on huddled shoulders, and from the outline eyes glared.

It was not more than twenty feet from where Nora stood, but the almost night darkness of the grove helped make illusions terrifying.

Now it was on knees and now it stood up!

“Oh,” cried Nora. “Who are you?”

A little girl—a poor little ragged girl, evidently more frightened than Nora herself.

“Oh, do come here,” cried Nora, as soon as she saw how she had been deceived. “I won’t hurt you.”

The child was now standing. What a sorry little figure! The part that was not eyes seemed just rags, and two bare feet pressed upon the brown pine needles like chunks of withered wood. Her head was covered with an ugly gray scarf and yet the day was warm

enough to feel the sun's rays even through the dense trees.

"What's your name, little girl?" asked Nora, venturing a step nearer.

The eyes rolled and then a smile broke over that frightened face. "I'm Lucia," replied the child, and her voice was as pretty as her name.

CHAPTER XVI—LADY BOUNTIFUL JUNIOR

Hearing that small, fluty voice Nora sighed with relief.

"Come here, little girl," she said gently. "I won't hurt you."

"Please, I can't. I must run——"

"Oh, no; don't run," begged Nora, as the child showed every sign of escaping. "I am all alone. I just want to talk to you."

"But I must not. I have to run," insisted the other.

"Why?"

"Because——" the voice had dropped many tones.

"Will any one hurt you if you don't?" This was merely a chance question of Nora's. She could not think quickly of just the right thing to say and was anxious to detain the child.

"Yes, no, maybe," a shrug of the small shoulders proclaimed foreign mannerisms. Her dark eyes also bespoke the alien.

"Well, I won't let anyone hurt you," declared Nora bravely. "I'm a Girl Scout, do you know what that means?"

"Yes, I know. It means crazy," promptly replied Lucia.

"Crazy?" Nora was somewhat taken back. Then it dawned upon her that foreigners had a way of saying things—perhaps—"crazy" meant something else to the child.

"Why do you say 'crazy'?" Nora asked next.

"Oh, they dress funny, and they run all over and they climb trees like—crazy," said Lucia. Nora saw she was correct in her free translation. Crazy was a comprehensive term to Lucia.

"Don't you like them, the Scouts?" pressed Nora.

"The little one—I like. The big ones chase me one day," came the indifferent answer. "I have to go, I must run sure now," declared Lucia, putting out her small hands to make a hole in the bushes through which to escape.

"Oh, please don't go yet," begged Nora. "I have just found you and I want to—know you."

"I don't dast," replied Lucia. "I have to hide now," she was getting through the break when Nora took hold of the long skirt. At this Lucia looked around sharply, and her dark eyes flashed dangerously.

"Are you hungry?" Nora asked. This was a tactful thing to ask and offered immediate postponement of flight for Lucia.

"Sure," she replied, beaming. "What you got?"

"Nothing—just now," faltered Nora. "But I can bring you lots of good things. You wait here——"

"Oh, no, I get caught," interrupted the woods wraith. "Then I ketch—it."

Nora was sorely puzzled, but being Nora she had no idea of allowing such an interest to escape. She said next: "If you tell me where to leave things for you, I'll bring

them and you can get them when no one is around. Would that be all right?"

"Maybe," replied the exasperating Lucia. "But when you get it?"

"Oh, any time, I live near here and I can just run over and be back before you have to go. Where do you go to?"

"I can't tell," answered Lucia with more foreign tone than she had yet assumed.

"You mean you do not dare tell me where you live?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

"Why?"

"I don't dast," again came that quaint, childish negative.

"Who would do anything to you?"

"Nick."

If Nora was eager to talk, surely Lucia was determined to be very brief. What could she mean by "Nick."

Again Lucia held the bush back into an open gate. And again Nora tugged at the skirt.

"If I bring you a lovely sweet pie will you come back and talk to me here?" begged Nora.

"Where will you put the pie?"

"Can't you come and get it?"

"I don't know."

It was aggravating. The child seemed purposely obtuse. Nora had an instinctive feeling that somehow she was the object of abuse. Her cringing manner indicated oppression.

"Now, Lucia," she began again, "if you come here every day I'll come all alone, except for Cap, and I'll bring you lovely things to eat. Wouldn't you like that?"

"Sure."

"Then you will come?"

"What time?"

"In the morning—about this time. Would that be all right for you?"

"If Nick is gone."

"Who is Nick?"

"Very bad man. I hate Nick." This last sentence was so purely American, that even Nora guessed the child had come from mixed surroundings. Holding to her shawl Nora could feel, she imagined, a shudder pass through the slim frame at the very mention of the name Nick.

Lucia dragged her scarf off a bush. "I go now," she said with just a tinge of politeness. "You bring pie?"

"Yes, a big pie. Don't forget to come."

"I come—sure."

The queer figure stood for a moment out in the clear sunlight, and Nora had a chance to see her features. She was pretty, strikingly so, in spite of her pinched cheeks and her too lustrous eyes.

"Please—you don't tell anybody?" came the appeal. "I work all day and pull weeds, but like to sleep little bit by the big trees, sometimes."

Then Nora guessed. "You mean you are sick and come here to rest?"

"Please."

“Well, you just come here whenever you want to, Lucia,” said Nora with feeling. “The idea of a tiny tot like you working at pulling weeds! And with all those heavy rags on you! It’s a shame!” she declared indignantly.

“You don’t tell?” the child persisted anxiously.

“No, Lucia. I’ll never tell. I have a lot of secrets, and this one I won’t even tell Alma.”

“Good bye.”

Like a frightened animal the waif sped across the field and dodged into the next clump of shrubbery.

“She is afraid of being seen,” reasoned Nora. “Who ever saw such a pitiful little thing?”

Then it dawned upon her that Cap had not even sniffed suspiciously.

“Did you like her, Cap?” she asked, patting the patient animal, that all during the broken conversation had lain at Nora’s feet without so much as a single growl. “Did you feel sorry for her, too, Cap?”

He may have or there may have been some other reason for his indifference, but now he was willing and anxious to go home. It was lunch time and Cap never needed an announcement.

Nora followed him. She was too astonished to know even what to think. That a little beggar girl should hide in the bushes to rest from hard work!

“I’ll bring her the nicest things Vita can bake,” she concluded. Then came the thought: How would she get Vita to give her the supplies without making known the use she was to put them to?

Picnics were common. These would surely supply an excuse for carrying out food, and, after all, wouldn’t it be a picnic for Lucia?

Nora’s heart was fluttering.

“I never knew what a vacation was before,” she told Cap. “Here I am having a love of a time and doing things worth remembering.”

How different from the fashionable summers she had been accustomed to! Nowadays she hardly had time to look in a glass, and yet she was enjoying every hour. It was like discovering something new continually, and did Nora but know the secret of the adventure it was simply that she was discovering her own resources—she was getting acquainted with Nora Blair.

But miracles are not common, and Nora was not yet completely transformed from a sensitive, secretive girl, to an honest, frank, fearless Girl Scout.

Even the new discovery of Lucia and her sad plight was now locked up in her breast.

But should it have been?

CHAPTER XVII—A PICNIC AND OTHERWISE

A rush of events followed. Chief among them was that of a Girl Scout picnic, inaugurated by Ted and Jerry, carried out by Nora and enjoyed by all.

It was a delightful hike out to the Ledge, that big, rugged rock that leaned over a pretty, disjoined lake, made up of tributaries from springs and rain flows. Rocky Ledge was exactly that—narrow, rocky; a table or shelf that leaned out just far enough to form a little portico over the frivolous waters beneath. It was a charmed spot, with many thrilling

legends to its credit, and being different from the entire scenery surrounding, it gave the place its name—just like one girl different from her companions will stand out as an example, if she happens to be that kind of different that is interesting.

Not that other parts of this territory were commonplace. No, indeed. There was a fertile farm country, Jerry's precious forests, Ted's wonderful butterfly haunts and even Nora's cedar groves; but these did not touch the high spot enjoyed by that novel little ledge; hence the whole territory was known as Rocky Ledge.

The picnic marked midsummer's festivity. Chickadee Patrol invited members from other camps out to the Ledge, and when Pell insisted that Thistle and her aids "do up enough grub" for those invited, a strike was narrowly averted.

"You know, Pell Mell, the Mantons will bring barrels of things to eat, so why should we make samples of our miserable home-cooking failures?" demanded Thistle. Betta was standing hard by egging her on.

"They will bring the lunch, that is, The Lunch, but what about a little four o'clock snack? There are silver springs out there with water cress on the cob, and I know our girls are never loath to nibble a bite or two when out on location," Pell reminded her mutinous crew. That was Pell. She had a way of getting things done and at the same time making a joke of it.

"Is Nora going to be inducted?" asked Betta. Next to Alma, Betta was the most avowed champion of the girl from the Nest.

"Yes, we had a letter today and Becky told us we would have a business meeting Wednesday, when your precious Babe Nora will be led to the stake. She will accept the halter of allegiance to Pell, Betta and the rest of the mob——"

"If you feel so frisky, Pell, I wish you would work off some of the extra on this tin can. I am supposed to open it with a souvenir trick can opener. I am sure Betta brought it from the state fair, B. C. 150. It has all the ear marks of antiquity without any of the teeth," declared Wyn, who was struggling with an implement, curious and wonderful.

"That's a perfectly good can opener," defended Betta. "Jimbsy purloined it from his own mother's table——"

"Which supports my theory," interrupted Wyn. "His mother's table is none other than antique. But there! It did cut—my hand into the bargain," and she defied all her first-aid rules by sticking a finger in her mouth. "Glad it cut something."

"Where's Alma?" asked Laddie. "She always gets out of the drudgery."

"Alma was tagged along to town to buy things," explained Thistle. "Becky is hearing her lessons on the way. Alma is our little freshman, you know, girls, and while she doesn't wear mourning, she is often in sorrow."

"She has a great time with Nora, I notice," remarked Doro. "I fancy between the two of them they have fixed it up about the prince. Shouldn't be a bit surprised if they invited him to the picnic."

"Now, remember," ordered Wyn, "don't dare say prince. Say duke if you must, but spare Alma's feelings on the princeling. But honestly, girls, wasn't it a joke?"

"Not to Alma," answered Treble. "She certainly had a vision if she did not see a prince. Here she comes. Look at the bundles! Land sakes alive! If it's more grub I'm going to duck. My fingers are mooing now from spreading butter," and Treble plastered a slab of the yellow paste on a square of bread, quite as if it were intended as mortar for a sky-scraper.

An hour later they were on their way. Nora might have ridden out to the Ledge in the little runabout, but she preferred to walk with the girls.

"I'm so excited about joining," she confided to Betta and Alma, her hike partners. "I feel as if I were going to have my final exams."

"You don't want to," advised Betta. "You know your manual perfectly, and have nothing to worry about. But we shall all be so glad, Nora, when you are really a Scout. It is all well enough to be a lone Scout out in the wilderness, but while we're around there is no sense in such isolation."

"The Lone Scout! Oh, I was fascinated reading about the provisions for such an individual arrangement. Just imagine being a troop of one," said Nora.

"About as interesting as Laddie's collection of one piece of genuine mica," replied Betta. "As much as I detest the girls" (she gave Alma's arms an affectionate squeeze in explanation), "still, I would rather be pestered with them than to be a Lone Scout on the Big Mountain. There, Nora! That would make a stunning title for your coming book."

"What book?" demanded the unsuspecting Nora.

"The one that is coming next," serenely replied Betta. "But let us hasten! See yon girls are turning into the other yon road," she went on. "We betta——"

A warning chuckle from Alma, cut short her "Betta." Until this attractive girl learned to respect the all-American R she would never know peace with her companions.

Joining the others the merry party hiked along; singing, whistling, calling, laughing and making noises peculiar to girls out on picnics bent.

Mr. and Mrs. Manton rode to the Ledge, deposited their treat and were ready to be on their way and leave the girls to their own good time, almost as soon as the party arrived.

"Oh, stay," besought Pell. "We are counting on having you in for our games——"

"I wish I could," replied the big brown Jerry. "But the fact is this wife of mine has planned a little picnic all of her own. You see, when she got me in on this she knew I could not back out on hers. Yes," he sighed affectedly, "she has made me promise to take her out canoeing, and I am not sure what terror she has set for me at the end of the stream."

"Oh, are you really going down the stream?" cried Treble. "I have just longed for a ride down through the rapids——"

"Well, you best not take it," spoke up Mrs. Ted. "I am going down the stream only to explore. And I would not go without the strong arm of a man at the keel."

"Oh, Jimbsy, where art thou?" wailed Thistle. "Why didn't we treat you right! Your gallant craft——"

"Get the water there, Cicero," shouted Doro. "This lunch is to have lemonade a la carte, and there isn't a drop of water in the house. Sorry to disturb the oration——"

"Gimme the pail," snapped the interrupted Thistle. "I never yet started anything that Doro didn't finish."

But even the delightful lunch, served on a grassy table with every girl holding down her own table cloth, for a light little breeze flirted outrageously with the service—even all this did not tempt the Scouts to tarry long from the delights of the great, wild open; and before the normal eating hour had passed the girls were formed in groups and circles, to suit their individual and collective tastes, and through field and glen their

laughter supplied the marching tune.

Nora was clinging to Alma, with a motive. She had seen the great field of corn just behind the Ledge, where fertility could be depended upon, and she was wondering, secretly, if little Lucia might pick weeds out there?

“Could we go over to those gardens?” she asked the leaders, when the other girls had all chosen their points for exploration.

“Why, certainly. I am glad to see that you are interested in real gardens,” replied Miss Beckwith. “Those are called the Italian gardens because Italians work there, not because they bear any resemblance to the wonderful gardens of Italy.”

The temptation was strong within Nora to tell Alma just why she wanted to go up close to the big women with hoes and rakes; but the memory of Lucia’s dark eyes, that looked so like dewy pansies when the child begged: “You will never tell,” that memory sealed Nora’s lips, while she eagerly sought out any small figure that might be that of the little slave of labor.

“I don’t like those horrid women,” said Alma. “Why don’t you want to go over the other way, out into the pretty woodlands, Nora? Come on and let’s run back. I am almost afraid of that ugly creature coming over that dug-up place,” Alma declared.

“I don’t like her, either,” admitted Nora. “I only wanted to see—they work—close by.”

“Going in for scientific gardening when we make you a real Scout?” Alma continued, as they both hurried back to the uncultivated territory. “Lots of girls are trying it, but it’s wickedly hard on the hands.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that, Alma. But I just——” She stopped and looked frankly into Alma’s gray eyes. “Alma,” she began again with an unexpected sigh, “would you think me mean if I asked you to do something to help me without, well, without explaining fully?” she floundered.

“Why, no, certainly not, Nora. You must have good reason for not wanting to confide——”

“I do want to confide,” Nora quickly took up the charge. “But this is not my own affair. I have promised not to tell.”

“Then don’t bother to explain,” said Alma, generously. “I’ll do all I can to help you. I am sure it’s for a good cause.”

“The noblest charity——” Nora checked herself. “I’ll tell you. I want to take my picnic lunch to—some place——” It was next to impossible to go on without going all the way.

“Nora, darling! You are truly a brave Scout!” declared the admiring Alma. “There you haven’t touched your lovely lunch. Saved it for a secret charity. Just you wait until you are received into the band of Chickadees! I’ll be your sponsor if I am allowed it, and I’ll find a way——”

“Alma! Alma!” gasped Nora, tragically. “You really must do nothing of the kind. As happy as I am now at the idea of being a Scout, I shouldn’t even join if I thought that in any way this secret would become known.” She was breathless at the very thought, and had jerked Alma to a standstill right in the middle of a mud patch, in her excitement.

“Oh, don’t worry,” soothed Alma. “I had no idea of telling any part of the secret, that, of course, I really don’t know anything about. I was just planning what I might say to your especial credit if the promoter should call upon me,” she finished with a tinge of

disappointment.

“Then help me carry my lunch back to—the woods near our house,” said Nora while the glance she exchanged was a unspoken volume.

“I hope you are not going to give it away to some wild animal,” Alma could not refrain from remarking.

“Oh, no indeed,” Nora assured her companion.

“Then why do you not eat it?”

“I have promised——”

“Maybe it’s Jimmie,” said Alma, with a sly little chuckle.

“Jimmie! Why I have never spoken to him!”

“Oh, you should,” the Scout assured her. “He is such a nice, useful boy.”

“Does he work on the farms?” asked Nora seriously.

“I guess he doesn’t really work any place in particular, but almost every place in general,” replied Alma. “But let’s hurry. The others will think we got hoed in with the corn.”

So they did hurry back to the picnic and back to their strategy.

CHAPTER XVIII—THE LITTLE LORD’S CONFESSION

It was all over. Nora had been made a Girl Scout. To celebrate the enrollment Jerry and Ted gave a “large party” at the Nest, and of all her memorable social functions, this to Nora seemed most delightful.

Every one came, even Becky the patrol leader, and in their uniforms all freshly pressed out, the white summer blouse being allowed for the festive occasion, the party looked quite novel, and the girls had a wonderful time, dancing, playing games and inventing new fun provokers at every turn. Nora as the guest of honor was honored indeed, and accepted her compliments most gracefully.

“It was all a matter of opportunity,” said Ted aside to Jerry, referring to Nora’s change of heart. “She is just as good a Scout as any of them.” This was a proud boast.

“The woods are full of them,” said Jerry the champion of all girls, Scouts and near Scouts. “Just give them the chance.”

But up in her own room Nora was pondering. “It’s just like getting married,” she reflected. “That is, I guess it is,” she amended wisely. “One must clear up every secret and fix all the old troubles when one gets married, and one must clear up all the old worries and secrets when she joins the Scouts,” concluded the systematic, little self-appointed conscience cleaner.

There was that matter of the prince. Never did Alma mention it nor never did Nora hear any of the other Scouts refer to it without feeling guilty.

“I just ought to tell Alma the whole truth,” she was now deciding. It was the day after the great event.

But came the thought of Alma’s certain surprise that she, Nora, her true friend and confidante, should have deceived her so long.

Pride did not melt into humility with the bestowing of the pretty Scout emblem, so Nora did not see her way clear to tell that silly story of her Lord Fauntleroy escapade. She was repeating her Scout promise “To do my duty to God and Country and to help others at all times,” and she mentally made the promise again.

“To help others.” That clause charged her. Was she helping Alma? Did she not

know, really, that the one glimpse of the person in velvets had left kind and considerate little Alma guessing ever since, and also that it had put her in a ridiculous position with her companions?

“I know, I’ll write her a letter.” The inspiration satisfied, and thus started the most remarkable correspondence—but let others tell it.

“She got a letter!” exclaimed Wyn.

“What’s wonderful about that?” asked Betta.

“It’s from the prince, that’s what,” declared the first speaker.

“Prince!”

“The very same,” chimed in Treble, stretching her long self from the bench to the boat swing.

“What nonsense!” scoffed Betta. “Alma may be romantic, but she is not crazy.” (Lucia to the contrary.)

“Just ask her,” suggested Wyn. “She’s hugging that letter as tight as tu’ pence. I always told you Alma was madly in love——”

“Hush!” Doro’s warning suspended operations along that line. Alma was upon them.

“Letter?” asked Wyn, innocently.

“Yes, and if you like you may read it. It’s from——”

“The prince?” blurted Treble, shooting her hand out.

“I’m corporal,” said Thistle, pompously. “Let me have it, dear.”

“Perhaps I should read it myself,” said Alma, pettishly, thus prolonging the agony. “It is so—personal.”

“Yes, do,” begged Wyn, coiling and uncoiling in sheer expectancy.

“Here’s a seat,” offered Betta.

“The sun’s there,” warned Thistle amiably. “Take this seat, Alma,” and she moved over so generously, the bench all but tipped end on end.

Every one waited. Alma took out her letter—it was in her crocheted bag and one could see how she treasured it.

What a thrill!

But Treble pinched Betta and almost spoiled the start.

“I received it this morning,” said Alma, “and, of course, it didn’t come through the mail.”

“How?” asked Wyn.

“Jimmie!” replied Alma.

“Oh-o-o-o-oh!”

The shout was mortifying, Betta came to the rescue.

“Jimmie isn’t your prince—Alma?” she asked sweetly.

“Jimmie!” Alma’s tone was caustic. “As if that freckled face——”

“Here! Easy on the Jimbsy!” warned Treble. “He’s a perfectly fine little Scout, and if ever this patrol extends to co-ed——!”

“Let Alma read her letter,” ordered Thistle, the corporal.

“How’d you say you got it?” persisted Wyn.

“Jimmie brought it.”

“Where did he get it?” again asked the irrepressible Wyn.

“He was pledged not to tell, but just see the stationery.” The envelope was passed

around; all commented favorably.

“You see,” began Alma, “this was written as a confession.”

The older girl shouted again. Treble nudged Wyn almost off the bench.

“Don’t mind them, Alma, I’m listening,” said Betta sharply.

“Oh, we all are,” chimed in Doro.

Alma folded her letter. “If you are—going to—tease——” she faltered.

“Here!” yelled Thistle, quite uncorporal like, “The very first one that speaks will be dumped into the lake. Proceed Alma.”

From that point things went along better. Again Alma looked promising.

“As I said, the letter is a confession.” Then ignoring a number of subdued interruptions, she went on. “It is signed ‘Your loving prince.’”

Could you blame them for howling?

“Your loving—prince!!!!” repeated Wynn. “And is there a Jimbsy to that?”

“I told you,” said the offended Alma, “the only thing Jimmie had to do with it was to deliver it.”

“So far as you know,” interjected Doro, “But Jimmie is a far-sighted lad.”

“Let me read it, Alma,” said Thistle in desperation. “I can’t see why some girls can’t have more manners.”

“And why some can’t have some?” retaliated Treble.

“Once more, shall I read it?” asked Alma, sighing.

“You shall,” declared Betta. “The first one that interrupts—— Oh, I say girls, it is almost time for drill. Have some sense and let’s hear it.”

Murmurs approved.

“‘I feel constrained to write this, dear,’” Alma actually read, “‘because I feel I have done you a great injustice.’” (Moans.)

“‘After you saw me and I fled——’” Alma paused. “He means flew, of course.”

This started another outburst, and what he didn’t mean by “fled” simply wasn’t worth meaning.

“Go ahead, Alma, we know he—fled,” prompted Betta.

“‘After I ran’” (prudent Alma), “‘I never had the courage to make myself known to you,’” she perused. “‘But when I heard your companions taunt you——’”

“‘There! Taunting her! I told you to be good——’” Wyn’s interruption was inevitable.

“It is no use in my trying to be sociable,” said the sensitive Alma. “But I thought you would all be interested.”

“There is not much more to read,” announced the popular member. “He just says that soon—soon he will come.”

“Oh, joy!” shouted Doro, rolling over in the grass. “Let me know in time!”

“They’re just idiots, Alma. Come on with me and leave them to guess the rest,” proposed the astute Betta, the confidante of girls. “I want to hear it if nobody else does.”

Without even a giggle they jumped up and seized Alma. One could not be sure whose arm was most restraining, but she changed her mind about going with Betta. Instead she opened the famed sheet again and read:

“‘My conscience has troubled me ever since, dear, but I was forced to do as I did. Drop your answer——’” She paused. “I don’t intend to read that part,” she calmly announced, and no amount of coaxing would induce her to relent. No one should know

where the letter to the prince was to be mailed, Alma was determined on that point at least.

CHAPTER XIX—A DESERTED TRYST

Nora was disconsolate. For two days the dainties left for Lucia had remained untouched. The bread box which Vita had given her to play with, and into which the food was deposited for Lucia, stood upon the tree stump with the sliced lamb, the piece of cake, and the big orange which comprised the last installment offered by the sympathetic Nora, just as she had left it.

“Can anything have happened to her?” Nora asked herself. She was almost too disappointed to sit down and rest in the cool, quiet shade. Cap sniffed the box but did not put a paw up to beg, and even the big noisy blue-jay scorned a few crumbs that lay on a fallen leaf.

“Suppose he—murdered her!”

It was not unusual for a girl like Nora to think the very worst first, in fact the normal, childish mind is very apt to leap at a sensation, but only the high spot is sensed, the detail is always conspicuously lacking.

“Of course she is deadly sick. Oh, why didn’t she let me know where she lived,” Nora wailed secretly. “I could visit her and bring her all sorts of lovely things——”

She lifted the paper napkin that covered the food offering.

“What’s this?” she exclaimed. A stiff little green leaf made of very shiny paper appeared, and with it, Nora found, was an old fashioned nose-gay, the sort beloved by the Italians and the Polish peasantry. Nora picked up the spray. It was tied with a green ribbon and somehow gave Nora a distinct shock.

“Oh! She’s dead, this is what they—have at funerals!”

Tears welled up into the blue eyes, and hands holding the silent message trembled. Nora sat down and Cap nosed up to her; he knew something was the matter.

Such a pathetic little bouquet! One stiff pink rose, one yellow daisy, two bright red carnations and three very stiff green leaves, all made of a sort of oil-cloth paper.

A tear fell into the heart of the rose. If it were not really a flower it was at least a good picture of one, just as a photograph can so vividly remind one of the original.

Nora went back to the box. “When can she have put it here?” she wondered. It was under the paper plate.

Then she recalled that this last donation had been hastily deposited in the box, for it was late and Nora had to hurry back to get ready for her own tea at the time she placed it there.

“I must have it put right on her flowers,” she pondered. “Poor, abused, little Lucia!”

Picking up the untouched food Nora discovered a slip of soiled paper beneath it. There was writing on it, a scrawl of some kind. She carried it to the light out from under the dense trees.

“Yes, it’s a note,” murmured Nora, as if Cap, her only companion, understood. And it just says “Goodbye, with love.”

Nora read and reread the scribble. It was written, she decided, in Lucia’s hand, for it was such a crooked, uneven scrawl. The paper was a leaf torn from a book, and this assured Nora that at some time Lucia must have gone to school.

“After all my joy, the party, the enrollment and everything, this has to come,” thought the discouraged girl. “I hoped today I could induce her to come over and see Ted and Jerry.”

It was too disappointing. For the first few days Nora had felt it was safer to allow Lucia to have her way, and when she waited and waited, until the Italian girl appeared, then coaxed and urged that she come over to the cottage, Lucia showed signs of real fright. She would have run from the tree-tent and never returned, if Nora had not promised to agree to her secrecy. After that the benefactor brought the food but was never able to get more than a fleeting glimpse of Lucia, as she scurried off like a little black rabbit with her precious food and her strange secret. And now she was really gone and had said goodbye.

“Why didn’t I tell Alma?” sighed Nora, regretfully. “She might have known a better way to have helped her.”

Too late to reason thus, Nora with a heavy heart again covered the tin box, hoping something would bring Lucia back; then she took the quaint floral token and started for the Nest.

Her plans to help Lucia had included everything from a change of home to a complete change of identity, for Nora felt the stranger must have been in sore need, and why couldn’t she induce Cousin Ted to adopt such a pretty, forlorn child?

It was characteristic of Nora to decide on the most dramatic course, for such a possibility as a mother, father, or family in the background of Lucia’s life was not thought of.

And was this to be the end of her precious secret? She squeezed the paper bouquet until the humble ribbon wrinkled into a sad bit of stuff, and then decided to put the token away with her most precious belongings. Maybe Lucia would come back, and if she ever did Nora decided positively she would then tell someone about the child, even tell Cousin Ted if need be, and, certainly, Alma.

“And now I must go to my letter box,” she told Cap, the faithful.

Looking up and down, in and out, far and near, to make sure no one saw her, Nora followed the trail to the bent willow—the hiding place of Alma’s correspondence with the fabled prince.

She had been there, the moss was a shade lighter where feet had pressed the velvet nap, and the leaves of the bushes were still “inside out” from a hasty brushing made to clear a path to the bent willow.

Under the stone, as directed, Alma had placed her answer to the prince’s letter, and finding it there she quickly hid the envelope in her deepest blouse pocket. She would read it in more comfort, enjoy it more at home, with the door locked.

“What an exciting vacation I am having, really!” she reflected. “When I came all I could think of was pretty things.”

Had she been that Nora once so filled with foolish fancies that life, brief as it had been to her, seemed too full of nonsense to admit of real joys with girl companions, and any number of adventures?

“A real vacation indeed,” concluded the girl in khaki, holding close Lucia’s flowers and Alma’s letter. She was sorely tempted to peek into the latter, but that would spoil the delicious secret reading, which to be complete would have to be made in solitude.

It had been days since she went out “on location” with the cousins—Jerry always called surveying “doing location,” as the moving picture folks termed their work, but so many other things claimed her attention it seemed difficult to get them all in. Cousin Ted was very busy herself, but had managed to write Nora’s mother. A glowing account of the Scout interests was surely given in that letter, and Jerry was disappointed when Ted refused to ask permission for Nora to stay during the winter. To this, woman-like, Mrs. Jerry Manton had not agreed, because to go to school in the wilderness is always more picturesque than practical.

But Nora had endeared herself to those generous hearts, and even the thought of that real mother with an unreal name did not thrill her as did the knowledge that she had “made good” with these devoted friends.

Home now—that is to the Nest, Nora rushed up to her room to devour Alma’s letter. She ignored Vita’s appeal to come see the wonderful flowers sent from some one for Mrs. Manton. She must read the letter before going down to dinner.

In the biggest chair by the open window beyond locked doors she unfolded the precious page.

“She writes a pretty hand,” was the first comment. Then she read:

“Camp Chickadee.

“My dear Prince:

“How wonderful to get a letter from you! As you have guessed I did think of you ever since. Please tell me who you are and where you live? We Scouts would love to know you and perhaps we can tell you some interesting things about America, if, as I surmise, you are a visitor here.”

“Oh mercy,” gasped Nora. “I have only made matters worse. She actually believes I am a prince. What ever shall I do?”

The letter lay mute and yet accusing. Nora had written Alma a first letter to prepare her for the second. True, she did not explain—but she fancied somehow Alma would come to the tree, and then perhaps they would meet and settle the whole troublesome business.

“But it’s worse, heaps worse,” sighed Nora. The call from down stairs was unanswered, for she must plan something else and that quickly.

First she thought of writing another letter with a complete and full confession, but she dreaded it, shrank from it and finally abandoned the idea.

“If it only were not Alma,” she sighed. “I would almost enjoy the joke on some of the others, but Alma!”

Nothing could be worse than this nagging at her conscience. She must conquer it. And here was the new trouble about Lucia!

“I always thought secrets were such fun, and yet these are positively—tragic,” she thought. “If only I could tell Alma about Lucia, at least that would be a comfort.”

Another call from Vita. Cousin Ted and Cousin Jerry were in now. The cheery whistle and the joyful “Whoo-hoo!” must be answered.

“Oh, dear me!” sighed Nora. “I suppose things always happen that way.” She gave Lucia’s flowers an affectionate squeeze, dropped them into her ivory box, slipped Alma’s letter under the cushion and went down to dinner.

CHAPTER XX—THE WORST FRIGHT OF ALL

It was growing dusk—the sunset seemed in a great hurry to get away, and day time was evidently going to the same party. The Mantons failed to induce Nora to accompany them on a “bug hunt,” Jerry’s term for Ted’s moth expedition. Vita too seemed in haste to get somewhere, and altogether the evening was especially popular to make escapes in.

Nora was going over to camp, she announced, and would be there long before dark. The girls would come home with her, she had assured the prudent Ted.

So everything was settled and the Nest would be unoccupied, with Cap as guard, for that evening.

Not a smile broke the serious look on Nora’s face. It was evident the program for the evening included something very important.

“Goodbye,” called out Ted. “Be sure to go over to camp, right away, or the dark will—catch you.”

“Yes’m,” echoed Jerry, “and Mr. Dark knows no distinctions at Wildwoods. He throws a big black blanket over the whole kaboodle.”

Nora replied, but even the joke did not cheer her. A few minutes later she stood at

the foot of the attic stairs, drew a long breath; then dashed up.

Over to the chest that contained the costumes long ignored, she literally dashed, yanked up the lid and dragged out the Lord Fauntleroy outfit.

She counted the pieces, waist, jacket, knickers, sash—where was the cap?

Nervously she fumbled over the tangle of garments, but did not find it.

“I had better dress first,” she decided, “and come up again for the cap. I am—so—nervous——”

No need to make the confession, for even her hands, young and usually steady, actually dropped the velvet coat right on the dusty attic floor.

No time for looking in the mirror. The knickers were kept up with round garters now, a Scout acquisition, and the thin white blouse that went under the jacket, went under very quickly—fullness and strings jabbed in wherever space allowed.

In a remarkably short time she was inside the entire outfit. One glimpse in the glass assured her she was again garbed as the fickle prince. Then for the cap.

“I have time to run and get it,” she assured herself. “Of course, I must have that cap.”

Back to the attic, now a shade darker, and then again into the mysteries of the costume chest, she rummaged.

“Oh, dear,” she sighed. “I’ll be—here it is! Thank goodness!” She just jabbed it on her head. A sound startled her. She stood still, every sense alert.

“What was it?” she instinctively asked.

Again. It—was—a low—moan!

Pausing only long enough to make sure her nerves were not fooling her, Nora heard again, distinctly, a sound, a human or inhuman moan! Then she rushed down the stairs, kept on rushing until she reached the street door, and realizing no person was upon the premises, ran down the road, straight for Chickadee Camp.

No thought of her appearance concerned her; she must get the girls to come back and find out what was in the attic!

Only once she stopped, just to make sure the cap was not going to fall off her yellow head.

Voices and laughter came to meet her. That was Thistle and Wyn——

Gulping back a choking, nervous gasp, she rushed on. The next minute she dashed into Chickadee Camp and stood before an amazed group of Scouts.

“The prince!” went up a shout.

“My prince!” corrected Alma.

“Why, it’s Nora——”

“Girls!” gasped the intruder. “Listen, please, I am no prince——”

“You are indeed. Just look at the dandy outfit. Alma, we most humbly apologize——”

“Wyn,” shouted Thistle, “please listen! Can’t you see there is something the matter?”

“Oh, there is really, girls,” panted Nora. “Come quick! There is someone—dying in our—attic!”

“Dying?”

“I was up there—getting these things, and I—heard the awfulest moans——”

“Maybe it was Cap,” suggested Treble. Her eyes had not wandered from the

surprising spectacle.

“Oh, no, he was outside,” said Nora, “and no one is home, not even Vita. Oh, please do come! I know someone is in agony,” and her voice trailed off into agony of her own.

“I’ll lead,” volunteered Thistle. “Come along, every one. Alma, you can take care of your—prince,” she could not resist injecting.

“Oh Alma,” sighed Nora. “I was planning to come to explain to you——”

“You don’t need to,” and a most affectionate and all encompassing look went from Alma to Nora. “I know all—about it now, and you are my prince, just the same.”

“Come along, you two lovers,” ordered Thistle the leader. “You had a ‘crush’ on Nora from the first, Alma. Now we all know why. Fall in there, Betta. No need to wait for guns——”

“I am not going without some weapon of defense,” declared Betta. “Nora knows her own attic, and she knows when someone is moaning. It may be a lunatic. There is always an asylum in a pretty place like this.”

“Oh, is there?” cried Nora. “I would be afraid to face a—lunatic in that big, dark, attic——”

“I should think you would, lunatic or just plain, human being,” agreed Laddie. “You look delectable enough for anyone to just eat you up——”

“Can’t you girls realize this is an emergency, not a debate?” snapped Thistle. “We don’t suppose Nora is dying of fright just for fun. Betta, run over and tell Becky.”

“Oh, don’t let’s have her along,” interrupted Treble, bent on making the most of the adventure. “You know she would have to do something we wouldn’t.”

“Right,” agreed Wyn. “Come along Scouts! ‘Jeuty’ calls us.”

They had been “coming along” all the time. These expressions merely gave vent to pent up energy.

Nora, although thoroughly frightened, was thankful that the dark helped hide her dismay. Alma had her arm, and Alma was thinking in terms of “prince,” even the pretender was conscious of that.

The girls giggled and talked, as they always did, and as Betta took time to remark, “they would be apt to do it at their own funerals.” There was no suppressing Wyn, and Treble fell but a peg below in volubility.

“Look out there!” called Thistle.

Everyone halted.

“What?” demanded Wyn.

“A puddle,” replied the heartless leader. “And I’m responsible for the shine on your shoes, lunatic or no lunatic,” she declared loudly.

“When my turn comes to lead for a week I’ll have that wretched girl up every day at dawn,” threatened Betta. “She has the cruelest way of raising one’s hopes.”

“Had you hopes for the lunatic in the mud puddle?” demanded Laddie.

“You had better get your sense valve working,” suggested Doro. “We are almost there.”

“Right,” added Treble. “I can see the gate light now.”

“How ever will we go up there in the dark?” Nora asked Alma. “I will be afraid to go into the house.”

“Don’t you worry, dear,” Alma was still under the influence. “We will all go in

together, and Thistle isn't afraid of man or beast."

Arrived at the Nest Nora was confronted with a light at the back of the house.

"Someone home?" suggested Thistle.

"There shouldn't be," declared Nora. "Everyone is out for the evening."

"Where is Vita?" asked the same leader. They had stopped at the natural hedge, and now stood under the picturesque, homemade arc light—Jerry's lantern with the red globe.

"Vita went out somewhere. She often does, and you see I was going over to camp, so there was, really, no one at home."

"Your dying princess has come down stairs to die," suggested the irrepressible Wyn.

"Princess?" scoffed Nora.

"Or was it merely a maid in waiting—excuse me, your *man* in waiting."

"Wyn," shouted Laddie, "can't you see you are making yourself ridiculous at a time like this?"

She probably couldn't for she went off into a gale of laughter and had to go behind a bush to enjoy it.

"There is someone in the kitchen," declared Treble. "Here she comes!"

She did; she came right out and greeted them.

It was Vita!

CHAPTER XXI—STRANGE DISCLOSURES

For a moment no one spoke—they were all so surprised.

"Hello!" called out Vita. "What's this? A party?" Her English was perfect.

"No, it isn't Vita," Nora managed to answer. "I was almost scared to death——"

"Let me tell her, Nora," interrupted Thistle, the leader.

"I'm not going in that house with her until Cousin Ted comes home," declared Nora. "Vita is always putting me off. She knows what that noise up in the attic is."

"Have you heard it before?" asked Betta.

"Yes, a number of times——"

"Then, if the moaner did not die before, Nora, what makes you think the present attack would be fatal?" Wyn came out from the bush to inquire.

"Land sakes, Wyn! Will you hush? Fun is all right in its place but this is serious," warned Pell.

"Looks it," whispered the same Wyn, into Betta's unwilling ear.

"Nonsense, standing here like a——"

"Serenading party," finished Laddie. "Let's begin."

"Serenading?" An uncertain and feeble whistle followed, but in the dark no one owned up to it.

"You coming in? No?" asked and answered Vita.

"No. We are not coming in," declared Nora, who had stepped up to the door at which the spacious Vita stood. "We heard a noise up in the attic and we were coming in to investigate, but we won't now."

The girls were audibly disappointed. They said so outright.

"Perhaps she doesn't know a thing about it," suggested Laddie. "Don't you think, Nora, we ought to go in and look around?"

“No, I don’t. She is in the plot, or secret or whatever it is,” declared Nora aside. “When I first came here I heard it——”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” demanded Doro. The parade had come to a useless halt.

“I don’t know,” murmured Nora. “You know I had queer ideas at first,” she faltered, unconsciously smoothing down the pretty little velvet knickers and slipping a nervous hand into an inadequate pocket.

“We know, but we all have—at first,” admitted Laddie. “I used to think I would love Thistle, and see what she has done to us with her old bossing.” The challenge went unanswered.

“Can’t we go to the bench and talk it over?” suggested Betta, unwilling to leave the scene thus unsatisfied.

“Oh, no, please don’t,” begged Nora. “I don’t know just what I fear, but actually, girls,” she did whisper this, “I am as much afraid of Vita now as I am of the thing up in the attic.”

“Your nice, fat, good natured Vita?” asked Pell in surprise. The person spoken of had gone indoors discreetly.

“I don’t mean that I am afraid of her all the time,” Nora hastened to correct. “She is as good as gold, generally, and I am sure Vita is honorable. But it is that attic affair—she is in some way connected with that, and I am not going to take a chance of getting frightened again tonight. You have no idea how I felt, up there all alone, in fact I was all alone in the house when I heard that groan.”

“Groan?” Wyn could not resist. “I thought it was a moan?”

But no one paid any attention to the remark. Betta suggested they agree with Nora and all go back to camp.

“We can bring Nora back home about the time she expects her Cousin Jerry,” Betta’s suggestion included. “There is no sense in subjecting her to more terror with the Italian woman.”

“For once I agree with you, Betta,” answered Thistle. “March back to the Chickadee, every Scout of you, and see that you don’t wallow in that mud puddle.”

“But the prince?” inquired Wyn. “Is he to walk through ordinary mud puddles?”

“No. Of course not. You and the other big girl, Treble by name, are to carry him. Avaunt!” ordered the leader.

“Oh please——” protested Nora; but in vain. She was upon the shoulders of Wyn and Treble before she had a chance to finish her useless appeal.

“Put your royal arms around me,” chanted Treble.

“If you don’t you may be dumped,” warned the other slave.

“Listen!” ordered someone. “Here comes the whole camp! Are we out after hours?”

“If we are we can plead emergency,” explained Thistle. “How could we wait for permission when someone was moaning to death?”

They took up the march in real earnest. As faithful Scouts they always kept to regulations and found pleasure in doing so. Only Nora’s call of distress had lured them away as darkness was setting in.

“Please let me walk,” begged Nora. “I know you must get back as quickly as you can, and I am sure I have given you enough trouble.”

“We love to carry you,” insisted Wyn. “Besides, we know it’s our last chance.

Alma will be unconscious in the throes of love from this on," she finished with a lurch that brought the erstwhile prince to "his" feet in spite of their intentions.

A few more accidents, minor and major, according to the way said accidents were accepted, and the squad arrived at Chickadee. Nora was now more embarrassed than ever. How could she again go in among all those sensibly-clad girls in that ridiculous costume? Besides, now she was bound to tell the whole miserable story.

"Where have you girls been?" began Becky, who stood waiting. "Did you not know this was story night?"

"We have been out scouting, and we did," replied Thistle in her most docile tone. "Becky, love, we have the bravest thrill of our entire career to unfold."

"Begin, please, by explaining the infraction of hours," said Miss Beckwith, although her manner belied her demand, and the summer twilight lasted.

"The thrill is none other than someone, anyone, dying of moans," said Wyn. "We have with us tonight——"

At this she craned her neck over the tallest of them to locate little Nora. But she, the guest of honor, was hiding behind Treble.

"When you hear the whole wonderful tale," promised Pell, "you will only be sorry you were not along. We have been out gunning for attic ghosts." After more talk of this variety Nora was dragged forth.

How pretty she looked in the camp light! A glow from the fire that had been lighted for stories, surrounded the little prince, and, as the picturesque figure stood in the center of the group of admiring eyes, even the glory of the modern Scout uniform was threatened with eclipse. In the late twilight the effect was entrancing.

"Isn't she darling?"

"Just look at those—panties?"

"Oh, don't you remember——"

"Sweet Alice Ben Bolt."

"No, not Alice, but the night we fought over those bloomers," recalled Treble.

"They're not bloomers. They're rompers."

Then began that whole foolish debate which ended up by Thistle declaring they might be overalls for all it mattered, if only the girls would let Nora tell her story. Pell and Treble agreed. The introduction was briefly outlined for Becky's benefit, then Nora was allowed to tell it as it appeared to her—that is, she was allowed to begin to tell it that way, but what with the interruptions, the suggestions, the questions, and the qualifying clauses, it was small wonder the willing culprit made poor headway.

As the story took the shape of a confession Nora seemed to be the culprit, but judging from the approval voiced by the multitude they all had little regard for *her* brand of "crime." In other words, Nora only imagined she had offended, the entire detail made a most interesting story as it was told around the campfire blaze of Chickadee Patrol.

She admitted frankly that her early notions were anything but practical, she bravely recounted her weakness for fancy things, including ivory bureau sets and pink ribbons, to which more than one Chickadee added her own little admission, in fact, Pell said she always did and always would love pink; brown khaki and smoked pearl buttons to the contrary notwithstanding.

The telling of her attempt at attic tenancy brought forth peal after peal of laughter, in which Nora joined. Then she told all about her disguise as the fabled and famous

prince.

“I think it is all too jolly for words,” insisted Laddie, “and what do you say, girls, to our adopting Prince Adorable for our mascot?”

This precipitated more trouble. Nora was put on the table, that long box used when weather was pleasant and drenched when weather was wet, and from that grandstand, or throne, she was called upon to make silly speeches, prompted by Wyn and interrupted by Betta.

Alma objected. She insisted Nora had hinted to her something she ought to tell the others. And she further maintained it was a matter serious enough to put a stop to all nonsense, and “if the girls aren’t willing to listen quietly, I shall take Nora over to the other tent, where she can tell Becky in peace,” threatened Alma.

This put a soft pedal on all unnecessary sounds: even Wyn desisted.

“Tell us, Nora, please do tell,” begged Wyn. “We have had fun enough to give our poor jaws a rest. Mine are aching from laughing.”

So Nora began.

CHAPTER XXII—THE DANGER SQUAD IN ACTION

It was a fascinating tale. Every detail told by Nora took on new value as it was silently applauded by her eager audience. Thus encouraged she waxed eloquent, and when she finished all about the wearing of the Fauntleroy costume, then her desire to tell Alma the truth, when she knew the Scouts were teasing the Tenderfoot, the recital might well have been called a credit, even to the girl who felt guilty of its secrets.

“You see,” she said naïvely, “I was always so much alone. I had no companion but Barbara, and she agreed with everything I said.”

“What a change this must be!” murmured Wyn.

“Hush!” warned Betta. “Funny as you are, Wynn, you *can* be rude.”

“And now, girls,” said Nora in a brand new tone of voice, “as I have told you all of that, I feel anxious to tell you something else. I have another secret and I think it is much more serious than anything else that has happened on this wonderful vacation.”

“Out with it,” begged some one, but Nora did not hear the thoughtless phrase.

Miss Beckwith sat with the girls, encouraging their confidences, and the usual safety in numbers was surely a clue to the satisfaction of the novel meeting. Secrets were best shared by the multitude, then what one was not wise enough to know, some one would surely be clever enough to guess—so far as solution of the problem went.

“One day when I was wandering around—it was the day we had such a wonderful time——” Nora started.

“When you learned to swim?” prompted Wynn.

“I think it was. Well, I just walked along a lane I had never found before,” continued the prince—for she was still that noble character, “and under a cave of pines—they grew so thick I could hardly see there, it was almost as dark as night; and right there, in a bed of leaves I saw something move.”

Just who was it that choked back Wyn’s interruption does not matter, but presently Nora continued:

“At first, of course, I thought it was a dog or something like that, but all of a sudden it sat up!”

“Oh!” exclaimed the sympathetic Alma.

“Yes, it sat up and looked at me with eyes like coals of fire.”

“Nora!” shouted Laddie. “I am all goose flesh, please tell us who had the eyes.”

“I’m trying to,” said Nora, realizing the value of pauses. “I was so frightened I wanted to run, but before I could do so the creature showed how frightened she was——”

“She!” This was Betta.

“Yes, it was a poor, miserable little girl, all rags and eyes, and so sad looking! Really girls, my heart went out to her,” declared the story teller in her most Nora-esque manner.

Titters barely tintured the atmosphere. Miss Beckwith begged the girls to listen politely.

“I managed to get her to tell me her name,” said Nora next. “And it was Lucia.”

“Lucia,” repeated a chorus in perfect time, pronouncing it “Luchia.”

“Yes, a poor, neglected, little Italian girl, who has to work on one of the big farms——”

“There!” almost shouted Alma. “I knew when you saved your picnic lunch it was for something noble. It was for Lucia, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but after bringing her food for days she suddenly disappeared.”

“What happened to her?” asked Pell.

“How can I tell?” sighed Nora. “I have done everything to find out. I have even had Cousin Ted drive me around the big farms hoping to get a glimpse of her, but I never saw any one who even looked like her. Then, I haven’t told you the most pathetic part,” she paused again. “The last day I went to fetch her a lovely piece of pie, you know I used to put food in a big tin box Vita gave me; well, there was all that I had left the day before. Of course, I was awfully disappointed and I felt so—sorry I had not told you girls——”

“If you had, Nora,” said Miss Beckwith, gently, “we might have found a way to help the child.”

“I know that, Becky, and I am telling this now partly to——”

“Ease your conscience,” prompted Pell.

“Yes; I don’t want any more secrets. They are more worry than they can possibly be worth,” said Nora tritely.

“You were telling us about the box,” prompted Alma.

“Oh, yes; but I must hurry, I have to go home very soon. It is time the folks were back.”

“Tell us the rest and we won’t interrupt once,” promised Wyn in a contrite tone, and she seemed to mean it.

“I found a little paper bouquet in the box,” Nora continued. “And a scribbled bit of paper.”

“What was on it?” Betta could not help asking.

“Just a few words, ‘Goodbye, I love you.’” Nora stopped suddenly.

“The poor, little thing,” commiserated Alma. “And could you find no way to tell who she was or where she lived?”

“I didn’t dare ask anyone outright,” answered Nora, “because you see, I had promised not to tell anyone about meeting her. She was in terror of a man she called Nick.”

“Nick?” repeated a number.

“Yes; she would only say he was a bad man, and I know she feared him for she

would tremble so when she mentioned his name.”

Miss Beckwith had remained in the background. If she knew a way to solve the mystery, evidently she did not think the time had come to disclose it.

“But when I found she was gone—I knew what a mistake I had made in not telling anyone about it. Even if she was afraid, I could surely have trusted—Alma,” sighed Nora.

In the semi-darkness none could see the look of affection Alma threw out. Her sensitive soul had found solace in the companionship of the almost equally sensitive Nora.

“I must go,” insisted Nora. “The folks will be home and I am going to tell them about that attic noise tonight, Vita or no Vita.”

“You are perfectly right in that,” said Miss Beckwith. “Come along, girls, we will all see Nora home this time.”

They wanted to carry her back, but costumed and all that she was, Nora felt little like partaking in their frolic. She feared something. That moaning was human, of this she was certain; and it was equally certain that Vita was in too good health when she appeared at the door, to have been in any way implicated, physically.

“If your folks have not returned will you come back and stay all night?” suggested Betta. “We could leave a message for them and you know you have not stayed a single night at camp yet.”

“I am sure they are at home, I see the light in the living room,” responded Nora. “But thank you, just the same, Betta. I shall love to stay a night soon, I have been counting on having that treat before this vacation is over.”

They had rounded the curve and the Nest was now in full view. Presently they were at the door and Nora touched the knocker.

There was no immediate response and she wondered. “I can see inside, the curtain is up, and I don’t see a soul,” she declared.

“Nor hear a sound,” added Pell who was listening at the keyhole.

Here was another cause for wonderment. Nora rapped the knocker until the sound seemed doubly loud, reverberating in the dusk.

But there was no answer. “What can it mean?” asked Nora anxiously. “I am sure some one lighted the lights, can they have gone out looking for me?”

“Can’t you get in?” asked Miss Beckwith.

“Yes. I know where to find the emergency key. But I don’t think I’ll go in.” Nora seemed doomed to spend the night at camp after all.

The girls crowded around. Plainly any excitement was a welcome diversion for them.

“Maybe the groaner lighted up,” suggested Wyn, facetiously. “She seems to like traveling.”

“You are so brave, Wynnies,” said Miss Beckwith, “I wonder would you be brave enough to go in and investigate?”

“Certainly,” came the quick rejoinder. “I’d like nothing better. Volunteers?” she called out.

“Hush!” begged Nora. “It may be that Vita is upstairs and has not heard us, although she must have heard that knock.”

Again she rapped the knocker.

“Hark!” said Betta. “I honestly thought I heard a cry.”

Everyone was now breathless.

“I do hear some one crying,” declared Alma. “Whoever can it be?”

“That up-attic person, I’m sure,” said Wyn. “Better get the key, Nora. We can’t let them cry to death while we are all here, listening in.”

“I think I heard crying,” said Miss Beckwith. “Perhaps you had better open the door, Nora.”

From under the fern dish Nora procured the key.

Miss Beckwith took it, and presently the door was open. The hall was flooded with light, but everyone instinctively stepped back.

There was no sound.

“Where’s Cap?” asked Nora. “We left him here.”

“There is really nothing to fear,” said Miss Beckwith. “Here we are, a half dozen of us. I think we had better go inside. Maybe poor old Cap is locked in somewhere and held captive.”

“Oh, that’s so,” replied Nora. “He has a habit of getting in closets and he might have sprung the door shut. Sometimes he moans——”

That was enough to excite practical sympathy, and everyone promptly stepped inside. Once within, it did not seem so fearful. Pell prowled around and Wyn made foolish noises; but Nora hung back.

After satisfying themselves there was nothing wrong on the first floor they decided to investigate the second.

“I can always hear it right over my room,” said Nora when the band of Chickadees inundated that territory. “There! Did you hear that?”

“Yes, someone is crying upstairs,” declared Miss Beckwith, “and we must see who it is.”

“But suppose——”

“Here’s Cap. He would not let anyone touch us,” declared Nora. “But Becky——”

“Come along, girls, that is not the voice of a man or woman. Come, we must do something. It sounds like——”

Bouncing up on Nora, Cap whined. “There, he knows, he wants me to go up. What is it, Cap?” Nora asked again, and again the dog whined piteously.

Now, everyone was willing to lead, yet they formed quite an orderly drill.

This was an emergency and emergency always means order for Scouts.

CHAPTER XXIII—RAIDING THE ATTIC

No one could tell just how they got there, but realizing that some one was suffering they had all followed Cap to the attic, and there waited again for the sound that was to lead them to the victim.

“There’s a cabinet over there,” Nora whispered. “A person might hide in that.”

She was holding on to Alma and looked odd, indeed, still dressed in that gorgeous velvet costume.

“Here’s another light—this will show us the far end there,” said Miss Beckwith, snapping on the extra bulb.

“There it is!” gasped Pell. “Oh, it is somewhere—yes, come over here,” she cried.

“Surely that’s a child!”

The faint cry, that was almost like a sob, sounded again. It must be over under the low beams.

Nora forgot her terror now, for she knew the secret place of the long, rumbling attic, and no sooner had she heard the distinct cry than she brushed past all the others, dragged up a big dust curtain, then stopped.

“Here! Here!” she called frantically. “It’s a little girl. Bring the candle!”

Thistle was beside her with the extra light. “Oh, mercy!” gasped Nora. “It’s Lucia.”

“Lucia,” repeated the others.

“Yes, my own little darling Lucia. Oh, child,” she cried out, “what has happened to you? How ever did you get here?”

“Go away. Please, go away. I can’t tell you. Oh, where is Vita? Vita come!” begged a voice, while Nora tried in vain to soothe her.

“Let me there!” ordered Miss Beckwith. “The poor little thing!” she continued. “She evidently has had a fit of hysteria. Just see her gasp! Keep quiet, dear,” she said gently. “You are all right now. We will take care of you. There! Stop sobbing. Don’t you know the girls?”

“She knows me, don’t you, Lucia?” asked Nora, anxiously. “Oh, I am so glad we found her. She might have died.”

“Don’t let us waste time in talking. Here girls. Use your first aid, now. We must carry her down stairs to the air,” ordered Miss Beckwith.

They carried her down carefully and laid her on a couch by the window.

“Where is this?” the girl murmured. Then she looked into Nora’s face and something of the terror left her own. “Angel,” she said simply, blinking uncertainly.

“You know this little girl, don’t you, Lucia?” pressed Becky now, anxious to arouse her.

“Yes,” she said.

Nora cast a look of appeal at the director. She wanted to speak to the sick girl. Becky motioned she might do so.

“Lucia,” began Nora, very gently, “where did—you—come from?”

“I run away from—Nick,” she gasped, and again that look of terror flashed across the little pinched face.

“Don’t be frightened; you are here with me, Nora, now,” said the girl in the velvet suit. “No one can touch you here.”

“Where—is—Vita? She not come back, bring doctor?”

That was it. Vita had gone for a doctor.

“She’ll be here soon,” soothed Miss Beckwith. The Scouts stood spell bound. How wonderful to have found the poor little waif right in Nora’s own attic!

There was a sound below. Vita came stamping up the stairs.

“What is it?” she panted. Then seeing the crowd. “You come—save my poor little Lucia!”

“Yes, Vita, we are here,” replied Nora, sensing now the part that Vita had been playing. “We brought her down.”

“Poor Lucia. Vita’s baby—Vita’s bambino,” crooned the woman, as she leaned over the couch and chaffed the trembling hands.

It was a pathetic picture. The brilliantly-lighted room was like a stage with this strange drama being enacted upon it. The row of Scouts were unconsciously standing like a patrol at attention, while Nora in Fauntleroy dress, stood at Lucia's head; and the woman in the quaint peasant attire bent over; and then, there on the soft, bright couch, lay the inert figure with the great eyes staring out from under the bandage, evidently put on the hot forehead by Vita.

No questions asked, every one could see the child was kin to Vita, but not her own child, perhaps her granddaughter.

"She will be all right now, I think, Vita," said Miss Beckwith. "She just had a spell of hysteria, didn't she?"

"Oh, she have a fit very bad," whispered the woman. "I run for doctor, quick, but he is no place——" her voice droned off into a low sound of foreign words, lamentation and wailings.

"Why was she shut up there?" asked Nora.

"She beg for dark—she never go in light when fit comes," Vita managed to make them understand. "I always hide her—she runs from Nick like anything. But he no hurt her, never. Just one time he scare her. She always cry so much he t'ink she might get better, and he scare her. Lucia run away and come to Vita, every time."

"He didn't really hurt her," Miss Beckwith was both asking Vita and explaining to the girls. "Hysterical children must have a dread of something, and I suppose she seized on that."

Lucia now sat up and looked about her. All the fear had left her, and her black eyes shone with relief.

"She's all right now, aren't you, Lucia?" Thistle ventured to ask. The other girls were still spellbound.

"Lovely," replied the child, actually rubbing her brown hand on the soft couch cover almost as if she were saying, "Nice! Nice!"

"There come Cousin Jerry and Cousin Ted!" exclaimed Nora. "I'll bring them right up."

"What Mrs. Jerry say?" asked Vita, anxiously.

"Oh, that will be all right, Vita," said Nora, running along. "She'll understand everything."

It is marvelous what sympathy can explain. No need for words to fill out the gaps.

"Well, what a reception!" exclaimed the surprised Ted. "I never expected such a party as this." Her eyes fell upon Lucia. "A refugee?" she asked kindly.

"Vita's little girl, Cousin Ted," said Nora, promptly. "We found her—sick." She did not say where.

"She is in good hands now, I am sure," said Mrs. Manton, glancing around at the patrol. "We were detained with our fractious car—should have been home ages ago. Did you need anything? Have you had a doctor?"

"She seemed merely hysterical," explained Becky. "I don't think she needs a doctor tonight. She will probably sleep well after the excitement—and exhaustion," she added in an undertone.

"Well, of all things," exclaimed Mrs. Manton, suddenly getting a good look at Nora. "Have you been having a masquerade?"

"A little Scout party," Miss Beckwith replied, to save Nora embarrassment. "This

has been an eventful evening.”

“Must have been,” agreed the hostess. “Shall we all go down and leave the child to rest?” she proposed.

“We must go,” assured the leader. “It is not ten o’clock, I hope?”

“No, and we’ll run you over in our car—if the car will run. Mr. Manton is out tinkering with it. That’s how he missed the excitement,” Ted explained.

Nora hung back with Lucia. She felt she had found her after so much anxiety, she was almost afraid the child would be spirited away if she should lose sight of her now.

“How nice!” said Vita, and the relief in her own voice proved that the big woman had been suffering no little anxiety, herself.

“I go home now, Vita,” said Lucia, humbly. “I’m sorry, Vita.”

“Oh, you don’t have to go home, Lucia,” Nora hurried to interrupt. “You can stay right here. You don’t want to go hide in the dark any more, do you Lucia?”

“But I don’t want to make the trouble.”

“She is so good when the fit is gone,” said Vita, affectionately. “Poor Lucia, she can no help it.”

“Of course, she can’t. I’ll tell you, Vita, we’ll ask Cousin Ted and I’m sure she’ll let us fix Lucia up in that nice attic bed. Would you like that, Lucia?” enthused Nora.

“She love the attic,” said Vita. “She come every time, and I must hide her. But I no like to make the bother——”

“And that was why you kept it secret!” said Nora. “Well, Vita, I did think you were—mean,” she paused to soften the word, “but now I know why. And I am so glad to find Lucia again. You see, I knew her before.”

“You bring her the cakes——”

“And you knew that, too?” Nora’s secrets were fast evaporating. “Well, at any rate, Vita, you gave me a nice tin box and all the good things you could make, so I won’t blame you. I’ll run along and ask Cousin Ted about the attic. Dear me! What a blessing the girls came over with me! We might have been going on this way—for weeks and not have found out,” she added. “But the girls have to hurry off; it is getting time to answer the night roll call. I’ll be back in a minute, Vita,” she was talking fast. “Don’t let Lucia move until I tell you,” she warned.

“All right, little Nora,” replied Vita fondly. “I have two little girls, now; yes, Lucia?”

“The girls have to leave without hearing this whole wonderful story, Nora,” said Ted, as they crowded out to the car, “but I have asked them to come over tomorrow. They will die of curiosity in the meantime if Miss Beckwith does not keep them too busy to get into such mischief,” added the young woman jocularly.

“Oh, Nora!” called out Wyn, “you come right over about daylight, will you? We’ll leave a tent flap loose and you can crawl in. I would have nervous prostration if I had to wait until after inspection to hear the sequel. Good night!”

“Good night! Good night! everybody!” went up the customary shout, and when the reliable little car, so recently called fractious by its owner, rumbled out into the roadway, the Scouts were actually singing their camp song.

How wonderful to be girls! And how wonderful to be Girl Scouts!

CHAPTER XXIV—FULFILLMENT

“Of course, she’ll come over. Didn’t I say I’d leave a flap up?” asked Wyn. It was so early that the very Chickadees, after whom the patrol had been named, were still asleep in their own tree-top scout tents.

“As if she could get out of bed——”

“Why couldn’t she? After last night I wonder if she will ever feel safe in bed again. Seems to me,” said the incorrigible Wynnie, “she could do lots more good sitting up—raiding attics and things like that.”

“But Chicks,” said Thistle from a rumpled pillow, “isn’t that child a dream?”

“You mean didn’t that child dream——”

“No, I do not. I think she is the most adorable thing. Why, she looks exactly like a painting we have——”

“There—there,” soothed Treble.

“Don’t get homesick,” Pell called out. “We have a few more days to go before time to break camp and you want to be in at the big party, don’t you?”

“I think the prince part simply the most marvelous story I have ever heard,” said Treble, under her breath. It was too early to join in a general wake-up.

“Leave it to Alma,” whispered Laddie. “I always said these quiet little girls have the most fun. I heard Wyn groaning in her sleep after every one else was aslumber. That’s the kind of fun *she* has.”

“Looks as if Nora had not walked in *her* sleep, at any rate,” put in Betta. “I move we get up and slick things up early. How do we know but the myth flew away in the night?”

“We don’t, but she didn’t,” replied Treble crisply. “But hark to a familiar sound. It calls arise——”

Then began the duties, and in spite of their anxiety to get over to the Nest, the Scouts did succeed in performing their tasks with the usual accuracy and unusual alacrity.

At nine o’clock they were free.

No need to ask what anyone was going to do that morning. Every Girl Scout who had been in “the raid” was ready to run before the day’s orders had been read from the bulletin.

They headed for the Mantons’ cottage.

“Did you ever?”

“No, I never!”

This was a part of the meaningless contribution in words offered as the girls came up to the Nest. They had seen the tableau on the front porch.

“Hello!” called out Nora.

“Lo, yourself,” sang back Thistle.

“Too early for a fashionable call?” asked Treble.

“Come along, girls,” Mrs. Manton welcomed them. “I am sure Nora has been anxiously waiting for you. I’ll let her tell you the news,” she finished, indicating the chairs for the party.

Lucia was in a big steamer chair. It almost swallowed up the tiny figure, but she had a way of reclining, quite gracefully.

“How are you today, Lucia?” asked Alma.

“Oh, I’m all right,” replied the child, pinking through her dark skin. She looked very pretty in one of Nora’s bright rose dresses, with the same color hair ribbon, and her

feet encased in a pair of white slippers. No wonder she was “all right.”

“She’s going to stay,” said Nora proudly. “We’ve adopted her.”

“Quick work,” remarked Laddie. “But I don’t blame you. She looks as if she grew right here in this lovely big wild wood. Don’t you like it, Lucia?”

“Lots, much,” said the child.

“We found out all about it, of course,” continued Nora. “Lucia won’t mind if I tell you?” she questioned.

“No,” said the stranger. The single word indicated her timidity.

“You see, she is the daughter of Vita’s daughter who died last year,” Nora explained. “She has been living with cousins, and the man Nick, of whom she was so frightened, is the cousin’s husband.”

Lucia now seemed to shrink back, and at that sign Nora signaled the girls to leave the porch and adjourn to more convenient quarters for their confidences.

Once away from the restriction, words flew back and forth in questions and answers, until Wyn wanted to know if it was all a duet between Alma and Nora, or could they make it a chorus?

“And he didn’t beat her?” demanded Pell.

“And she is really related to Vita, not kidnapped?” asked Betta.

“You didn’t find her all bruised up——”

“Now girls,” scoffed Nora. “I know perfectly well you don’t think anything of the kind. You all know Vita was always kind and generous——”

“Whew!” whistled Wyn. “How we can change! I thought she was a regular bear this time yesterday morning.”

“I think your cousins are perfectly splendid,” said Betta, sensibly. “Is she really going to adopt the child?”

“We had a doctor this morning,” said Nora with an important air, “and he advised change of scene——”

“Let’s take her over to Chickadee!” interrupted Thistle. “That would be a distinct and decided change.”

“Oh, hush,” begged Alma. “What else did the doctor say, Nora?”

“She is hysterical—all came from the fright of her mother’s sudden death,” continued Nora. “But girls, I don’t know how much to thank you,” she broke off. “Being a Scout has done much for me.”

“We believe you,” said Wyn in her usual bantering way. “But say, little girl, are you going back to that school where they teach you to wear silk underwear in the cold, blasty winter weather? Couldn’t you make out to get adopted at the Nest yourself?”

A laugh, then a set of laughs, followed this.

“You are coming over to camp tonight, remember,” said Alma, seriously. “We have not initiated you yet, you know.”

“How about that first formal ducking, with Jimbsy in the background?” Pell reminded them. “That seemed all right for an initiation.”

Mrs. Manton was coming down the path with the inevitable letter. Was there ever a story finished without “a letter”? Mr. Jerry followed up.

It was, as you have guessed, from Nora’s mother, and she did grant permission for her to stay.

“So,” said Mrs. Teddy Manton, otherwise Theodora, while the real Jerry looked

over her shoulder at the letter, and Cap sniffed approvingly at Nora's khaki skirt, "we expect to have Nora go to school in town this winter, and perhaps next summer we will all be back again at Rocky Ledge."

"This was a real vacation," sighed Nora, "the best I ever had."

"Three cheers!" yelled the Scouts; and Lucia from her porch was truly sorry she had ever called those girls "crazy."

It was all so comfortable and safe now. Even her "bad fit" was gone with the winds, and how lovely to be out in the sunlight and have nothing to fear!

Again came a riotous shout from the girls on and off the bench.

"Chick! Chick! Chick-a-dees!" they yelled. And it must have been Wyn who echoed:

"Cut! Cut! ka-dah! cut!"

Girl Scouts are many and their adventures equally numerous, from mountain to valley, over hill and dale, and their further activities will be told of in the next volume of this series, which will be entitled: *The Girl Scouts at Spindlewood Knoll*.

THE END.

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