

THE ORCHARD
SECRET

CLEO F. GARIS

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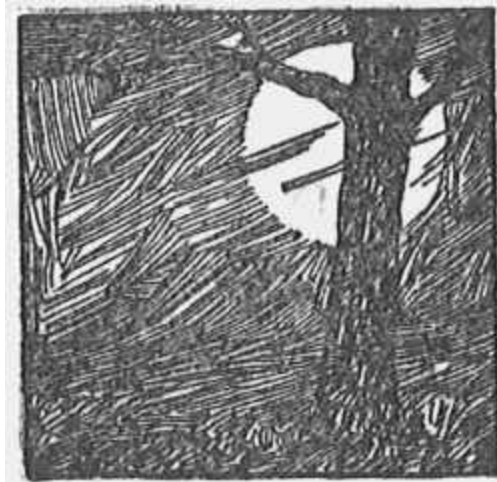


“Oh-h-h-h-e-e!” screamed Sim, “Oh, girls, look here!”
(Frontispiece) (THE ORCHARD SECRET)

The Arden Blake Mystery Series

THE ORCHARD SECRET

By
CLEO F. GARIS



A. L. BURT COMPANY
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The Arden Blake Mystery Series

BY CLEO F. GARIS

THE ORCHARD SECRET
MYSTERY OF JOCKEY HOLLOW

MISSING AT MARSHLANDS

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The Orchard Secret

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CHAPTER I

The Warning

For a few uncertain moments no one had spoken. The old flivver bumped over a little hill, and the girls seemed suddenly to realize they were entering upon that much anticipated new experience—college life.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it!” exclaimed Arden Blake, resting her hand on Terry’s shoulder. “Such beautiful pines—so tall and——”

“Mysterious!” supplied Sim Westover, making a dive for her compact.

“Thank you. I was about to say—stately,” remarked Arden with assumed superciliousness. “And see the deer behind the bush, a stone deer, I suppose. But it’s all so lovely!”

“Lovely indeed,” agreed Terry as she was apt to do with anything Arden said or did. “Don’t you think so, Sim?”

Sim, occupying most of the back seat of the rickety station car, felt differently about it and said so. Sim was that way.

“It’s all very well,” she murmured, busy with her compact, “all very well, my good girls, but isn’t it about time we got inside the college? After a train trip like the one we have just endured, I’ll be glad to get my feet off Arden’s suitcase. Wherever did you get such a big one, Arden?”

“It was given to me when we all decided to come to Cedar Ridge. You’ll wish it was yours when you see what’s inside. Oh, look! That must be the swimming-pool building!” There could be no mistake about it as they could note when the harassed little flivver was slowly completing the half circle of the cinder drive which curved like a crescent moon in front of Cedar Ridge College, and was approaching a glass-roofed structure set somewhat apart from the other buildings.

The roof was dome-shaped, and its glass panes, set in frames of copper which glinted in the rays of the red autumn sun, were thick and green like petrified ocean waves.

As they rattled past the pool building they saw a wheelbarrow standing right in the pathway. Somehow that odd obstruction looked out of place near a natatorium, and Sim said so, adding:

“I wonder what’s the idea?”

“Oh, they’re probably just cleaning it out,” suggested Arden.

The cultivated rustic setting for the big gray stone structures made the whole scene picturesquely perfect, just as the prospectus had stated. But to the girls the college was also a little forbidding. Certainly there was nothing cozy about it—nothing inviting—and not every girl can boast the artist’s taste.

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The buildings were solid and massive, as solid and dependable as the women instructors within who guided the four student years of “their girls.” Besides the swimming pool, only the chapel, with its tall spire, caught the warm sunset glow and displayed it more lavishly. But that, of course, thought Arden, was because there was so much more glass, beautifully tinted, in the chapel windows.

As the wheels of the car crunched the cinders, Arden hoped she hadn't been wrong in urging Terry and Sim to come to Cedar Ridge with her. They had come because of her urging. There was no doubt of this. Had it not been for the promise of swimming, implied by the beautiful picture of the pool in the college prospectus, Sim would, she said, have been content to stay at home in Pentville.

As for Terry—where Arden went, there went Terry. They had been inseparable since the “baby grade” in Vincent Prep.

The driver of the car, a typical country taxi-man, probably too well trained to talk unbidden to the students, pulled up suddenly as he neared a lane that curved around a big elm and wended its way toward a distant grove.

“Down below there's th' orchard,” he said hesitantly. “Ef I was you, I wouldn't go prowlin' around in it.” He indicated a part of the extensive farm ground that was an inheritance of Cedar Ridge College—long rows of old gnarled trees, many of them now heavy with russet, red, golden, and yellow fruit. The orchard was separated from the eastern end of the dormitory building by a tall and tangled hedge but could be seen from the hill on which the building stood. “No, don't go down there,” advised the driver as he let in the clutch.

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“Why?” came a surprised and gasping chorus.

“Waal, queer things are said to happen down in that orchard. But don't ask me what!” he quickly cautioned. “I'm only hired to drive this tin Lizzie, an' I dassn't talk.”

Terry, who sat beside Arden, evinced a desire to put a question but thought better of it.

The girls looked wonderingly at one another as the car speeded along. They were puzzled over this mysterious

introduction to Cedar Ridge. For here was the college. That was no mystery but a solid fact.

They were there!

The flivver chugged on to the main entrance, and the girls alighted. As they reached the top of the massive stone steps, a young man, porter evidently, picked up their bags as the taximan slid them along to him and quickly led the way inside the portals.

The very sight of a young man there, at this college for girls, even clad, as he was, in blue overalls, prompted a giggle. But Arden pinched Sim's arm and Sim didn't.

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Just inside the doorway, at a desk near which the young man set down the bags, sat a severe-looking woman in black with the judicious linen collar and cuffs. She waited with a pencil poised over a large sheet of paper.

"I suppose this is where we are expected to register," murmured Arden.

"Yes," agreed Terry, as usual.

They gave their names to the severe woman, who permitted herself a frosty smile as she remarked:

"Oh, yes, freshmen. You young ladies have all been assigned to the same room. Let me see." She consulted a list. "It is number 513 on the fifth floor of the main building." She made a note on the paper, and then, turning, addressed a distant shadowy corner, saying:

"Miss Everett will show you where it is. You may go to your room now, and when you hear the bell you will come to the recreation hall, which you will pass on your way. Miss Everett!" she called sharply.

A tall blonde girl came forward from the shadows, a little reluctantly, it appeared. Just why, neither Arden nor her two chums could imagine. They didn't even know, yet, who Miss Everett was. This stately blonde girl, however, took matters into her own hands with some show of authority.

"Come this way, please," she said, addressing the three freshmen. They were a little uncertain whether or not to pick up their bags, now that the luggage had been brought into the building for them. But Miss Everett knew what to do.

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The young fellow in the clean suit of blue overalls could now be seen at the end of the corridor. He was apparently deeply interested in the outside view, for he stood squarely before a window and seemed oblivious of his humble duties.

"Tom!" sharply called Miss Everett. At that the blue-clad man turned quickly and hurried toward the desk. "These bags to the fifth floor, Tom!"

"Yes'm," he murmured. He kept his head bowed. Perhaps he still wanted to retain that vision of the apple orchard in which he had been so interested. For it was toward the orchard he had been looking, as Arden and her chums noted when they went down toward the window. They could see the strange gnarled trees over the top of the high dark hedge. "Fifth floor?" questioned Tom, the porter. He was also an assistant gardener, as the girls later learned.

"Room 513," added the woman at the desk.

"Yes'm."

Arden thought she saw a little smile playing over the face of the good-looking young man as he started off ahead of the three freshmen, led by the stately Miss Everett. The porter was evidently going to a service elevator, as he passed out through a side door and was then lost to sight, with the bags

[13]

he carried so efficiently, all three of them, and not small, either.

Arden, Terry, and Sim, following Miss Everett, started up the brown polished stairs that reared skyward at the back of the large entrance hall.

Up and up and up they walked. All the landings and halls looked exactly alike, and the freshmen wondered how their guide retained her sense of direction and maintained the count.

Halfway up Terry murmured to Arden:

“Do you think there was anything in what he said?”

“Who said?”

“The taxi-man who drove us here from the station.”

“About what?”

“The orchard. You know he warned us to keep away from it. And if there is something terrible or scary about an orchard so near the college, why, I’m going——”

“You’re going to keep right on walking up!” interrupted Arden with her usual clear-headedness in a critical situation. “If there’s any mystery here at Cedar Ridge we’ll have the time of our lives solving it. But I don’t believe there is. That orchard is no different from any other, except, from what little we saw of it, there seemed to be some fine apples there. Now don’t go making mountains out of the camel in the eye of the needle, or something like that.”

“Oh, all right,” said Terry meekly. “But I was thinking——”

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“This is no time to think!” came from Sim. “Use your legs! Whew! Five flights! Is your room this high up, Miss Everett?”

“No, I’m a sophomore. I’m a floor lower than you are. But this is the fourth time I’ve taken freshies up here today. I don’t see why they have to pick on me!”

“Oh, this is too bad!” exclaimed Sim impulsively. “Perhaps if you could have a swim in the pool before dinner tonight you wouldn’t feel so tired.”

To Sim a dive into a pool with sea-green tiles on the bottom was a cure-all and she recommended it at every opportunity.

“Try a swim,” she urged.

Miss Everett came to a sudden stop on a landing and laughed in a manner that could be described only as cynical.

“Listen, freshie!” she exclaimed, “let me tell you something about that pool!”

The three girls looked at their guide apprehensively.

Was there something mysterious about the pool, as the taxi-man had intimated there was about the orchard?

CHAPTER II

Fruit-Cake

Waiting, with the deference they, as freshmen, guessed was due a sophomore, Arden, Terry, and Sim looked at Miss Everett. There was a smile on her lips, but there was no mirth in her words as she went on.

“There’s nobody in the world who could have a swim in that pool!” said the tall blonde girl, and one could only surmise whether there was exultation or vindictiveness in her tones. “A swim in that pool! Don’t make me laugh! Why, Tiddy, our revered head, uses it as a storehouse for cabbages, potatoes, and turnips that come out of the college garden. Swimming pool—ha!”

“Then that accounts for the wheelbarrow,” murmured Sim in a strained voice.

“Wheelbarrow? Oh, yes,” said Miss Everett. “They cart the cabbages, potatoes, and turnips to the pool in the wheelbarrow.”

“And apples?” asked Arden who, as were her chums, had been taken somewhat aback by this information. Yet Arden couldn’t help mentioning apples. She remembered the orchard, about which the taxi-man had so mysteriously hinted and toward which Tom, the porter, had been gazing so

steadfastly. What was in the orchard, anyhow? Arden Blake wondered while she waited for the tall blonde girl's reply.

"Yes, apples in season," granted Miss Everett. "There's a big orchard here, a fine orchard, as orchards go, I suppose, though, really, I don't know much about them. But we have a crabbed old college farmer who seems well up in that work. And there's Tom."

"Where?" asked Terry for she saw no signs of the good-looking young fellow in blue overalls.

"Oh, I don't mean he's here now," Miss Everett made haste to reply, with somewhat more interest in her voice. "But he too seems fascinated by our orchard. He seems to know a lot about apples. Yes, they'll store some in the swimming pool, but mostly potatoes, cabbages, and turnips go in there for the winter. I hope you freshies will like vegetables, because you're going to get plenty of them here."

"But what in the world is the matter with the swimming pool that they have to store vegetables in it?" asked Sim as they walked down a gloomy corridor.

Arden felt her heart sinking. She dared not look at Sim.

"What *isn't* the matter with it?" sneered Miss Everett. "The pump is broken, the concrete walls are full of cracks, the tile bottom is broken in several places so that it won't hold water, and half the edge is gone on one side. It hasn't been kept in service for two years, I imagine."

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"Why?" asked Sim sharply.

"No money. The depression—and other things, I suppose," answered the blonde guide. "And then, too, nobody here, that I know, goes in much for swimming. It isn't my line, I'm sure."

Arden ventured to glance at Sim, who at that moment raised her eyebrows with rather a breathless gesture and pushed her smart sport hat back on her head. But Sim did not further pursue the matter then.

“Here’s the recreation hall for your floor.” Miss Everett indicated a large bare room, the broad doors of which were partly open. “And down this way,” she went on, “is your room. You’re free to do what you like until you hear the bell, and then you’re to report in the hall. Hazing,” she added ominously, “doesn’t begin until next week.”

“Thank you for bringing us up here,” the three chorused as they turned toward No. 513. But the tired sophomore had already vanished down the dusky corridor.

For a few moments Arden, Sim, and Terry were too bewildered to speak as they entered their room. Silently they noted that their bags were already there. Tom must have ridden up with them on some sort of an elevator to arrive ahead of the girls.

It was a long narrow room with three beds in a row, two on one side of the door and one on the other. There were three bureaus against the opposite wall, and there were three windows, close together, at one end of the apartment. A most attractive and home-like feature was a window seat extending beneath the three casements. Three desks and a small bookcase completed the furnishings.

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“Thank goodness, there’s a large closet for our clothes!” exclaimed Sim, opening the door to disclose it.

“I think it’s lovely here,” murmured Terry.

Arden went to the windows and looked out through the gathering dusk. She saw down below, and a far distance it seemed, the cinder circle of the drive with a fountain in the

center. On a little plot of grass was the stone deer gazing, in a surprised manner, Arden thought, across the campus toward the railroad tracks.

Somewhere to the south of Pentville—and home—for all three freshmen. Just about this time the lights were being turned on. The respective fathers would be shaking out their evening papers and the respective mothers would be seeing to it that the dinners weren't late.

With a start Arden turned away from the windows. She wasn't getting homesick, was she, so soon? She who had urged the others to come to Cedar Ridge! A typical freshman trick!

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But no! Sim and Terry seemed all right. Terry was combing her sandy hair, and Sim was rummaging in her suitcase.

Not the prettiest of the three, Sim Westover had something about her that left a clear impression which could be remembered afterward. Her eyes, large and sparkling, were sea-gray in color, with long, dark-brown lashes. It was fitting that Sim's eyes should, somehow, be of a sea tint, for since she was a little girl she had spent all her summers at the shore, and she reveled in surf-bathing and swimming in deep water. Sim made no secret of the fact that some day she was going to be a champion swimmer and diver. That, perhaps, was why she had so readily agreed to Arden's proposal to come to Cedar Ridge when she saw the picture of the swimming pool in the prospectus. And that was why Sim was going to be so bitterly disappointed because the pool was out of use. A storage place for vegetables.

Poor Sim!

Terry considered herself the luckiest in her family, for all her sisters had straw-colored brows and lashes that are often seen with reddish hair.

Tall and muscular was Terry, and she had fine eyes with brown lashes and brows. She played tennis and golf, rode, and was a good swimmer, though, as she admitted, not as “crazy” about it as was Sim. Sim was different. She was small, light-haired, and round of face. She was afraid that some day she would be fat. Perhaps that was why she paid so much attention to water sports.

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Arden smoothed her dark, softly curling hair, turned her blue eyes away from the window view that was fast being obscured by the darkness outside, and said:

“Choose whichever beds you girls want. I’ll take the one you leave. And about the pool——”

“About the pool!” interrupted Sim. “I came here because of that, and now it might as well not be here. I thought it was queer they’d leave a wheelbarrow at the entrance. It couldn’t be used in first-aid rescues; I knew that!” She was almost sneering now, like Miss Everett.

“Oh, but Sim!” burst out Arden. “The pool will be fixed. They’ve just got to fix it! We’ll have it repaired. If it’s a little money they need, we’ll get that, somehow. If you two will help——”

“Of course we’ll help,” Terry was quick to offer. “But you’ll never get the money! How can you?”

“I don’t know, Terry, but there’ll be a way, I’m sure.” With a gayety she did not feel, Arden stood on her large suitcase, raised one hand as though drinking a toast, and exclaimed:

“To the pool! May it never be a pool of tears!”

“Oh, my word!” gasped Terry. “My word, Arden Blake! Get off that suitcase! You must be standing right on the fruit-cake!”

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“Fruit-cake!” echoed Sim. “Is there a fruit-cake? If there is, Arden, get off it! For if some of the stories the old grads tell are true, we’ll be mighty glad to have that fruit-cake before long.”

“Don’t get excited, my pets!” mocked Arden, lightly descending. “It’s Terry’s cake, but she didn’t have room for it in her bag so I packed it in mine. But it’s in a tin box. So you shall have your cake and also your swimming pool, Sim, my dear!”

Smiling, Arden opened the suitcase and took out a gold and red tin box which she set in the center of the middle bureau. With the electrics switched on, the red and gold box gave a high light to the room, a fact to which Terry immediately called attention. She added:

“As soon as we can go to town we must get spreads for the beds and covers to match for the bureaus. And I’ll have my globe sent up from home. I always think a globe makes a room look as though it were inhabited by a student. And perhaps a lamp with a green shade. Oh, do let’s hurry and unpack!”

Terry was almost breathless, but her eyes were shining and Arden, who was beginning to worry over the responsibility she had assumed in urging her chums to come to Cedar Ridge, felt she would not have to be concerned for Terry, at least.

“I’ll take the bed nearest the door, as you know I’m apt to be a ‘leettle-mite’ slow,” drawled Terry. “You take the one nearest the window, Arden. Then you can look up at the stars.”

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Sim laughed and said: “I’ll take the middle bed so——”

“So you can be the meat in the sandwich, little one!” interrupted Terry.

“I’m not so little, Terry Landry! It’s just because you’re such a giantess!” declared Sim indignantly.

“Stop teasing her, Terry! It’ll soon be time to go to the Hall, and we haven’t so much as washed our faces. Besides——”

Before Arden could finish her speech, the sort Terry called “Arden’s good-will talk,” there sounded a loud knock on the door.

Without waiting to be invited, Toots Everett, the tall blonde guide, entered with two other girls.

“Stand at attention, freshies!” Toots loudly commanded. “I am Miss Everett. The girl on my right is Miss Darglan and on my left Miss MacGovern. We three have picked you three to haze, when the proper time comes. I’ll take the red-head, Jessica,” she said to the girl on her right.

“I’ll take the baby,” decided the sophomore called Jessica. “That leaves the black-haired goddess for you, Pip. Don’t be too hard with her,” she mocked. “She looks as if she had led a sheltered life.”

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“But,” began Sim, “we don’t——”

“We’ll do the talking,” interrupted Miss Everett coldly. “You girls will report to us every day after classes, for a while. Your time is, henceforth, our time. We hope you have good constitutions. Our room is 416 on the floor below. See that you keep it in good order!”

“Oh, my friends, look!” suddenly exclaimed Pip MacGovern, indicating the fruit-cake in plain sight. “A goodie from home that we must not overlook. It is also to be hoped that you freshies brought a tea set and the wherewithals to go with it.”

“Yes,” timidly admitted Terry, “we have——”

She was interrupted by a surreptitious kick from Sim.

“Good!” declared Toots. “I can see where you three will be very useful to us!” she exulted. “Does anyone care for a piece of cake?” she asked her chums. “Sometimes our dinners here leave much to be desired.”

She walked with exaggerated undulations toward the bureau, like a model showing a new gown, removed the red and gold cover from the box and sniffed appreciatively. Having no knife, Toots took the cake in both hands and was about to break it as a boy breaks an apple when——

Clang-clang! Clang-clang! Clang-clang! Clang-clang! Clang-clang!

[24]

An insistent bell, so close to their door that it startled the three freshmen, rang loudly. Arden, Sim, and Terry moved closer together as if for protection.

“What’s that?” gasped Terry. “Fire?”

“No, Brighteyes,” mocked Toots. “That’s the five-five-five. The bell calling us to listen, most humbly, to Tiddy’s welcome-home speech. Your fruit-cake is saved, for the time being. But our time will come!”

Whereupon Toots, followed by her fellow hazers, stalked out of the room, leaving Arden, Sim, and Terry staring wonderingly after them.

“I—I think,” murmured Terry, “that perhaps the bell was also meant for us.”

“Yes,” agreed Sim, “it probably was. Well, here’s where we go in off the deep end!”

As the three freshmen hastily made ready to attend in the recreation hall, and as the black gloom of night settled down over Cedar Ridge College, out in the old apple orchard a young man in blue overalls wandered beneath the gnarled trees. He looked toward the brightly lighted windows of the recreation hall and then, with a quizzical smile on his bronzed face, while he stroked his mustache, he glanced toward the broken swimming pool and walked softly away through the rows of fruit-laden branches.

CHAPTER III

Black Danger

Rather timid, diffident, and certainly not as self-confident as they had been when the sneering sophomores had invaded their room, Arden, Terry, and Sim stood looking at one another outside the hall. Finally Arden broke the portentous silence by saying:

“Well, I suppose we had better go in.”

“No help for it,” voiced Sim.

“Oh, it may not be as bad as we think,” consoled Terry. “It’s like going in for a swim the first day of the season. The first is always the worst.”

“Don’t talk to me about dives and swimming!” snapped Sim. “I’m cheated, and I resent it!”

“Oh, Sim!” murmured Arden helplessly.

“I don’t mean you, my dear. It’s just hard times and whoever is responsible for storing vegetables in the pool that I’m sore against!”

“Well, come on!” urged Terry. “Let’s get it over with.”

With hearts momentarily beating faster, the three stepped into the recreation hall on their floor. It was a big room that was rapidly filling with girls, girls, and more girls.

“Just group yourselves about, young ladies. I shall not detain you very long,” said Miss Tidbury Anklon, the dean, with a half smile as she stood teetering upon her toes on the platform at the end of the room. Miss Anklon was a small woman, dark of complexion, and thin. This intermittent raising of herself on her toes as she talked seemed to be an effort to make herself taller and more impressive. Her severity and keen words at times, however, made her sufficiently respected and not a little feared. She was now trying to bring about some semblance of order in the inevitable chaos of the first assembly of new pupils.

“Quiet, please!” Miss Anklon tapped her knuckles on a convenient table. “There are a few things I must explain to you freshmen girls on your first night in Cedar Ridge.”

But, in spite of her promise, the dean did keep them rather long, until Sim found herself standing first on one foot and then on the other. Arden leaned quite frankly on Terry, who in turn rested herself against the nearest wall. It hadn't seemed worth while to sit down at first. Now it was too late to take chairs. The dean generalized.

The freshmen must always “sign in and out” when leaving the college grounds and returning. They would find the registry book in the lower vestibule hall. They might go to town, if the time of their classes would permit. But if in going to town a class period was missed, the offending ones would be “campused” for a week.

“Not allowed to leave the college precincts,” Miss Anklon took pains to translate.

Arden, her chums, and the others were told of the “honor system,” of “upper classmen” and “lower classmen,” and of rules and regulations, until many of the girls began to wonder how they could possibly remember it all.

One thing was deeply impressed upon them. Here, at Cedar Ridge, they were, for the time being, freshmen. However great had been their standing at their local high or preparatory schools, now they were the lowest of the low. The dean didn’t say that in so many words, but this was the impression she created.

Miss Anklon, “Tiddy” to the initiated, implied that as far as instructions along those lines went, the sophomores would not be long in making such matters clear to the freshmen. But it was all to be taken in a sporting manner and in the end would do much to cement friendships and foster school spirit, smiled Tiddy.

Terry was busy looking about the room, selecting girls who, she thought, looked like her friends at home. Arden was wondering what Sim was going to do now that there was no pool, and Sim, while also looking about, was debating with herself just how much the loss of the swimming she had counted on was going to mean to her.

Arden Blake, Theodosia (Terry) Landry and Bernice (Sim) Westover had been chums through their primary, grammar, and Vincent Prep days. Their friendships began very early, when all three, living near one another in the small city of Pentville, found themselves in the same class. Their association was further cemented when all three graduated at the same time from Vincent, which was an unofficial “feeder” for Cedar Ridge College.

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Addison Blake, the father of Arden, was a prosperous automobile dealer in Pentville. Terry was the daughter of Mrs. Nelson Landry, a widow with a fairly good income even

through the depression. Sim had for her parents Mr. and Mrs. Benson Westover. Mr. Westover owned a large department store, with branches in several cities. Mr. Westover had wanted a boy and his wife a girl, when the daughter was born, and Sim's nickname was a combination of She and Him. It fitted her perfectly. She was clever and popular in the trio and outside of it, more especially as she was in a position to obtain from the grocery department in her father's store many good things to eat—food more or less forbidden at surreptitious school feasts.

“There's Mary Todd,” whispered Arden as the talk of the dean was obviously drawing to a close.

“Yes, and Ethel Anderson and Jane Randall,” added Sim.

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These were three other girls from Vincent, but they lived in a New York suburb. They were friends with but not exactly chums of Arden and her two close companions. They had not made up their minds to come to Cedar Ridge until after the three inseparables had made their announcement.

“Now, my dear young ladies,” Miss Anklon finally concluded, “you will go to the dining room and be assigned your tables for the term.”

Instantly a flood of conversation was loosed. Arden and Sim clung together, and Terry, who had been momentarily separated from them, pushed her way through a throng of strange girls to reach her two friends.

Dean Anklon led the way, and all the freshmen followed down the five dark flights of stairs to the large dining room that was brilliantly lighted. At the door the dean was called aside by one of the teachers, and the bewildered freshies, swarming in, were left huddled together like a troop of new soldiers whose commander had deserted them.

Terry, at this point, took matters into her own hands, and, motioning to her chums to follow, selected a chair at a pleasant table about halfway down the length of the dining room and near a window. Some other freshies followed the lead of the more bold three, and the chairs were all quickly filled.

Terry looked at Arden, obviously well pleased with herself at so soon having become a class leader. Her joy was short-lived, however. A none too gentle tap on her shoulder caused her to look up.

[30]

“You freshies! What do you mean by sitting at our table?”

It was Toots Everett, with Jessica Darglan and Priscilla MacGovern standing behind her. All were glaring at the offending freshmen.

“A pretty good start, I must say!” sneered Jessica. “Your table is down there!” Dramatically she pointed to the far-distant lower end of the room.

“Go down there,” Priscilla said a little more gently. “You know you freshmen will have to think, now that you are in college. I’m afraid this means, for you three, the picking of lots of apples.”

Without a word, but deeply humiliated, the freshmen all rose and followed the lead of Terry, Arden, and Sim to their own proper table. Other freshmen, who had not made this social error, as well as the assembled sophomores, juniors and seniors, looked on, smiling.

“What did she mean—picking a lot of apples?” whispered Arden.

“How do I know?” gasped Sim. “Oh, is my face red!”

The three and the other freshmen quickly seated themselves in the proper chairs, and a chatter of conversation, more or less coherent, began. Most of the girls were strangers among strangers, but, realizing that they were all under the same roof and would be for some time to come, they soon began talking together, introducing themselves and a friendly spirit was quickly engendered.

[31]

“Oh, Arden! What a dreadful thing to do!” gasped Terry. “Wouldn’t you know I’d start something like that!” She was greatly embarrassed.

“It’s all right, Terry,” soothed Arden. “If only, though, it didn’t have to be our own particular sophomores whose seats we took.”

“Our fruit-cake hasn’t a chance now, and I’m afraid we shall be really well hazed,” said Sim as she looked sadly at Terry. Then she glanced down at her plate, adding: “This cold ham with sliced tomatoes doesn’t help to raise my spirits any. Poor fruit-cake! Not a chance!”

“Yes, it has a chance, Sim!” excitedly whispered Terry. “I have an idea! If that fruit-cake is to be eaten we had best do it ourselves. There are twelve of us at this table. I’m afraid it doesn’t mean much cake each, but we must stick together in times like these.”

“What is it, Terry? What are you going to do?” Sim wanted to know.

“Now, just listen, and you’ll find out.” Getting the attention of the other girls at the table, Terry continued in a tragic whisper: “As soon as you can, after we three leave, all of you here come to our room. It’s 513.” She indicated Arden and Sim with herself. “Knock twice, a pause—another knock. Those sophs will never taste that fruit-cake!”

[32]

“It’s a grand idea!” declared Arden.

After this, amid bubbling talk, the meal was quickly finished. The students began filing out of the dining hall. Old friends greeted one another with open arms and in a surprisingly short time most of the talking, laughing groups had disappeared into various rooms where, behind closed doors, they still talked and talked and talked.

Arden, Sim, and Terry hurried to 513 to get it ready for visitors. It was not long before the first “tap-tap—tap,” sounded and the first visitors were admitted. Others followed until the window seat and the beds, to say nothing of the chairs, were all much sat upon until, as Sim whispered to Arden, it was almost necessary to put out a sign of S. R. O.

The fruit-cake was brought out from hiding, was much admired, and then went the way of all good fruit-cakes; a nail file being used to cut it into slices, and handkerchiefs serving as plates.

In the intervals of eating, the girls found out much about one another and vowed to stick together during the hazing, the prospects of which had really frightened some. Voices rose hilariously higher and higher, and laughter became more frequent. They were having a fine time. It was good to be thus sitting around in a college room, talking to interesting girls, thought Arden and her two chums, and planning future fun. Studies were momentarily pushed into the mental background.

[33]

Now and again someone would inquire about “math” or “English lit.” Girls whose older sisters had been to Cedar Ridge before them were somewhat well informed as to which of the instructors were “easy” and those for whom students must really make adequate preparation.

“I don’t worry much about English lit, though,” Arden remarked, brushing crumbs from her lap. “But math I’ll never get through. I just can’t do it!”

“Math is easy for me,” declared Mary Todd, a really lovely-looking girl, wearing a simple, well-cut sports dress of the “shirtmaker” type. “I’ll help you, Arden.”

“Thanks a lot, Mary,” Arden responded gratefully.

“I have to study hard for everything,” lamented Sim. “I’m not a bit clever that way.”

“Well,” began Terry, “I think——”

But she never had a chance to say what she thought. Suddenly, before any of the convivial little party realized what was happening, the door of 513 was pushed open and the “Terrible Three,” as Arden later nicknamed them, stood within the room.

[34]

“What’s this? Freshmen meeting in your room, Miss Blake!” Toots Everett was very stern. “You girls who don’t belong here will go at once to your own rooms and don’t do any more of this visiting. Jessica, confiscate the fruit-cake!”

Jessica made a noble attempt, but there was no fruit-cake. The red and gold box was empty. All that remained were a few crumbs for the mice. Arden smiled sweetly at Pips MacGovern, Terry was grinning most enjoyably, and Sim’s round eyes outdid themselves in roundness.

The offending freshmen quickly vanished to their own rooms, while the three sophomores were speechless with indignation. Toots finally found her voice to say frostily:

“This is the third time we have met, Miss Westover, Miss Blake and Miss Landry. This meeting is somewhat to your

advantage. But we sophomores will not forget. You three will report to me, Miss Everett, in my room tomorrow after classes. The program has been changed. Hazing will begin officially tomorrow!”

Waiting an ominous moment to see if the threatening words had any actual effect, the three sophomores then silently left the room.

“Well, that’s that!” remarked Sim.

[35]

“Wasn’t she dreadful!” murmured Terry.

“It’s going to be fun, girls!” Arden exclaimed. “I’m not a bit afraid of being hazed. Now, let’s unpack the rest of our things, and then we must write some letters home. They will all be so anxious to know what happened on our first day at Cedar Ridge.”

“Such a lot has happened,” murmured Sim, looking doubtful. “I’m afraid we haven’t exactly endeared ourselves to those sophs.”

“Who cares?” laughed Terry.

“After hazing is over they’ll be our good friends,” declared Arden. “It’s part of their stock in trade to seem very gruff and terrible now, but we needn’t worry about that. Let’s get at our letters. You’ll have to lend me something to write on, Sim. I don’t seem to have any paper in my suitcase. There’s some in my trunk. I suppose that’ll be up tomorrow.”

“I expected this, Arden,” Sim laughed. “I brought some extra stationery for you. See that you write your mother a nice long letter. No more ten-word telegrams.”

The room was soon quiet except for the scratching of pens on paper. It was very serene around Cedar Ridge College now,

and quiet in the farm and orchard grounds that formed part of the old estate which had been transformed into a seat of learning.

The girls had been told that night letters might be placed on a table at the end of their corridor, whence they would be taken up by one of the porters or janitors in time for the early morning mail.

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“Well, I’ve finished!” said Terry, sealing her last envelope.

“So have I,” said Arden.

“Let’s take them out and leave them on the table,” suggested Sim. “The folks will get them tomorrow night.”

As the three walked down the dimly lighted corridor, they saw two other freshmen going back to their room after having deposited their mail on the table over which glowed a small light.

This table was at the end of the corridor nearest the old apple orchard, which formed part of the college farm. The girls had heard something of the college farm, and there had been a veiled threat that the freshmen had to gather apples for their sophomore hazers.

The big window in the corridor was open. And as Arden and her two chums dropped their letters upon the table they thrust their heads out for a breath of the fresh night air.

“I wonder what sort of apples grow in that orchard?” mused Sim.

“They must be very choice,” suggested Arden.

“How do you know?” asked Terry.

“Don’t you remember, that good-looking porter with the cute little mustache who took up our bags, was gazing so soulfully out of the window into this same orchard?” suggested Arden. “There was such a queer, rapt look on his face, I’m sure, though I could see only the back of his head.”

“Oh, my word!” mocked Sim. “Aren’t we getting poetical and humorous all of a sudden!”

“Hark!” cautioned Terry in a whisper.

From the dark orchard below them and to the northeast of the college building sounded a cry of alarm and fright floating through the murky blackness. It was a cry as if someone was in danger.

“Oh!” gasped Sim. “Whatever was that?”

Then, with one accord, she and her chums ran back to their room and closed the door but did not lock it. For it was against the rules of Cedar Ridge to lock bedroom doors. Miss Anklon had impressed this on the freshmen. Terry, however, insisted on dragging a chair against the portal, bracing the back of it under the knob so it would be difficult to gain access.

The three girls gazed at one another with fear in their eyes.

Was there danger abroad in the blackness of the night?

CHAPTER IV

The Reward Circular

“What could that have been?” gasped Terry, sinking on her bed.

“Then you heard it, too?” asked Arden.

“Of course! We all heard it!” declared Sim. “A shout or groan in that dark orchard as if someone were suffering. Do you think there could have been a fight among the help? You know they have a resident farmer here at Cedar Ridge and several laborers. They might have had a bout—or something.”

Suddenly all three burst out laughing. They couldn’t help it. The looks on their faces were so queerly tragic. And Terry said:

“I think we’re making a lot out of nothing. Probably what happened was that a porter—the blue-eyed porter—was trying to lug in some faculty baggage the back way and it fell on his toes.”

“Well, whatever it was, don’t let’s go spreading scandal around the college so early in the term,” warned Arden. “We must keep the secret of the orchard to ourselves—if there is a secret.”

“Guess we’ll have to,” yawned Sim. “For who knows what the secret is?”

“That taxi-man seemed to hint at something,” murmured Terry.

“Oh—bosh!” exploded Arden. “I guess we’re all just worked up and nervous because this is our first night and we’ve had to stand a lot of annoyance so soon—those sophs and all that.”

“Well spoken, my brave girl!” declaimed Sim. “Let’s forget it.”

It was this thought which gradually quieted the palpitating hearts and the excited breathing of the three. After they had listened, more or less cowering on their beds, and heard no sounds of any general alarm, they finally prepared to retire for their first night at Cedar Ridge.

“After all,” said Terry, “it may have been some skylarking boys trying to steal the college apples.”

“Maybe,” agreed Sim.

“It didn’t sound like boys to me,” declared Arden. “It was more like a man’s shout.”

“Well, we don’t need to worry about it,” went on Terry. “But if those snobby sophs think we’re going in that orchard in the dark, after what we just heard, to get apples for them, they can have my resignation.”

“And mine!” echoed her chums.

Sleep was actually in prospect, and final yawns had been stifled when a scratching in one corner of the room aroused the tired girls.

“We must get a trap for those mice,” Terry sleepily murmured. “I suppose they smell the fruit-cake crumbs.”

“All very well to trap ’em,” chuckled Sim, “but who’s going to take ’em out of the trap after they’re caught or strangled to death?”

“Oh, stop!” pleaded Arden. “Let the poor mice have the crumbs. Maybe they need them.” Which seemed sound advice well given.

The morning of a new day dawned bright and cool. Fall had only lately checked the glories of summer, and the heavily clumped shrubbery about the college seemed strong enough to withstand many wintry blasts before giving up its well-earned beauty.

“Oh, look, girls!” exclaimed Arden, first of the trio out in the corridor ready for breakfast. She pointed a slim finger, well manicured, at the table near the end of the passage.

“What?” asked Sim. “Has the orchard noise of last night materialized?”

“No. But they didn’t collect our letters for the mail,” said Terry.

“Something must be wrong with the system,” spoke Sim. “Though it isn’t to be wondered at, in the confusion of opening night. But can’t we take them ourselves and drop them into the post office after breakfast? The office is just off the college grounds across the railroad tracks. Can’t we do that?”

“I don’t see why not,” reasoned Arden.

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Breakfast was rather a cold and grim meal compared to the excitement of the supper the night before. It was finally eaten,

however, and then, it being too early for any classes yet and no orders having been issued about chapel attendance, the three from room 513 started for the little post office outside the college grounds.

Arden looked completely happy. Surroundings were so important to her. Wearing a light wool dress, dull blue in color and with most comfortable walking shoes on, she urged her chums forward. All of the girls were simply dressed. In keeping with the traditions at Cedar Ridge, hats gave place to mortar-boards and, even in freezing weather, they would be donned with a gay defiance of winter winds.

“Come on, girls!” Arden was excited. “I must be at Bordmust Hall at nine. My adviser is going to help me arrange my schedule of classes. I hope we can get together at least on a few.”

“We all have to be there,” said Terry, adding with a sigh: “I suppose I’ll have an eight-thirty class every day, worse luck!” Morning sleep was so good.

“Oh, swimming pool!” chanted Sim as they passed the building now turned to so base a use as that of a vegetable cellar. “When first I saw thee——”

“Have patience!” interrupted Arden. “Look who’s coming this way!”

[42]

A white-haired old gentleman, clad somberly in black, was slowly approaching along the path that led from the front campus down to the railroad tracks and across to the post office. His hands were clasped behind his back and, with head bent down, he seemed to observe only the ground at his feet.

“Who is he?” whispered Sim.

“He must be Rev. Henry Bordmust, the resident chaplain here. Shall we speak—or just bow respectfully?” Terry looked to Arden for advice.

“I don’t believe he even sees us. He looks as though he were thinking deeply. Let’s wait and see if he speaks to us.” After this advice, Arden stepped a little in advance of her two chums to invite the clergyman’s attention.

The daydreaming chaplain had met and was passing the girls now; still without a sign of recognition. But he was saying something—muttering to himself as old men often do. The girls overheard a few words.

“Dear, dear! The orchard! The old orchard!” he murmured. Mentally he seemed to be wringing his hands in real distress. “Why doesn’t he come out of it?”

Rev. Henry Bordmust sighed and passed the freshmen, his eyes still on the path at his feet, as oblivious of the trio as if it did not exist.

“Did you hear that?” mumbled Terry as they walked on.

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“He was talking about the orchard—where we heard the noise last night,” spoke Sim. “What can he mean?”

“I heard one of the seniors talking about him,” volunteered Arden. “He is said to be—queer—says things no one can understand. And he often gives the girls awful scoldings over nothing—and sometimes asks you in to have tea with him, most unexpectedly.”

“Well, I wish he’d invite us in to tea this afternoon,” murmured Sim with new energy. “And I wish he’d explain what he means about someone coming out of the orchard. I hope that weird noise doesn’t play any tricks tonight.”

“Oh, perhaps we misunderstood him,” suggested Terry. “The chaplain can’t know anything about a mysterious noise in our college apple orchard.”

“Hardly,” agreed Sim. “Well, he certainly never saw us. I don’t believe I’d like to have tea with him.”

“Oh, I think he looks sweet,” declared Arden.

“Then you won’t need sugar in your tea,” laughed Terry. “But let’s hurry and mail these letters. It would never do to be late for our first class.”

They had reached the tracks of the Delawanna Railroad, the line that ran from New York to Morrisville, the small city nearest the college. From force of habit the girls stopped and looked up and down the rails for the possible approach of a train. Soon they would know when each one was expected. It was a tradition that by the time one was a senior at Cedar Ridge no watch was necessary, so familiar did the students become with the passage of the trains.

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The post office was a small one-roomed building with a stove in the center. Two windows, one for the sale of stamps and the other for the mailing of parcels, broke the stretch of tiers of glass-fronted boxes behind which the business was carried on. For the post office served the town as well as the college.

The side walls were literally papered with police posters offering rewards for the arrest, or information leading to the arrest or apprehension, of various persons—criminals—men and women. The posters were from the police departments of several cities, New York among them. Many of the placards were adorned with profiles and front views of the oddest faces the girls had ever seen.

“Oh, for the love of stamps!” gasped Arden when they had dropped their letters in the slot and were looking at the

posters. "What nightmares!"

"Aren't they awful!" agreed Terry.

"Not a good-looking man among them," was Sim's opinion. "I've heard about these posters. They've been here, some of them, for I don't know how long. It's a sort of a game among the girls to see who can find the funniest face."

"Let's try it," suggested Arden, laughing. Suddenly she ceased her mirth and stood as if fascinated in front of a poster showing the full-face picture of a young man. He was rather good-looking and quite an exception to the other portraits so publicly displayed. His face, like most of the others, was smooth, unadorned by beard or mustache.

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"Terry!" impulsively exclaimed Arden. "Look! Haven't you seen that face before?"

Terry considered carefully before slowly answering:

"No, I don't believe I have. It isn't a bad face, though."

"Rather interesting," agreed Sim. "What's he wanted for, murder or bank robbery?"

"Neither," answered Arden. "Listen." She read from the poster:

"One thousand dollars reward for information as to the whereabouts of Harry Pangborn." Then followed a general description, the age being given as twenty-three, and there was added the statement that the young man had suddenly disappeared from his home on the estate of his grandfather, Remington Pangborn, on Long Island.

Part of the poster consisted of a statement from the attorneys of Remington Pangborn—the *late* Mr. Pangborn, it was made

plain.

“Harry Pangborn,” the statement read, “is not wanted on any criminal charge whatever. He disappeared from his friends and his usual haunts merely, it is surmised, because he was expected to assume the duties and responsibilities of the large estate he was about to inherit from his grandfather. It is understood that he stated he did not want the inheritance just yet. Of a high-strung and nervous temperament, Mr. Pangborn is believed to have gone away because the responsibilities of wealth are distasteful to him and also, perhaps, because he seeks adventure, of which he is very fond. If this meets his eye or if anyone can convey to him the information that he will be permitted to assume as much or as little of the estate as he wishes, a great service will have been done. All that is desired is that Harry Pangborn will return to his friends and relatives as soon as possible. His hasty action will be overlooked. It is rumored that Mr. Pangborn may be in the vicinity of Morrisville, though he may have gone abroad, as he was fond of foreign travel.

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“Information and claims for the above reward may be sent to Riker & Tabcorn, Attorneys, New York City, or to the local police department in the municipality where this poster is displayed.”

The girls, crowding about Arden, read the poster with her. Then Sim said:

“Maybe it was in the movies that you saw someone who reminds you of him, Arden. Harry Pangborn isn’t bad looking, compared to all the others.” With a sweeping gesture she indicated the various poster exhibits.

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“Why, he’s positively handsome when you put him alongside of Dead-eye Dick, here,” laughed Terry. “As for Two-gun Bobbie——”

“I’m serious, girls,” interrupted Arden. “I’m sure I’ve seen this young man somewhere before. Now, if we could only locate him or tell the lawyers where to look for him and get this reward money, wouldn’t it be just wonderful?”

“Grand!” agreed Terry. “But wake up, my dear. You’re dreaming!”

“And I’ve just thought of something else!” went on Arden, oblivious of the banter.

“What?”

“If we did collect this money we could donate it to the college to have the swimming pool repaired.”

“That’s sweet of you and a good idea, Arden, but I don’t believe we could do it,” objected Sim. “Besides, I don’t exactly believe what it says on this poster. It seems very silly for a young fellow to disappear just when he’s coming into a lot of money—a fortune.”

“Perhaps he was made to disappear,” suggested Terry, her eyes opening wide.

“Oh! You mean—kidnaped?” asked Arden.

“Yes.”

“Worse and more of it!” laughed Sim.

“Well, anyhow, we could try, couldn’t we?” Arden asked. “You’d help, wouldn’t you, Terry?”

[48]

“Yes, indeed I’ll help. I’ve always fancied myself in the rôle of a detective, spouting pithy Chinese philosophy and generally getting underfoot.”

“Now, Terry, just be serious for once. And Sim, you also. You know how disappointed you were when you found out the swimming pool was——”

“*Kapoot!*” chuckled Sim, supplying Arden’s evident lack of a word with the latest Russian expression. “Go on!”

“Well,” resumed Arden, pouting a little, “you never can tell. Maybe we could do it. It isn’t impossible. Stranger things have happened. And I just know I’ve seen that young man on the poster somewhere before. If I could only remember where! Did either of you ever have that feeling?”

“Lots of times. I’m for you, Arden!” declared Sim. “I’ll do what I can and whatever you say. This mysterious Harry Pangborn may very well be right around here.”

“Around Cedar Ridge!” shrilled Terry.

“Certainly! Why not? If the authorities didn’t think it likely that he might be in this vicinity, why did they put the poster up here in the post office? And they mentioned Morrisville,” challenged Sim.

“There’s something in that,” Terry admitted.

“Oh, if he should be in hiding around here and we could find him and claim the thousand dollars reward,” breathed Arden, “wouldn’t it be just wonderful! And what a sensation when we magnanimously turned the money over to the college for the swimming pool. Oh, oh!”

“Would you do that for dear old Alma Mater when you don’t know her so very well?” asked Sim, who, with her chums, was still gazing at the poster of the good-looking but missing heir of the Pangborn estate of millions.

“I’d do it for you, Sim, dear,” murmured Arden. “I want you to be happy here, since I teased you so to come.”

“And you think I won’t be happy without the swimming pool?”

“Will you?”

“Not as happy as I would be with it.”

“But even admitting that this missing young man may be around here,” suggested Terry, “what chance have we of finding him? We have so much college work to do. For, after all, we were sent here to learn something,” she sighed.

“Granted,” laughed Arden. “But we may find time for a little detective work on the side as well as for hazing. Oh, it’s a wonderful prospect!” She swung around in a few dance steps right there in the old post office.

“Well, we’d better be getting back,” suggested Sim after this. “Oh, look at the clock!” she gasped. Then followed a hurried sending of some picture postcards they had bought; cards on which they marked with an X the location of their room.

[50]

The three chums were bubbling with life, laughter, and merriment as they turned to leave the little building, but their mirth was turned to alarm as a stern voice assailed them.

“Young ladies!”

They looked around to see Rev. Dr. Henry Bordmust sternly regarding them from the doorway.

“Yes, Dr. Bordmust,” Sim almost whispered as the chaplain appeared to be waiting for formal recognition.

“You are freshmen!” he accused, with a glance at their mortarboards, the tassels of which told the tale. “You know

you are not permitted over here—in the post office. It is against the college rules—for you freshmen. Return at once! You must! You must!”

He appeared strangely stirred and angry, and his dark brows, shading his bright little eyes, bent into a frown. But somehow, after that first booming and accusative “young ladies,” the chaplain seemed exhausted, as though the anger pent up in him had taken something from his none too profuse vitality. He was an old man. Now he essayed a wintry smile and added, as he gently waved them out with motions of his thin white hands:

“That is to say, you shouldn’t have come here. You—er—
have no need to be—er—frightened at this first infraction of
the rules, but—er—another time you may be—er—campused
for such action.”

[51]

Then, having seen that the three were on their way out, Dr. Bordmust turned to the window, evidently to buy some stamps for the letters he held in one hand. He murmured to himself in those queer, quavering, meaningless tones:

“Too bad; too bad! I can’t always be watching! Dear me!”

Wonderingly, Arden and her chums looked at the shrinking figure in black as they passed out of the door. But Dr. Bordmust gave them no further attention.

[52]

CHAPTER V

Rescued

Sim, who was hurrying after Arden and Terry up the steep hill on top of which was perched Bordmust Hall, uttered a series of frightened exclamations.

“Oo-oo-oo! Oh, my! Oh, but I was frightened. Wasn’t he angry!”

“Since Dr. Bordmust is our chaplain, it was probably what might be called righteous anger,” suggested Arden.

“What do you suppose he meant when he spoke about not always watching?” asked Terry.

“I don’t know,” Arden had to admit. “The girls say Dr. Bordmust is really queer at times. I suppose it is because he’s such a profound student. He knows such a lot, all about Egypt, so many languages, and they say ancient history is an open book to him.” Arden was fairly sprinting along the boardwalk that made the steep path up to Bordmust Hall a little easier. What with talking and hurrying, her breath was a bit gaspy.

“Well, don’t ask me what it all means,” begged Terry. “I can’t even guess. But, oh! I do hope I’m not going to be late for this first class.”

“So say we all of us,” chanted Sim.

“They can’t be too severe at the very beginning,” murmured Arden.

Bordmust Hall, where most of the class sessions were held, crowned with its classic architecture the summit of the long slope which formed the eminence of the broad acres about Cedar Ridge College. It was behind the main, or dormitory, building in which were housed the executive offices and the residence rooms of the faculty. To the southwest of the hall, and easily viewed from the steps, was the unused pool. To the northwest, and in line with the main building, was the beautiful Gothic chapel with its wonderful stained-glass windows. Near the chapel was the unimposing home of the chaplain, Rev. Dr. Bordmust; one of whose ancestors had partly endowed Cedar Ridge. For this reason the hall was named for him.

At the foot of the slope on which the hall stood were the rambling fields and gardens where much of the farm produce for the college tables was raised. The nearest of the farm-lands, so called, was the orchard, part of which could be seen from the southeast windows of the dormitory. And it was this orchard that the taxi-man had indicated in such a warning manner. It was this orchard into which Tom Scott, the good-looking porter, had been staring the night of the arrival of Arden Blake and her chums. So much had been crowded into the comparatively short time the three freshmen had been at college that they had almost forgotten the strange orchard. Even now they had no chance to consider the matter, for they, with many other girls, were hastening to their first classes.

[54]

They gave a momentary glance toward the orchard, with its quaint gnarled trees. The morning sun was glinting on red, dark-green, and golden russet apples which the gardener and his men had not yet started to gather.

Arden, especially, gazed searchingly at the orchard. Apple trees grow in such strange shapes and huddle so closely to themselves, as if each one guarded a secret. There was a puzzled look in Arden's blue eyes as she tried to guess what might be hidden by those trees and the tall hedge surrounding them.

Sim was gazing rather sorrowfully at the pool building, but Terry was smiling, perhaps because everything seemed, for the moment, at least, to be so filled with good and pleasant life.

“Go on in, kids!” Sim urged her two chums. “I’ll be along in a minute or two. I just want to take a look at—I just want to—oh, well, go on. Don’t wait for me.”

“But won’t you be late?” objected Arden.

“No, I have some time to my credit.”

As her surprised friends watched, Sim left them and hurried down across a stretch of smooth lawn toward the disused swimming pool.

[55]

“Too bad,” murmured Arden.

“What is?” asked Terry.

“I really think Sim feels more keenly than we realize about the pool. But she’s such a good sport. Look at her! Going to view the ashes of her hopes or the collapse of her dreams or something equally tragic.”

“Don’t let’s say anything about this,” proposed Terry. “If Sim cares so much, I’m sure she’d rather not talk about this little visit.”

Arden agreed and, taking Terry's arm, they hurried into the hall.

Sim reached the pool building and tried to get some idea of the wreck within by peering through a window. But the sill was too high to afford a view, even if the window had not been made of heavily frosted glass, quite opaque.

Then she stepped back and gazed up at the copper and glass domed roof. Around the top of the building were set at intervals glazed tiles depicting nautical scenes. Dolphins were diving merrily as if to tantalize sea horses with necks proudly arched, and mermaids flicked their tails disdainfully at Father Neptune.

"I may as well try the door," Sim murmured. "I'd like to see what it's like inside, though it will probably break my heart!"

After several hard pushes to the extent of her strength, she succeeded in swinging back the door. She found herself in a sort of vestibule, but the inner door of this opened easily, and then Sim stood almost on the edge of the abandoned pool.

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A peculiar smell assailed her, as of a place long shut up, but at the same time it had something of out-of-doors about it, the odor of clean earth and ripe vegetables.

"It isn't as bad as Toots said," mused Sim. "At least, it looks as though there isn't so very much the matter. It isn't filled with vegetables, either; just a few bags as yet, though they probably will bring in more when they pick the apples. This must have been a beautiful pool once."

The bottom of the pool was tiled a pea green, a color which must have given the water a most cooling tone on a hot day. But the white tile sides no longer gleamed, and in more than one place jagged dark cracks ran crazily down the walls like streaks of black lightning. Sim looked at the cracked tile and

concrete edge at her feet. The depth was still indicated, though there was no water in the pool—5 feet.

“This is the shallow end, of course,” Sim thought, and she walked slowly around the edge and toward the melancholy spring-boards to which some strips of cocoa-fiber matting still clung.

“How quiet it is in here,” Sim murmured. “Like a museum after hours—or an Egyptian tomb.” She shivered a little, though it was warm in the natatorium.

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In the deep end several filled burlap bags were piled up, and in each corner were barrels of cabbages leaning against the walls.

“I thought, from what Toots said, the whole place would be filled to the brim with cabbages and turnips,” Sim said to herself, smiling a little ruefully. “I wonder how long this pool is, or should I say *was*?”

She began to measure the length with her eyes, mentally swimming with long, smooth strokes while her feet churned up and down.

“About seventy-five yards long, I guess,” she went on. “And about twenty-five across. A lovely size. I could do three lengths a day here and really enjoy it. Let’s see how deep it is from the end of the board.”

She walked gingerly out on the diving plank, choosing the center one for there were three at the deep end, tiered at different heights. It was difficult to estimate, without water in the pool and with the barrels and bags of vegetables scattered about, how close the different boards came to the surface of the filled space. Sim decided that the plank she was standing on was the lowest.

She permitted herself a little pre-diving, teetery bounce on the very end, half fearful lest the dried wood should crack beneath even her light weight. But it held, and Sim gave a bolder jump.

“A straight dive—cutting the water about there!” With her eyes Sim indicated to herself just the spot where her finger tips should enter the water—had there been any water there.

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She jumped again and came down safely, with no warning cracking of the dried plank. Then she balanced herself on the very tip of the board before, mentally, springing into the air. Now she performed a most ambitious jump, but this time the stiffened wood snapped back suddenly. Sim was thrown to one side, and she swung her arms around and around like a child on its first roller skates, trying desperately not to topple backward.

But her motions only caused the board to quiver more violently, and in a split second Sim slipped off and clung, with her finger tips only, to the edge of the plank, while the hard-tiled bottom of the pool, seemingly miles below, waited to receive her.

“Oh, gosh! What’ll I do?” poor Sim thought. “Those tiles don’t look very soft, and I’ll drop in a minute!”

Her fingers ached from their stiff clinging grip, and her arms were quickly tiring. She decided she must soon let go for after a futile attempt to sling one leg up over the side edge of the board it bent so alarmingly that she feared it would snap. She began to swing to and fro like a pendulum, hoping she might cast herself upon a bag of vegetables which would serve to break her fall, when, suddenly, she felt her wrists firmly gripped by two hands, and she looked up to see Tom Scott, the porter-gardener, smiling down at her. He was kneeling on the end of the plank.

“Don’t jump!” he warned. “I’ll pull you up. It’s rather the reverse of ‘don’t shoot, I’ll come down,’ isn’t it?” he said lightly. He could not have taken better means to quiet Sim’s excited nerves than with Mr. Crockett’s little coon banter.

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With what seemed no effort at all, Tom Scott lifted her up and held her clear of the end of the board so her legs did not scrape against it. Then he carefully walked back with her toward the middle of the plank, where there was no danger of its breaking, set her down, and stood grinning at her. A nice grin it was, too, Sim thought later.

She managed to produce a weak, embarrassed smile.

“Thank you so much!” she said a bit stiffly. The man must think her crazy. “I—I slipped! I—er—I was—that is, I was trying——” To cover her confusion she looked at her red finger tips.

“Hurt?” he inquired.

“Broke two or three nails,” Sim responded ruefully. “I’m very glad you came along. I might have sprained an ankle if I had let go, for this end must be nine feet deep.”

“The water, when there is any, is over nine feet deep nearest this wall,” said Tom Scott. “You certainly would have been jarred a bit, to say the least.”

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“Then I must thank you again. But please don’t mention to anyone that you found me in such a silly fix, will you?” Sim begged. She was quickly regaining her lost composure. “I just wanted to get a look at the pool and foolishly walked out on the board. I imagined myself poising for a dive and I slipped off. You won’t tell?”

“Of course I won’t,” Tom agreed, somewhat gayly, it seemed. “I came in to get a few of the early apples we have stored

here. One of the cooks asked me to. I imagine there are going to be pies. But, honestly, I won't tell a soul."

"Thank you," Sim murmured.

The young gardener walked up to the middle of the pool and with athletic ease jumped down in it near several bags of vegetables. He picked up one containing apples, heaved it up on the edge and jumped up himself. Then, slinging the sack up on his shoulder, he walked toward the door, giving Sim a friendly backward glance as he went out.

"What a nice young man!" said Sim to herself. "He doesn't seem like a gardener at all. No brogue and no accent of any kind. I wish I could tell Arden and Terry, but I'd rather die than have them know of this dizzy adventure. I must have looked perfectly stupid hanging there on the end of the plank!"

The clanging of a distant bell brought Sim back to reality, and as she looked at her wrist watch she left all thoughts of pools and good-looking rescuing gardeners behind her. For it would need a swift dash to get her to Bordmust Hall before she would be late for her class.

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CHAPTER VI

Apple Hazing

Girls of various sizes, types, and descriptions were hurrying into the building, and their clothes, of all colors, gave a luster otherwise lacking in the dull, sand-colored structure. The freshmen were easily distinguished from the other students by the fact that they were all carrying or scanning yellow cards which told them in what rooms to report for their first classes.

Sim was surprised to see Arden and Terry still outside the hall.

“I thought you had to hurry in to class,” she said, hoping they wouldn’t notice her broken nails.

“Wrong number,” remarked Terry. “We went in and were told to come back in fifteen minutes, so we came up for air.”

“Where were you?” asked Arden, glancing sharply at Sim.

“Oh—just walking around. I think I’m about in time for my class. Let’s go in.”

The three found they were to be separated for the morning session though the first class in the afternoon would find them in the same room for English literature.

“And we must try to sit together,” called Arden to Sim and Terry as they parted.

Inside the hall all was confusion. Girls were running hither and yon. Stairways were crowded with students going up or coming down, and all were excited. Doors were suddenly pushed open by uncertain freshmen and again by oversure sophomores. The latter, in a spirit of fun, several times sent a poor “frosh” up to the top floor when she should have remained on the first.

Another warning bell rang and, almost at once, the corridors were empty and quiet. Inside their classrooms the three girls from 513 looked, listened, and answered somewhat in a daze. That first day always remained more or less of a hazy recollection. Something of an organization was arranged, the roll was checked and corrected, names were asked and given, everyone was on edge and nervous, even the instructors. Strange faces, many of them timid, looked on other strange faces, also somewhat timid.

Then came welcome noon, and the rush out of Bordmust and some of the other study buildings to the dining hall was comparable only to the New York subway rush at five o'clock.

The afternoon classes were attended by all more pleasantly and with less strain. To their delight, Arden, Sim, and Terry managed to get into the same room and sat near one another.

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As they were leaving Bordmust Hall, at the close of the afternoon session, Arden heard someone say:

“Here come our three!”

Toots Everett, Jessica, and Pip were regarding the other trio with sardonic smiles and, as Terry said later, “with murder in their eyes.”

“Good afternoon, freshies! How about a little song for my friends, here?” Jessica was mockingly speaking. “A song befitting your talents. Arden Blake, come here!”

Arden stepped forward, blushing. “I can’t sing,” she quavered.

“You shall learn. Your friend here, with the red hair, looks like a singer. And while you two sing, Sim Westover shall dance. On with the dance, freshies!”

The trio from 513 looked at one another in dismay, but there was no help for it. Amused seniors and juniors had gathered to see the fun. From the classmates of Arden and her chums two kinds of advice was forthcoming, the “don’t-you-do-it!” and “go-on-be-sports!”

Finally, in a weak and uncertain voice, Arden and Terry, after a moment of embarrassed consultation, sang one verse from their prep-school song; something about “Bring Me Violets for My Hair,” while Sim tapped about more like a sparrow than a swan.

At last it was over.

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“Not bad,” commented Toots.

“I’ve seen worse,” said Pip.

“But not much,” was Jessica’s opinion.

Then the sophomores delivered a rhyming ultimatum. They stood with their heads together and chanted:

*“From yonder orchard, old and green,
Where, ’tis said, strange things are seen,
You three, upon this fatal day,
Must gather apples while ye may.”*

*At once repair to that dread spot,
And in your quest dare pass it not.
Then bring, for our symbolic use,
Fair apples with but smallest bruise.
Ten perfect fruits, no less, must we
Your mentors have, in time for tea.”*

There was a dramatic pause, following this delivery, and then, as though they had rehearsed it, as, indeed, they had, the three sophomores picked up the books they had deposited on the ground in front of them while singing, and marched away, leaving the trio from 513 the center of an excited and thrilled group.

“What does it all mean?” asked Sim.

“Is it part of the hazing?” asked Terry.

“Must we really go after the apples?” asked Arden in astonishment.

“Yes,” said Mary Todd. “It’s just part of college life. And you may as well go to the orchard now, while it is still light and bright. I certainly hope I don’t have to do that stunt. No orchard in mine.”

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“Some of us probably will have to gather the apples later,” declared Jane Randall. “But a soph, who got a little friendly with me, said that the best apples were at the far side of the orchard. So you girls had better go there at the start, as Toots and her crowd won’t accept nubbins, and you don’t want to have to make two trips.”

“I should say not,” murmured Sim. “One is bad enough.”

Arden and Terry were still a bit bewildered, even after this well-meant advice, and Sim declared she was “dying from embarrassment.”

“I suppose we may as well go. What do you say, girls?” asked Arden.

“Yes, let’s! Anything to get away from here!” Sim was regarding the circle of amused girls.

“You take our books to our room, will you?” Terry asked Mary Todd. “We’ll let you know later how we make out.”

The fated trio started down the southern slope of Bordmust Hall hill toward the picturesque orchard where, even now, though it was not very late, the shadows were lengthening and the sun had lost some of its brightness. They crossed a field, deep with grass, crawled through the bars of a snake-rail fence, and found themselves beneath the trees.

“I vote we pick up the first apples we can see,” voiced Terry.

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“Certainly!” agreed Arden.

“Apples are apples,” quoth Sim. “Why should we go to the far end to gather fine fruit when windfalls may answer?”

“Why, indeed,” assented Arden. “But still I suppose we had better not pick up these.” With her foot she kicked out from amid the fallen leaves some withered, wrinkled, and partly rotted specimens.

“No, they won’t do,” declared Sim.

“Then let’s separate a bit. We can cover more ground that way,” suggested Arden. “Whoever first finds some decent apples must give a shout, and we’ll gather there.” She was quite businesslike.

“All right, Colonel!” laughed Terry. “You take the highland and I’ll take the low,” she sang softly. “Scatter, my lassies!”

They separated and began the search in the growing dusk.

Apples there were, but such poor things, windfalls and rots, that even the enthusiastic Arden began to feel discouraged. They might, after all, need to go to the far end of the orchard. Still, it was delightful beneath the old, gnarled trees. Their trunks were shaped like dragons, their branches like Chinese letters, and the roots, where they cropped out above the ground, like intertwined serpents grim and black, seeming to writhe in the shifting shadows. A little wind rustled the leaves, swung the hanging fruit, and made the limbs squeak as they rubbed one on the other.

Here and there they wandered, growing more and more apprehensive and nervous as the darkness deepened. There seemed to be something sinister about that orchard, although it was so close to the life and joy of Cedar Ridge College. The taxi-man had surely warned them—but of what? This was no time to think about that.

“Ah!” Sim suddenly exclaimed. “A perfect apple, red and round!” She picked it up from beneath a large gnarled tree. “And there are others,” she called. “This way! Over here, girls!” Her voice was joyous.

Arden and Terry ran toward Sim. But as Sim stooped to pick up another apple she saw something in a pile of leaves. It looked like—surely not the leg of blue overalls! A last lingering gleam of the setting sun, shining through a cleft in the hills, glinted upon that leg. Sim glided closer. Could it be —?

It was part of an overall suit, and there, thrust out of the lower end and twisted grotesquely to one side, was a foot!

“Oh-h-h-h-ee!” screamed Sim, dropping her apples. “Oh, girls, look here! Quick! Hurry!”

She stood in a panic of terror, rooted as firmly to the spot, for the moment, as one of the black gnarled trees.

“What is it, Sim? What’s the matter?” gasped Terry, the first to arrive.

“Look!” Sim pointed, breathless. She and the others, for Arden was now one of the trio beneath the tree, saw more than just the overall leg and the foot. They saw the huddled form of a man partly buried in the fallen leaves. And they could see—his face!

“Why, it’s Tom—the porter!” cried Arden. Instantly she was down on her knees beside him. “His head is cut. We must get help. Sim! Terry! Come here to me!”

Arden was dependable in a real emergency. She attempted to lift the death-like head. Terry struggled to help her while Sim bravely tried to straighten out a crooked arm beneath the senseless form.

It was so terribly tragic. The girls saw where all that blood was coming from. Tom Scott’s forehead was cut, and the wound appeared to be serious. Realizing this, the three hesitated about what to do next.

“Oh!” gasped Terry. “Is he—dead?”

“No,” Arden answered. “I can feel him breathing. But he’s had a hard blow.”

“What shall we do?” faltered Terry, becoming more and more alarmed.

“If we only had some water,” murmured Sim, “we could _____”

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The sound of approaching footsteps caused the girls to glance up. A man was hastening toward them through the aisles of the black trees of the orchard.

“Oh, dear!” sighed Arden as she let the inert head fall back on the cushion of leaves.

“What is he saying?” asked Terry.

“Nothing yet,” replied Arden, still watching closely the face of the unconscious man as well as she could in the fast gathering gloom.

“Who is coming?” asked Sim, for the approaching footsteps were pounding nearer.

No one answered.

Then they heard the voice of Tom Scott as he stirred on awakening from the stupor of unconsciousness.

“My head!” he murmured. “It—hurts. But it was so black and it came at me so quickly——”

The girls were so relieved to hear him speak that they all waited breathlessly. The running footsteps came nearer. It was a man. He fairly leaped through the dark tunnel of trees toward the group.

“Get away from here!” he snarled. “Get away—you girls! You’re not supposed to come in this orchard. Get away! I’ll take care of him!”

By his voice, for it was now too dark to distinguish his features, Arden and her chums knew him to be Anson Yaeger, the grim head farmer and gardener of Cedar Ridge. They had seen him from a distance that afternoon, had heard his snarling voice, and had been told who he was. Now he was living up to his reputation in ordering them off.

Arden and the others moved away from the still recumbent form of Tom Scott. But more life was coming back to him

now. He murmured again:

“But I didn’t know. I couldn’t see—except that it was something black—as black as the hedge—and it—got me!”

Then the voice of Anson Yaeger broke in:

“All right! All right! I’ll look after you, Tom. You girls run away. It’s all right, I tell you! Go away!”

His angry command seemed to shatter the calm darkness of the night.

CHAPTER VII

Terror in the Dark

Scarcely realizing how they had changed their fright into action, Arden, Terry, and Sim found themselves running away as quickly as they could through the fast-gathering darkness enshrouding the mysterious orchard. The cool wind whipped back their hair, and their feet stumbled on the uneven ground. Loose stones tripped them, and smashed apples made slippery spots that once caused Sim almost to fall. But she quickly recovered herself, ran on, and passed her chums.

As the three neared the dormitory building, the grounds about it were deserted, as this was the before-supper lull.

“I hope no one saw that mad rush!” panted Arden.

“What are we going to do?” asked Terry as they slowed to a walk.

“Say nothing—for a while, at least,” advised Arden.

“Right!” agreed Sim.

To this course of action, or, rather, lack of action, each agreed with unspoken loyalty. They must keep the secret of the orchard to themselves. It was their secret. None of the other girls, for the time, must know anything about the mystery tangled in those gnarled trees and in the smoky ivy vines that

hung from some branches like tangled snakes. Even the tall and almost impenetrable hedge that, in one corner, formed a terrifying tunnel before it opened into the wide aisles of trees took on a sinister shape and seemed to add to the mystery as the girls thought of it while standing in the gleam of lights from the dormitory building.

They were safe now. They need run no longer. They could stop and let their panting breaths ease. They must go inside. Oh, to be able to sit down and calmly consider what had happened.

But the five flights of stairs between them and their room! How could they be climbed? The same thought was in the minds of each one. To get safely inside their room and throw themselves down upon the beds until hearts beat a little less poundingly.

It was finally accomplished, somehow. Silently they reclined in their favorite relaxed positions. No sound, except a clock-like puffing, disturbed the stillness. The room was almost dark, only a little gleam filtering in from the hall through a transom. No one made a move to turn on a light. Just to rest, for the moment, was enough.

Gradually they grew calmer. Arden sat up.

“What an adventure!” she exclaimed. “But do you know what we did?”

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“What?” murmured Terry.

“We left the precious apples.”

“For all I care they can stay there!” Sim had lost all interest. “I’ll never forget how that poor young fellow looked! I only wish that old man hadn’t chased us away. Perhaps we could

have found out what Tom meant by that black thing he talked about.”

“I’d never have the courage to try!” murmured Terry.

“Do you know, girls,” burst out Arden, “I think we’ve stumbled on something important! You remember what Henry, our dear old chaplain, was muttering about the day we passed him. Something about coming out of the orchard and some sort of a promise. And the old taxi-man, too, warned us, in a way. Certainly that orchard holds a real mystery in its dark leafiness.” Arden smiled a little smugly. A sort of cat and canary smile, as Sim remarked when she got up off the bed to switch on a light.

She and Terry both were very thoughtful after what Arden had said. Perhaps Arden was right. There was certainly something more than merely queer about the orchard, it was getting weird and uncanny.

“Do you think those sops could have known?” asked Terry.

“I don’t,” was Sim’s opinion. “They’d never have sent us there if they had known what was going to happen.”

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“I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” spoke Arden. “Those sops _____”

“Hark!” from Sim.

Footsteps in the corridor outside.

A knock on the door.

A little scream from Terry, a quickly hushed scream, however.

The door was opened suddenly. It was Toots Everett and her two familiars.

“Where are the apples, freshies?” Toots demanded.

“We haven’t got them,” Terry stated simply. “We—ah—we—dropped them.”

“Oh, you did! And you look at us and calmly tell us you haven’t the apples we sent you to get! Well, you’d better get them tonight. It would be just too bad if the dean had to campus you in your first week here.” Toots paused ominously and resumed. “For going over to the post office without permission.” It was a theatrical finish.

“Get those apples for us tonight!” commanded Jessica. “Slip out the back door about eight o’clock and you’ll manage it all right. None of the teachers will notice you then. Of course, you’ll have sense enough to take flashlights.”

“We haven’t any yet,” said Sim lamely. “We haven’t been to town, you know.” She and her two chums were wondering how the sophomore knew about the post office visit. Had the chaplain told them?

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“No flashlights!” mocked Pip. “The poor dears! Then they’ll have to go in the dark.”

“Oh, no!” Terry cried out with a dramatic restraining gesture.

“Little freshie ’fraid-cats!” sneered Toots.

“Well,” remarked Jessica, “purely out of the goodness of my heart, and not because I like you, I’ll let you take my large flashlight. But don’t forget! We expect those apples before ‘lights-out’ tonight!”

With mocking smiles, the sophs withdrew to their room below.

“Oh, dear!” wailed Sim. “More trouble! I don’t want to go back to that orchard when it’s so dark!”

“I do and I don’t,” said Arden. “I want to find out something, but I’m a little scared.”

“If we all keep together and have a light, it shouldn’t take us long. I think I can find the tree we were near when—when ——” Terry didn’t quite know how to finish.

Clang-clang! Clang! Clang-clang! It was the bell calling the students to supper: always a light meal. The “big feed,” as the girls called it, came in the middle of the day.

Wearily the three arose from the beds whereon they had again cast themselves after the visits of the sophomores, straightened themselves with pulls and twists, and joined their classmates in the dining hall. Their coming hazing task was uppermost in their minds, consequently they did not feel like talking much.

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Terry was elected to get the light from Jessica while her chums waited in no little trepidation in the main corridor below, near a rear door out of which they had been told they might slip without being observed by those in authority.

“Did you get it?” whispered Sim, as Terry came lightly down the stairs.

“Sure! Did you think I wouldn’t?”

“I was hoping you might not, and then we’d have a good excuse for not going,” Sim answered.

“Well, let’s get started,” suggested Arden.

They went out. The night was clear and beginning to get chilly. Sim knotted her bright scarf more tightly about her

throat. Terry turned up the collar of her jacket, and Arden snuggled more closely into her long sweater.

At first, after walking away from the rim of light that filtered from the dormitory building, they could see nothing. But gradually their eyes became accustomed to the darkness and, without switching on the flashlight, they headed for Bordmust Hall.

For a few of their hesitant steps no one spoke. Then Terry turned on the flashlight, focusing its beams upon the ground while they walked slowly along in triangular formation, Sim and Arden forming the base as Terry with the light was the apex.

Nothing disturbed them. All was quiet and still and so absolutely silent that Terry remarked it was the “perfect state of nothingness.”

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The dark orchard seemed miles away. But as they paused for Arden to tie her shoe, a faint rustling could be heard. Tired old apple trees were once more settling down for the long winter sleep after a summer of fruit producing.

All at once they were there! Right in the orchard. The stones on the ground seemed to hold back their unwilling feet. They stopped and listened. Terry switched on the light but its penetrating beam seemed only to make the surrounding darkness blacker.

“Come on, girls! We’re just at the first row of trees. The one we are looking for is farther along. I remember a funny-shaped one, like a rearing crocodile, next to it. But wait, Terry! I heard something moving!” Arden froze into motionless silence to listen.

“Don’t let your imagination run away with you,” Terry gently mocked. “We’re just wasting time by listening, and I’ve got a

lot of French to do. Let's get going!"

Sim and Terry walked on. Terry, having seen that the way, for some little distance ahead, was clear, turned off the flashlight. They did not want to attract any possible attention. Arden was following a little more slowly. They were beneath some gnarled trees now.

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"Flash a gleam, Terry," begged Sim. In the glow they looked at the leaf-strewn ground. "There's not a single apple here! I don't see how we found any this afternoon!" said Sim gloomily.

"Cheer up, old gal! I think this is the tree. That looks like a pretty good specimen." Terry was examining an apple in the light of Terry's torch. "Pick them up quickly. If they turn out not to be good, we'll blame it on the darkness. Hold the bag, Arden. It was very smart of you to bring it."

Quickly the two dropped apples into the paper bag held open by Arden. They were making what they thought was a good collection when Arden suddenly stopped them as she murmured:

"Listen! Did you hear that? Sounded like someone sneezing!"

They stood motionless and quiet in the frightening darkness.

"I heard—something," Sim whispered.

"Well, whatever it was, it couldn't have been very close," declared Terry, taking charge of the situation. "If we hurry we can be out of here in another minute."

With renewed energy they fell to their task once more. Arden discovered Sim's pile of apples from the afternoon gathering and was putting them into the bag; they could not return to those sophs without filling their orders.

Suddenly the night's silence was broken by a loud noise: a sound between a sneeze and a snort, as the girls afterward described it.

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Then something like a black shadow tore past the frightened trio, moving with great speed and thudding feet, if that tearing scramble could have been made by feet. In her excitement Terry switched off the light. The darkness was at once made more dark.

“Oh! Help! Help! It's—got me!” screamed Arden, in a voice filled with terror.

Some strange force seemed to fling her aside, her skirt being caught and twisted around her legs, twirling her like a human top. She tried to retain her balance but toppled over and fell heavily in a pile of leaves and apples, too frightened to know where she was.

“Arden!” cried Sim. “What happened? Where are you?”

“Are you hurt?” demanded Terry trying in vain to get her fingers on the elusive light switch. “Oh, Arden! Whatever—was it?”

“It—it just missed me!” panted Arden, struggling to her feet. “But whatever it was, it certainly tried to get me! Oh, for mercy's sake, take those apples and let's get out of here!”

“Show a light, Terry!” begged Sim. “Where are the apples?”

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“I—I dropped the bag when that terrible thing rushed past me and was nearly entangled in my skirt,” Arden confessed. “Oh, this is awful!”

“Those sophs!” muttered Sim, “and these unlucky apples!”

“Beasts!” snapped Terry, who at last had the torch glowing again.

Then, never daring to look behind them, the three frightened freshmen, with Sim carrying the bag of apples, Terry focusing the torch on the uncertain way, and Arden almost in hysterical tears, ran out of the perilous orchard. This surely had been a terrifying encounter.

“But remember again,” breathed Sim when she felt strong enough to do so, “the apples are for—the sophs, but the—mystery—is ours!” Good little Sim!

CHAPTER VIII

A Tea Dance

“There!”

Sim flung the bag of apples with desperate aim straight at Jessica Darglan, who stood in surprised dismay near the doorway of her room.

“We’re back! We got the apples for you. But don’t ever ask us to go to that orchard again. It’s a *terrible* place!” Arden almost shook her finger at Jessica.

“I think you sophs are going a little too far in this hazing business.” Terry spoke firmly. “We tried to be good sports about it, but we might have been hurt or killed—or something! Well, anyhow, here’s your lamp, and you have the apples. Come on, girls!” she finished a little lamely, but a little defiantly as well.

The three frightened freshmen wearily climbed the last flight of stairs to their room. Never had the sight of those three beds in a row seemed so pleasant, so reassuring.

Terry decided to let her French go until morning. Arden and Sim thanked their lucky stars they could go to bed with easy consciences. They had nothing to prepare.

“But, Arden, what was it?” asked Sim as she began to undress.

“You haven’t given us any idea,” added Terry.

“For the simple reason that I can’t,” was the answer made after a moment of thought. “It was all so sudden—and terrible—a rushing black shape—something getting tangled in my skirt—twirling me down and—and—around——”

“Whoosing, snorting, and sneezing like some giant of an old man with a bad cold,” finished Sim.

“Yes,” Arden assented, glad to have been helped out.

“The orchard,” murmured Terry. “Could it have been—a snake?”

“You’re thinking of the Garden of Eden and Eve’s apple, I guess,” laughed Sim.

“Oh, don’t let’s talk about it!” begged Arden. “Maybe it was—the wind.”

“You know it wasn’t,” said Sim calmly.

“It may have been—for all I *know*,” Arden said. “I’m going to bed and try to forget it. College life should make girls brave.”

The others followed her example but sleep was long in coming. Adventures like the peril in the orchard called for pulling covers over one’s head, Arden remarked, and she did exactly that. Darling sleep came at last.

In the morning, at breakfast, the trio guardedly whispered to a few of their friends something of what had happened, but the real secret they kept to themselves. There were murmurs of wonder amid promises, exacted and given, of silence. But the talk spread. The idea of three freshmen—etc.—etc.—!

It was two days later, though, before an effect was produced. Then the whole college was called to General Assembly, and the three in room 513 realized to what an extent gossip had traveled.

“Any stories which you may have heard about queer things happening in the old orchard must be taken, well—conservatively, at least.” It was the dean speaking to the college students, who for once were all vitally interested in her discourse. “There is not much danger of our upper class students taking these things seriously. But in a college of this size, stories travel with remarkable speed. It would not be to the credit of Cedar Ridge to have such rumors spread on the outside. So we shall say no more about it, except to remark that, apparently, our sophomores this year are doing a very good job of hazing. It is to be hoped they will remember where hazing ends and bullying begins.” The dean’s usually austere manner suddenly melted into a kindly interest.

“She must have heard something,” Arden whispered to Sim. “Do you notice she doesn’t say exactly what happened?”

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“It’s my guess,” whispered Sim, “she doesn’t *know* exactly what.”

The three girls were sitting together in the large assembly hall.

“Foxy old thing!” Terry spoke out of the corner of her mouth at Arden. “I’d like to hear just how much she actually knows.”

The dean had finished with the matter of the orchard. She swept her glance over the faces raised expectantly to hers as she broached a new and not unwelcome subject.

“The Sophomore Tea Dance will be held this year earlier than usual; in New York, at the Hotel Chancellor. The committee, of which Jessica Darglan, Margaret Everett, and Priscilla

MacGovern are the active heads, ask your support in their undertaking.” A murmur of approval greeted this announcement. “They have voted to give any funds they may raise to the college treasury for the reconditioning of the swimming pool. I wish them every success.” This was a real pronouncement.

Then, gathering herself together and teetering on her toes as if, Terry said, she was getting ready to jump, the dean dismissed her students.

“Wouldn’t you just know they’d do something like that!” Arden was speaking, as the three chums sauntered toward their classes in Bordmust Hall. “Stealing our plan!”

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“But we didn’t announce it, Arden,” Terry remarked. “That is, if you mean we are to try for the thousand dollars reward for information about that missing Harry Pangborn.”

“That’s what I mean.”

“But we haven’t done anything,” suggested Sim. “Really, you know, Arden——”

“Why didn’t they give us a chance? I just know we can solve that mystery if we have time. I’m sure of it!”

“Have you decided yet,” asked Terry, “where you think you saw the original of that reward-poster picture?”

“Not yet,” Arden had ruefully to admit. “But I shall. And now those sophs——”

“Well, more power to them if they can raise the money for the swimming pool, I say,” spoke Sim philosophically.

“Never shall I forget, scared as I was, the expression on the face of Jessica as we flung the apples at her! It was almost

worth the fright we had,” Terry ventured, to change the subject.

“I know what we can do, though, to get a little even with them,” suggested Arden. “We won’t tell, no matter how much they ask, just what happened.”

“All right, Arden, we’ll do that. Now, don’t let’s talk any more about it. I’m tired of the word orchard. I’d much rather talk about the tea dance,” Sim returned, arranging her books more comfortably. “Do you think we can go?”

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“Of course! Why not?” asked Terry.

“Well—boys, you know. We couldn’t get any of our own friends from home to come this far for us,” Sim decided.

“You’ve been thinking about this dance, have you, Sim? Now, I never would have thought that!” laughed Arden.

“Of course I have! I like dances. I’ve been thinking about this one to such an extent that when I saw the notice on the bulletin board I asked Mary Todd what about it, and she and Ethel Anderson and Jane Randall have already written to their three brothers——”

“Oh, my! Has each one three brothers who are eligible for tea dances?” gasped Terry.

“No—one each,” went on Sim, laughing. “What do you expect? Anyhow, that’s how much I’ve been thinking about it!”

“That’s quite a lot of thinking,” Terry remarked, “for you, my little one! I might say that perhaps you took a great deal for granted, but if it works out all right, I’ll be just as glad as you are. Did you have the sisters send their brothers our pictures?”

That one of you in the school play, Sim, dressed as an old man, is good.”

“Don’t be silly! Of course I didn’t. Anyhow, as long as we pay for the bids, those boys ought to be glad to go. They don’t have to dance with us all afternoon.”

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“Oh, stop, you two! Do let it go, as long as Sim has engineered it this far. It will be fun, very likely. Russ Albono’s orchestra is grand, and we all have new dresses. There are more important things to consider,” Arden decided. “We must get our hair and nails done and see about a room in the hotel. I’ve never been there, have you? Think of going to a real college tea dance in a big New York hotel!”

“I was there once on my birthday,” Sim remarked. “My loving parents took me to dinner and the theater. We stayed at the hotel a whole week-end. I loved it!” She sighed, remembering.

“I hope you’ll find it as wonderful this time,” remarked Terry.

“Let us hope so,” murmured Arden.

“Mrs. Malvern is to be the official chaperon. You must report to her before the dance and after it is over, as you leave,” announced Sim. “I should think she might be pretty tired of answering the phone calls of the girls to her room when they notify her.”

“Really, Sim, how did you find out so much?” asked Arden.

“I asked here and there,” Sim admitted. “I also found out that we are to go to New York the afternoon of the dance, which is on Saturday. We don’t have to be back here at college until nine that night.”

“Quite a bit of liberty—for Cedar Ridge,” commented Terry.

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“Oh, dear! Here we are at Bordmust, and we’ll have to separate just when the talk is getting exciting!” exclaimed Arden. “But as soon as you two can, come back to 513, and we’ll complete our arrangements, will you?” she begged as they reached the grim building.

“Yes,” nodded Sim and Terry.

Groups of students on the steps were discussing the dean’s talk, the coming tea dance, and the ever intruding lessons, which, dance or not, must be endured.

Suddenly Sim saw Mary Todd.

“Have you heard anything, Mary?” she asked.

“No, it’s too soon. Give them a few more days,” called back Mary.

“Don’t be so anxious, Sim,” advised Arden. “You’d think we just couldn’t wait to find out about those boys.”

“Well, I *am* anxious. If they don’t take us, I don’t know how we’ll get there.” Sim sighed, certainly a little downcast.

“Don’t worry. We’ll go all right, and probably make a big hit, too!” Terry was climbing the steps now. “I’ll think it out in Latin class. I do some of my best thinking there.”

“See you later!” Arden waved a hand, laughing. “I’m due at math, worse luck!” and she hurried into the building.

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Terry and Sim followed. They were already lost in daydreams of music, laughter, lights, and gayety: the prospective coming dance.

“Say, listen, Sim,” exclaimed Terry suddenly, taking hold of Sim’s arm to assure attention.

“What is it, darling?” joked Sim. “Got a better idea for our dance boy supply?”

“No, nothing about that. But you know our Tom who got that mysterious blow the other night?”

“Do I?”

“Well, I heard him telling one of the gardeners about it, and he was laughing it off.”

“Well, what’s wrong about that?” demanded Sim.

“Sounded flooey to me. He said he merely tripped over a tree stump and another stump cut his head.”

“Maybe he did,” Sim casually answered.

“And maybe he *didn't*,” retorted Terry significantly.

CHAPTER IX

The Disappearance of Sim

Class matters went all too slowly between the time of the tea dance announcement and the affair itself. Lessons were slighted with bold abandon as the girls made their preparations, their universal excuse being:

“We can make it up later.”

At last it was the day. Soon after noon the college buildings began emptying rapidly, and excited students, carrying overnight bags, hurried to the little station for the New York trains.

It was great fun going in to the city. The seniors and juniors were, of course, literally “on their own,” but the lower-class girls were chaperoned by the ever-watchful Mrs. Malvern.

The train was crowded, but Arden and her friends, after some tactful pushing, managed to get seats together.

“It was fine of Mary Todd to help us get the boys to go to the dance with. And it wasn’t so hard in her own case, for she lives so near New York. None of the boys we know could travel so far for a tea dance.” Terry was chattering excitedly.

“Yes, it was nice,” Sim agreed. “I was certainly relieved when I heard they could come. If Mother lets me have a house party

at Christmas, we could invite them.”

“Do you mean the boys or the girls?” asked Arden.

“I mean the boys,” supplied Sim.

“How perfectly grand!” exclaimed Terry.

“Of course, we haven’t seen the boys yet,” continued Arden.
“So perhaps we had better wait until we do.”

“And of course, I haven’t asked Mother about the party yet, either. It was just an idea,” Sim concluded.

“Oh—Sim!” was all Arden and Terry could say to that admission, and presently they lapsed into silence while the train clicked on.

The ride to New York from Cedar Ridge was hardly long enough, and it seemed no time at all before the various groups of girls were alighting from the variously colored taxis in front of the Chancellor Hotel.

Then up to their rooms in the gorgeous bird-cage elevators, to unpack their dresses and give last-minute touches to hair, hands, and complexions.

“Sim looks simply darling!” observed Arden in an aside to Terry. “As long as she is small and child-like, I think she’s wise in making the most of it.”

“Yes, she does look sweet,” agreed Terry. “And you look nice, too, Arden. I like that color on you. Your hair has a dandy wave. I think that was a good beauty shop, don’t you?”

“Very good,” assented Arden. “And to complete the circle, Terry, you look—wonderful!”

“Thanks!”

Sim was so busy preening herself before a large glass set in the closet door that she took no part in the conversation until, all at once, she seemed satisfied with her appearance and, turning to her chums, remarked:

“Your dress is just perfect, Arden—blue is surely *your* color. And green is yours, Terry: you look sweet. And I think we all three are credits to Cedar Ridge. But let’s go down. It’s late, and we have to find Mary and meet the boys. They must have been waiting a long time.”

So they left their room after many last-minute touches, and with some temerity descended to the ballroom. Already lights were casting soft glows over the tapestry-hung walls. The orchestra was playing a lively tune, and several couples were dancing in the stately Louis XIV room. Smartly dressed girls and good-looking boys were laughing and talking together in little knots, their eager anticipation being distinctly felt if not actually heard.

“Have you seen Mary Todd anywhere?” Sim had a chance to ask Helen Burns, a classmate, who was apparently waiting for someone at the door of the ballroom.

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“Oh, hello, Sim!” Helen greeted. “You look lovely! Yes, I saw Mary and Jane and Ethel and a whole lot of boys over there in that small room.” She pointed toward a sort of alcove off the dancing space.

“Oh, gosh, Arden!” Sim’s poise was leaving her. “What shall we do now? Wait! There’s Mary. I see her!”

“Why, let’s go over and speak to her, of course,” suggested Arden. “Your nerve seems to be deserting you, Sim. You got us into this very nicely, but you don’t seem so brave about it just now.”

“You lead the way, Arden, and we’ll follow,” Terry said, smoothing her bright hair. “I’ve never been in a situation just like this before. I feel almost as frightened as though I were in the orchard!”

“Hey there! No orchards tonight, girlie,” cautioned Arden. “Come on, children! We’ll get the introductions over with, and the rest will be easy.” Arden started toward Mary who was chatting with several young men.

Then Mary looked up, saw Arden coming toward her, followed by Sim and Terry, and went halfway to meet the trio. So it wasn’t so difficult, after all, to cross to the small room where the boys were waiting.

“Arden,” said Mary formally, “may I present my brother Jim? This is Arden Blake, Jim. I’ve told you about her.”

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“How do you do?” greeted Jim. “Mary wrote me all about your adventure.”

Arden was wondering just what Mary had referred to, but there was no time to ask, for the others were now being presented, Sim and Terry taking their turns. Sim was now her vivacious self, and Terry had lost all her nervousness. Could one boy have brought them such reassurance?

Then Ethel Anderson’s brother Ed, a tall, good-looking boy, asked Sim to dance, and soon she was humming “Tea for Two” as though they were old friends. Yes, boys did inspire confidence just like that.

Terry was dancing with Dick Randall, talking and laughing as they whirled about the big, beautiful room. It truly was exciting.

Next Arden and Mary Todd’s brother Jim joined the dancers. Arden unconsciously made a pretty picture as she looked up

smiling at the handsome boy. She was thinking how easily the introductions had gone off after all and how glad she was to be there. Then, as the music stopped, she glanced about her inquiringly.

“There are not as many here as I thought there would be,” she remarked. “I wonder if the sophomores will clear expenses and make something for repairing the swimming pool?”

“You sound almost as if you wished they wouldn’t,” observed Jim, somewhat curiously.

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“It isn’t that, exactly,” went on Arden. “But, you see, I had sort of planned on raising the money for the pool myself—with the help of Sim and Terry. I suppose it doesn’t matter, though, if they have *more* than they need, just as long as they don’t have *less*.”

“You talk like Alice in Wonderland and you remind me of her, too,” laughed Jim. “But that’s rather a tall order, isn’t it? Trying to raise such a large sum by yourselves—just you girls?”

“About a thousand dollars,” admitted Arden. “I know it sounds awfully conceited, but back at school, in the post office——”

Arden was interrupted by Ed Anderson coming to claim her for a dance. “I’ll tell you some other time,” she explained gayly to Jim, and to her waiting partner she smiled a little coquettishly as she put up her arms in the correct position as he danced away with her. No thought of ugly orchards now; even college could be forgotten with that rapturous music. Arden was a pretty dancer.

The rest of the afternoon dissolved into a lovely kaleidoscope of color, music, and lights. The three sophomore hazers of the trio from 513, headed by Toots Everett, managed the affair

extremely well as far as the social end of it was concerned. Arden and her chums had occasional glimpses of “the apple trio,” as they were sometimes thought of, surreptitiously regarding them and the good-looking boys with whom the freshmen danced so often.

Was there envy in the glances?

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Now and then an ominous “good-bye” intruded upon the pleasant dream Arden was living in, until, as though she were slowly awakening, she realized that the party was over.

The boys and girls of Arden’s little group were gathered in a corner near the ballroom door. Like overlapping broadcasts of sound, the farewells and thank-yous crossed and crisscrossed among them.

“I want to say good-bye to Sim.”

Ed Anderson’s smiling request caused them all suddenly to stop talking and look at one another.

“Where is she?” Dick Randall asked. “I haven’t seen her for a long time.”

“I don’t know. She should be somewhere around here. We must find her quickly. We have scarcely time to dress and catch the eight-thirty train back to Cedar Ridge!” Arden exclaimed.

“She knew we were to meet her here when the dance was over,” Terry said petulantly. “Come, Arden, let’s go look for her! We have to hurry.”

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CHAPTER X

What to Do

Like the reflection of a cloud in a pool of water, a shadow passed over the face of Arden Blake as Terry spoke to her. But she acted quickly.

“I’m sorry we must go so soon,” Arden said to the somewhat puzzled boys. “But if we miss that train we’ll probably be campused. I’m sure Sim has some good excuse for her absence, but we’d better find her and learn what it is. I’ll have to say good-bye for her. I really don’t know what to think.”

“It’s all right,” Dick Randall remarked. “You and Terry go along. Perhaps Sim is upstairs waiting for you.”

“She doesn’t usually do things like this. But I suppose we really should go up,” Arden agreed. “We haven’t much time.”

Saying good-bye again, Terry and Arden left the group of boys and walked toward the elevator. But when they reached the room, high up in the large hotel, Sim’s bag was closed and packed, as Terry discovered, on the middle of the bed. And she exclaimed:

“She isn’t here, Arden! We must phone Mary Todd’s room.”

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“I’ll do it,” Arden promptly offered. “She may be down there talking things over.” She hurried to the instrument.

But Mary Todd hadn't seen Sim since early afternoon!

"Don't say anything to anyone, will you, Mary?" Arden pleaded. "I don't want Mrs. Malvern to know yet."

"Of course not!" Mary answered. "But Sim will turn up. Don't worry! 'Bye!" and she hung up.

"She isn't there, either," said Arden, turning to Terry. "What's the next move?"

Terry considered. "Well, this is a pretty big place. Sim may be ___"

The telephone jingled shrilly. Both girls sprang to answer, but Terry got there first.

"Yes, Mrs. Malvern," she said sweetly. "We're all ready, and we'll be in the lobby in a few minutes. Yes. Good-bye!"

Quickly she turned from the telephone.

"Oh, what shall we do? Mrs. Malvern will see that Sim isn't with us! Think of something, Arden! Quick!"

"We'll have to go down, anyhow," said Arden, pulling her dress over her head. "Maybe, in the crowd, she won't notice that Sim is missing. Hurry, Terry, and change your dress."

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"I am hurrying. I'm as nearly ready as you are. We mustn't show we are excited. She really could be—lots of places."

"Whatever possessed Sim to do a thing like this?" Arden was struggling with her garments.

"She's probably got some idea into her head. Unless she's been kidnapped and is being held for a ransom!"

Both girls stopped their dressing, suddenly frightened, Terry no less, though she had spoken the words. They had been spoken jokingly, but the possibility of such a terrible happening was not pleasant to consider.

“Oh, Terry! Do you think we better tell Mrs. Malvern after all? The police——”

“No! No! I was only joking. I have a lot of confidence in Sim. She can take care of herself. She knows people in New York. If she isn’t in the lobby when we get there, we’ll have to decide what to do then.” Terry was putting on her hat.

“I’m ready. I’ll take her bag and mine. You shut the door.”

Arden swept a last glance around the room. She stepped into the corridor, followed by Terry, who pulled the door shut. They both quickly looked down the long hall. It was empty.

“Hurry, Arden, into the elevator, before someone sees there are only two of us when there should be three!”

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By the greatest of good luck the elevator came quickly in answer to their ring. It was almost filled with chattering girls, and when it reached the ground floor it was impossible to see who got off.

The girls for Cedar Ridge were assembled in the magnificent lobby; a happy, chattering, laughing group. Terry and Arden, in unspoken agreement, worked themselves gradually as near to the center of the throng as they could, hoping Mrs. Malvern’s gimlet eyes would not note the absence of Sim.

“Come, girls, get together!” The chaperon was herding them toward the door leading to the waiting cabs. “Tell the driver to take you to Thirty-third Street tube station and there take a train for Hoboken. When you get there, ask at the information desk which is the next train for Cedar Ridge, and don’t forget

to sign in as soon as you get back. That is important. We shall have to separate from now on.”

So far so good. Terry and Arden guiltily got into a gaudy taxi with three other girls. The two were thinking so much about Sim; wondering if, should they go on thinking, some subconscious influence would not cause someone to ask about her. The only thing to do was to talk to the other girls about the dance to keep their thoughts occupied with that subject.

“Did they make any money, do you know?” Arden asked a strange girl, one of the three riding with her and Terry.

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“They cleared expenses, but I heard they only have a few dollars over.”

“It was a nice party, anyhow,” Terry put in, looking anxiously out of the window. “The music was grand!”

And that ended the half-hearted attempt at conversation. Both Arden and Terry had too much on their minds to do much talking. The other girls were intimately whispering among themselves. They seemed to give no thought to the missing Sim, nor to the fact that Arden and Terry had been two of a trio, inseparable, but were now only a duet.

Their problem was a difficult one.

Where was Sim?

If she was not waiting at the tube station or in Hoboken, what should they do? How could they get back to Cedar Ridge without Mrs. Malvern or someone with inquisitive authority finding out about the missing girl?

Arden privately decided, if they did not find Sim at either station, to tell Mrs. Malvern at the first opportunity.

Terry, whose thoughts were following the same line as were Arden's, decided, if they reached Cedar Ridge and found no trace of Sim, that it would be best at once to telephone from college to the parents of the missing girl and ask for advice.

There was a milling throng on the platform of the Thirty-third Street tube station on one side of which trains left for Jersey City and Newark, and on the other side for Hoboken and thence to Cedar Ridge. As well as they could, Terry and Arden peered through the crowd for Sim. But she was not to be seen, and the hope thermometer in their hearts went nearer the zero mark.

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The train was crowded, and it was almost impossible for Arden and Terry to converse above the noise. It didn't matter. They had nothing of interest to talk about, now. They looked anxiously at each other. Were they deserting Sim? Or rather, were they not showing real confidence in her? She must be safe! The excitement of the travel was helping to cheer her chums.

When Hoboken terminus was reached and the crowds poured out as they had flowed in, once more the two sought anxiously among the many faces. But though there were scores of their fellow students hurrying to catch the next Cedar Ridge train, Sim was not among them.

"She may be on the platform waiting for us," suggested Terry with a hope she did not feel.

"Maybe," Arden murmured prayerfully.

They almost stumbled up the concrete steps in their haste. The ramp, from the iron gates of which departed many trains for many places, was another place of milling crowds outside the station. A man in a portable information booth was answering questions in a very patient manner.

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By listening, without asking, Terry and Arden learned from which track their train departed and the time. They had a few precious minutes left.

“Let’s look around out here and then go inside,” proposed Terry, who was lugging along Sim’s bag with her own.

“She isn’t here,” Arden sighed, after a search. “Let’s go inside the station.”

There they looked about the big vaulted room: ticket offices on one side, a rank of telephone booths on another, a buffet restaurant, a magazine stand, a large candy booth. All of these spots were eagerly scanned without result.

Apparently just to say “hello” to friends, Terry and Arden went from one group of waiting girls to another, glimpsing the pretty, animated faces, but Sim’s was not among them. It seemed hopeless.

Now, really frightened, Arden and Terry clung together as the stentorian voice announced their train in long-drawn accents.

“We’ll have to go!” murmured Terry desperately.

“Yes. We can’t wait any longer. But she may be in the train.” It was a sort of last hope for Arden.

“We can look, if it isn’t too crowded,” Terry suggested.

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But it was. In all the coaches, for most of the college girls had caught this train back, were repeated the same scenes, the same talk and laughter that had marked the going trip. The seekers could not locate Sim in the coach where they were crowded, and they did not dare pass from one car to another as the train quickly gathered speed after leaving Hoboken.

The ride back was almost a nightmare for Terry and Arden, and when the train pulled into the Morrisville station, which was the college stop, they were pale and more worried than ever.

“Maybe she is already here,” breathed Terry, as they alighted. It was a brave attempt to brighten the situation.

“Maybe. Let’s hurry and see if she has signed in.” Arden was only too glad to seize on Terry’s suggestion.

They almost ran along the path from the station to the college. Terry still insisted on clinging to Sim’s bag, though Arden wanted to do her share of carrying it. Then up those back-breaking stairs and into the big recreation room where the registry book was kept for this occasion.

Signing their own names, the two frightened freshmen scanned the pages for Sim’s.

“No, Arden, she hasn’t come in.” Terry turned sadly from the book.

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“I left a space between your name and mine,” Arden said, “so in case Sim comes in later she can slip hers in without being caught. Hurry, Terry, let’s get to our room so we can talk this out and decide upon—something.”

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CHAPTER XI

Sim

Miles away from Cedar Ridge, Sim Westover idly turned the pages of a movie magazine. She was quite pleased with herself as she sat in a commuters' train, speeding toward Larchmont. It was dark now, and as Sim looked from the window her face was reflected in the glass as in a dull mirror. Just a hint of a shiny nose, but it was enough to cause her to open her envelope bag and search for her compact.

But what were those white envelopes?

Surely she hadn't forgotten to leave that carefully composed note for the dean—and the one to Arden and Terry!

Yes, she had forgotten!

"My word! They'll be worried to death!" Sim whispered in a gasp of dismay. "What a stupid thing to do! Write notes explaining everything and then take them with me!"

Sim settled herself deeper into the soft green plush of the seat and looked helplessly at the envelopes bearing the imposing red and gold seal of the Chancellor Hotel. She could imagine Terry and Arden dashing madly about asking everywhere for her. And she had intended to leave the note right where they would see it—on the bed near her packed bag.

“Oh,” mused Sim, “if only they don’t do anything rash, such as notifying the police or phoning to my folks!”

The adventure she had planned to be such a fine thing was fast losing its savor.

Suppose her father was not in Larchmont, after all? But he must be. In his last letter to Sim he had mentioned, casually, this trip which was a reason why he couldn’t be in New York to greet her at the tea dance. He would be in Larchmont.

It had seemed such a fine idea, when Sim learned the sophomores had not made the amount of money necessary even to start the repairs on the swimming pool, just to go to her father and ask him for it. It would be such a fine thing for the college, and Sim really must do some swimming. She felt that she was entitled to it after coming to Cedar Ridge, having seen the pictures of the pool in the prospectus.

The others were dancing as Sim’s grand idea was engendered within her, and it seemed too bad to interrupt them. Besides, Arden would, very probably, try to stop her. The simplest thing would be just to write the notes, explaining, and go ahead.

The desk clerk at the hotel told her, when she asked, that she had fifteen minutes to get a train for Larchmont from the Grand Central Station. Sim was so glad she had remembered her father had written he was to be there for the week-end at the Newman home—planning another large branch store for business expansion.

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“Oh, dear! What a fix to be in! I suppose I’ll be expelled! Mother will feel terribly bad, and Dad——Oh, dear!” Sim sighed aloud.

But there was nothing she could do now. There were the forgotten letters which would have made everything all right.

She had hurried up to the room, slipping away from the dance, had written the notes, put them in her bag, and changed her dress. She intended leaving them just before going out of the room. But a glance at the electric clock showed her there was little time to catch a taxi for the Grand Central in time to make the train, and in her haste——

The train ran along smoothly. The clinkety-click of the wheels over the rail joints mocked Sim with their ever recurring:

“Forgot! Forgot! Forgot!”

She grew more upset and worried. She pulled back her coat sleeve and glanced at her wrist watch.

Nine o’clock!

By this time the girls would be taking the train for Morrisville. What had they done about her disappearance? Sim hated to think about it. This was, indeed, the deepest hole she had ever been in.

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The conductor opened the door and shouted:

“*Larch-mont! Larch-mont!* All out for LARCH-MONT!”

Sim gathered her things together and prepared to leave.

As she alighted from the train, the thought came to her that she must at once go in the station and telephone Arden. But another glance at her watch caused her to hesitate. Arden and Sim might not be in Cedar Ridge yet. So she decided to wait until she reached the house of her father’s friend and to telephone from there.

She approached a taxi and gave the address to the driver. The ride was not long, and soon was on the steps waiting to be admitted at the Newman house.

It was Mr. Newman himself who opened the door.

“Why, Sim Westover!” he exclaimed. “What are you doing here? We thought you were safely in bed at Cedar Ridge. But come in! Take off your things!”

“Good-evening, Mr. Newman,” Sim said quickly. “I should be at Cedar Ridge, but something very important came up, and I decided, in a hurry, to come up here to see Dad. I was in New York at a dance. Dad is here, isn’t he?”

“Why, no, Sim, he isn’t. He telephoned me, late this afternoon, that he couldn’t make it after all. Is anything the matter?”

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Sim’s face was a study in many expressions as she faintly replied:

“Yes, I guess there is—now. Everything would have been all right if I hadn’t been so forgetful!” Sim was close to tears, and the sight of her mother’s dear college friend (both ladies had graduated at Cedar Ridge) caused Sim almost to break down.

“Come in, Sim!” greeted Mrs. Newman, sensing, as she hastened into the hall, that something was wrong. “Have you had anything to eat? I thought not. Come into the dining room. Marie can get you some tea and sandwiches, at least. Then you can tell us all about it while you eat, and you’ll feel better. It isn’t serious, is it?” This last prompted by a look at Sim’s face.

“Well, it isn’t going to be very pleasant, I’m afraid.” On the way to and in the dining room, while a hasty lunch was made ready, Sim blurted out the whole story.

“And so you see,” she finished, “I must get word to Arden or Terry as quickly as possible, and it must be managed so that

I'm not found out as missing or I shall probably be expelled. I'm away without leave. I must get back tonight."

"Go back tonight? Impossible, my dear! Can't you stay with us until morning?"

"I think not. If I can slip back all may yet be well. But if I have to explain to the dean——No, it couldn't be done. There must be a train back tonight, isn't there?"

[112]

She turned questioning eyes on Mr. Newman.

He looked at some time-tables, of which he had several in his smoking room, and announced:

"You'd never get back until late——very late——by train. But if you feel you must be back in college before morning——"

"I do. Oh, yes, I do, Mr. Newman!"

"Then the only thing is for me to drive you there. We can make good time at night. I know the roads."

"Oh, Mr. Newman! I couldn't dream of——"

"Tut, tut, Sim! It's the only way. I don't mind. It will be a little diversion for me. I'll have the chauffeur get the car out now. He can do the driving. I'll sit and talk to you, and the way won't seem so long."

"Oh, Mr. Newman, you're wonderful! Now I must phone Arden at once to be watching for me. Luckily our room is on the front of the dorm. How long do you think it will take?" Sim, getting up from the table, at the session of which she had much improved in spirits, was planning rapidly now. Perhaps all would yet be well.

"About three hours, I should say," Mr. Newman answered. "It will be slow going from here until we get into New Jersey,

and then we can make time. You ought to be back *at* college around midnight, though whether you can get *in*——”

“That’s why I must phone Arden or Terry. Oh, what a lot of trouble I’m causing!” Sim’s eyes filled with tears, but she blinked them back.

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“There, now, my dear, never mind!” soothed Mrs. Newman. “We’ll help you all we can.”

“That’s the kind of people they are,” Sim told Arden, later. “They haven’t forgotten what it is to be young.”

It took some little time to get a telephone connection through to Cedar Ridge, and Sim lived years in moments, she thought, while waiting for Arden to come to the phone. Finally the voice came to her.

“Hello, Arden? Yes, I’m all right. I’m up at Larchmont with friends of Dad’s. Did they find out about me? No? Good! Listen! Here’s my plan. I’ll tell you all how it happened later. Someone might hear us if I talked too long now. I’m driving back—yes, driving. I’ll get there about midnight. Don’t fall asleep. When we get to the entrance—the outside gate, I mean—we’ll toot the horn three times. You and Terry slip down and let me in. Do you understand? Fine! I’m leaving right away. Good-bye, darling! I’ll explain everything later. I’m quite all right, and nothing has happened. Good-bye!”

She hung up and turned to her friends, murmuring:

“That’s over, thank goodness!”

“Well, let’s get going, Sim!” Mr. Newman was now almost as much excited as was Sim herself.

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“Try to sleep on the way out, Sim dear,” advised Mrs. Newman. “I’m having robes and a soft cushion put in the car.

You can snuggle up in a corner of the sedan.”

“I thought she was going to talk to me!” chuckled Mr. Newman.

“Of course I will—if I can find anything to talk about.”

“No, you mustn’t,” decided his wife. “Sim must try to get some sleep. You will, won’t you, my dear?”

“Yes, I will. Luckily tomorrow will be Sunday, and I can sleep late in my room—if I get there. Thank you both—so much! I’ll never forget this—never!”

Sim put her arms about Mrs. Newman’s neck and kissed her affectionately.

“Oh, my poor dear! I know just how you feel. You meant it all for the best, and there is really no harm done.”

“Not yet,” said Sim a trifle grimly as she followed Mr. Newman out to the big sedan that was waiting, with the chauffeur at the door, on the drive.

CHAPTER XII

Midnight Mishap

Arden's slippers feet pad-padded up the dark stairs like small, softened trip-hammers as she hurried away from the telephone to inform Terry of the good news that Sim was safe and on her way.

She pushed open the door of 513 and shut it quickly behind her, panting and excited from her swift upward flight.

"Terry! Terry!" she began breathlessly. "It was Sim—on the phone. I talked to her!"

"Oh—good! Is she—all right?"

"Yes. She didn't have time to talk much. She was 'way up in Larchmont. Said she'd explain everything later. She is coming back around midnight, and she wants us to watch for her and let her in."

"What was she doing in Larchmont?" the practical Terry wanted to know.

"I can't guess," replied Arden. "We'll have to wait until we see her. She said she was all right and nothing had happened. I can hardly wait until she gets here."

“Midnight,” murmured Terry. “We’ll have to stand our turns at watch as they do aboard ships. Now that I know Sim is safe, I’m suddenly very sleepy. How is she coming—train?”

“No. She’s driving. We’ll have to listen for a car. She thought she’d better walk in from the entrance instead of having the car drive right up, so no one would hear. They’ll toot the horn so we’ll know.” Arden went to the window and gazed at the black scene below.

“It’s absolutely dark out,” she continued. “I hope we’ll be able to see the lights of the car as it comes up the road. We’d better get undressed in case anyone comes in.”

“All right,” Terry agreed. “I’ll take the first watch. Let’s make them an hour each. You sleep until I call you. I’ll sit here on the window seat. If I go to sleep I’ll probably fall off, and that will wake me up.”

Quickly they got into their pajamas. Terry put on a robe and slippers and curled herself on the window seat.

“I never remember a blacker or stiller night,” she remarked. “I’m glad Sim isn’t alone. She’s with friends of her father’s.”

“Do you suppose we can let her in all right? What if we can’t get the door open?” Arden asked nervously.

“I’ll think that possibility out while I’m on watch. You go to sleep as quickly as you can. Don’t worry so much, Arden. You’ll be gray by morning!”

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“I’ll be exhausted by morning, anyhow. However, toodle-oo—sailor, beware, and all that sort of thing! I’m going to try to get some rest.”

There was not a sound in the room for at least five minutes when Terry suddenly flung a tennis ball with a thudding crash

at a marauding mouse. The ball, one of a supply of such ammunition kept in readiness for just this contingency, bounced a few times and rolled under a bed as the mouse, with a protesting squeak, darted back into a hole beneath the baseboard.

The college had settled for the night. The appearance of the mouse was one proof of this.

Terry tried not to be too comfortable and kept shifting her position on the window seat. It was getting cold, so she pulled a blanket off her bed and wrapped it around her. The next thing she remembered someone was shaking her to wakefulness. It was Arden.

“Fine sailor you are! You were sound asleep! Sim might be trying to get in. You get in bed, Terry. I’ll watch.”

“No,” sleepily.

“Yes,” firmly.

“Oh—all right, Captain. Let’s see how you make out. Anyhow, she can’t be here yet—it’s too early.”

Terry rolled herself into the bed, and Arden took her place on the uncomfortable window seat. After a few minutes there she leaned forward and pressed the side of her face to the cold, dark glass in order to look as far as possible to the east, the direction from which the traveling car would come. But the highway beyond the college grounds showed no blinking lights, so Arden drew her knees up to her chin under her robe and stared moodily out into the night.

What was going to come of all this, she wondered?

What might happen if Sim were caught was too disheartening to think of, so Arden tried to piece together the events of the

afternoon in a brave effort to keep awake.

The whole affair had so many missing links, though. It was just Sim's usual good luck that she was not missed by Mrs. Malvern when the girls returned to school.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Arden at the thought of how she and Terry would have been put to it to explain. But they had not been obliged to do any explaining—so far.

The mouse, grown bolder in the silent darkness, was conducting a rustling, rattling search among some papers on a desk for tasty crumbs. Arden got up quietly and reached for another tennis ball. As she stood up she looked once more toward the highway and waited in strained tenseness.

Yes, she was sure of it. Far down the road a light bounced about as a speeding car neared the college.

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"Terry! Terry!" Arden whispered. "I think they're coming! Wake up!"

Terry was up in an instant and glided over to the window.

"It's a car, sure enough. But we'd better make certain before we start down. Keep watch while I fasten the belt of my robe."

"I will," whispered Arden.

"Is it stopping at the far gate?"

"No, it's going on. Oh, no, it isn't, either. It hasn't passed the gate. It must be Sim! We'll give her a few seconds to get out and walk up the drive. I hope she knows enough to stay on the grass and not on that crunchy gravel."

"Trust Sim for that," murmured Terry. "Now I'm ready. But give Sim time to get to the door. We don't want to wait down

in the dark lower hall any longer than we have to.”

“No. Come on! And don’t use your flashlight unless you have to.”

Cautiously Arden opened the door and, followed by Terry, stepped out into the dark corridor which seemed to stretch for miles and miles the length of the building, disappearing into blackness at the end. At the top of the first flight of stairs leading down from the floor of the 513 room was a small light bulb doing its little best to dispel the gloom.

Holding hands, Arden and Terry tiptoed down the first flight. Arden’s free hand slid noiselessly along the polished banister rail. Now and then the stairs creaked and snapped with what seemed to be the noise of a gun.

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They stopped to rest at the first landing, not so much from physical weariness as from the nervous strain. On the first and several other landings was a large window facing the distant orchard. The orchard was now only a black blur but Arden and Terry thought they could see the gnarled trees beneath which they, with Sim, had been so frightened on the occasion of the hazing.

“I wouldn’t go down there now for anything!” whispered Terry.

“Down where? Do you mean to let Sim in?”

“No, I mean that awful orchard. What do you suppose is in there, Arden?”

“I wish I knew. No, I don’t. Let’s don’t talk about it now.”

“The subject isn’t very heartening in the present circumstances,” agreed Terry in queer little gulps.

They tiptoed down to the next floor. Every now and then they halted, trembling, waiting for some door to open and lead to their discovery. But the other students must, indeed have been sleeping the sleep of the just, for Arden and Terry eventually reached the lower entrance hall without mishap.

The ground glass of the heavy front doors showed a little lighter than the surrounding wooden frames. Arden was there, fumbling with the old-fashioned key. Terry was watching apprehensively.

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Suddenly two dark figures were outlined on the glass of the door. One was that of Sim!

“I’ll have it open in a moment, Sim!” Arden panted, working desperately with the key. “It’s turning now!”

“And none too soon!” whispered Terry. “Oh, I’m so frightened!”

The lock clicked. Arden turned the knob and pulled the heavy door inward, just far enough to admit Sim, who slithered in with the speed of a wind-blown leaf. Thrusting her gloved hand out through the opening crack she had slid through, while Arden braced herself to prevent the portal from swinging too far back, Sim waved to someone unseen and hoarsely whispered:

“Good-night, Mr. Newman! I’m all right now. Thank you a thousand times! I’ll write to Mrs. Newman. Good-bye!”

With all Arden’s care she could not hold the heavy door firmly enough to prevent a deep though not loud banging sound as it closed.

“Arden!” gasped Terry.

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“I couldn’t help it. Quick! Help me turn this key back. It’s so stiff!” Terry gave her aid. Then the two turned to the midnight entrant in the dark precincts of Cedar Ridge.

“Sim!” whispered Arden, flinging her arms about her chum.

“Oh, Arden!” returned the wanderer.

“Come on, you two!” Terry interrupted. “We’re not safe yet. Take off your shoes, Sim, you bad girl!”

Sim bent down to comply with this cautionary advice, but suddenly stood crouched, frozen with dismay. That noise could be from only one cause.

Someone was coming down the stairs!

Even as the three frightened freshmen realized this, a white face was outlined by a gleaming electric torch on the landing above them. A voice, high-pitched in anger, floated down to them.

“What is the meaning of this?”

It was the dean looking like Lady Macbeth, holding an electric candle above and in front of her, so that the gleam made curious shadows on her stern face. And above all other possible colors she was wearing a cerise robe! Perhaps deans were secretly like that.

“Go to your room at once and report to me in the morning!”

Lady Authority turned with all her dignity and swept away, while the girls, with consternation knocking at their hearts, crept up the stairs to the harbor of their room.

CHAPTER XIII

Aftermath

While Sim, in the room the three girls shared, undressed with weary slowness, Terry and Arden sat like youthful inquisitors and shot question after question at her until the whole foolish episode was at last laid bare before them.

“Sim, you must have had a touch of the sun, or something, to do what you did,” Arden said spiritedly.

“It’s all over now, Arden—there’s no use crying over the straw that broke the camel’s back or the spilled milk that got in the eye of the needle in the haystack, or something,” Terry remarked soothingly.

“Thanks,” murmured Sim. And then, with sudden energy: “But, oh, girls! I forgot to tell you the most exciting part! We came in as far as we could on the back road—you know, where it circles the college grounds near the orchard and finally comes out at the main highway?” She looked questioningly at her hearers.

“Yes, we know,” said Arden, and Terry nodded, adding:

“Let’s hear it all.”

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“Well, I thought,” went on Sim, “that we had better stop for a minute to see if there were any lights in this dorm before we

went any farther. So we did, but I didn't notice just where we were, as I was looking so hard toward where I knew you two would be, and on the watch for me, I hoped."

"As we were," said Arden.

"Yes. Thanks a lot. But listen to this." By Sim's manner Terry and Arden knew something startling was to be told—something so startling that, for the moment, it drove from their minds the thought of having been caught by the stern dean.

"Suddenly," said Sim, "away down at the far end of the orchard, I saw a light bobbing about!"

"Ye gods, Sim! Did Mr. Newman see it? What was it?" demanded Arden excitedly.

"He saw it, and so did the chauffeur, for he said something about why someone should be out in a gloomy old orchard at that time of night with a lantern. I was frozen with horror!" Sim was enjoying herself and watching the eyes of the girls widen with surprise.

"Well, go on!" whispered Terry. "What did you do?"

"We didn't say a word—just sat there in the car and watched the light coming closer. I felt sure it was someone looking for me."

"For you?" gasped Arden.

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"Well, I mean trying to find out who was coming back to college so late, against the rules—afraid they'd find me out, you know."

"Oh, yes," Terry murmured.

“Pretty soon,” resumed Sim, “we said that it was someone carrying a lantern—holding it down low so it was only shining on the ground.”

“Don’t stop, Sim—tell us who it was!” Terry begged.

“I don’t know who it was. He didn’t pass very close, and from the way he was carrying the lantern I could only see his legs and part of one hand, but—” Sim paused dramatically—“he seemed like a young man.”

“Did he see you?” Arden blurted out.

“Perhaps; though if he did, he didn’t seem to care. He went stumbling on his way toward Bordmust. Then I came out of my daze and told Mr. Newman we’d better be getting on our way. Of course, he thought it queer that a man should be out that hour of night near a girls’ school, but I passed it off by saying it was the watchman on his rounds. But, girls, it wasn’t, though even the little I could see made me feel he belonged around here. But, here’s a question, a hard one, really: What do you suppose he was doing in the orchard after midnight?”

“I can’t imagine. It’s all very queer. And,” went on Arden, “I hope it just stays merely queer. But now, to be practical—much as I know you hate to be that way, Sim—I think we had all better get some sleep. We’ll have to see Tiddy in the morning, and we had better have our wits about us when we do.” Arden yawned. The conference was ended. The girls got into bed. The light was extinguished. Silence settled over the room.

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Terry, as usual, lost no time in getting to sleep. Sim, utterly exhausted, was sighing heavily as she burrowed under the blankets.

But Arden was never more wakeful. All the various adventures the girls had shared in the past were as clear in her mind as though she were watching a motion-picture film of them. She tossed and turned. Through the gloom Arden fancied she could see again the face of the man described in the reward placard in the post office.

Arden was still certain that, somewhere, she had seen that face before. The fright she and her chums had in the orchard, was, in some way, linked with the lantern man Sim had seen that night. Then, intruding upon that situation, it was borne to Arden that the swimming pool was in as hopeless a shape as on their arrival at Cedar Ridge.

What would Sim do now?

And what would happen at the morning interview with Miss Tidbury Anklon, the severe dean? Arden was desperate. She would never get to sleep at this rate. As quietly as she could, she arose, went to her bureau, and managed, by feeling, to find the bottle of aspirin tablets. She swallowed one, taking a few sips of unpleasantly tepid water from the glass at her bedside table, and tried to compose herself again. She noticed that Sim and Terry were breathing like tired, sleeping children.

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Arden lay flat on her back, as she had read somewhere this was a good thing to do when one could not get to sleep. Closing her eyes tightly, she began to count:

“One! Two! Three!”

Suddenly the white woolly sheep leaping gayly over a black fence became huge red apples rolling toward her as she was stretched helpless on the ground. She put up her arms to ward them off, but to no avail. Soon she was covered completely by an immense pile of the fruit. Her voice, as she sought to cry for help to Terry and Sim, would not sound. She tried in vain

to crawl out from beneath the heap of red apples as hard as stones.

“Arden! Arden! You’re dreaming! Wake up!”

Sim was shaking her gently. Slowly Arden returned to consciousness. She raised herself on one elbow and stared dazedly about the dim room.

“Sim—I’ve had such a horrid dream!” Arden took a deep breath and sat up. “Oh, dear, it’s almost morning!” [128]

She had, in truth, slept nearly the night through. A gray dawn, shot with glints of the rising sun, pressed against the window.

“In a few hours we’ll be in Tiddy’s office,” Arden sighed. “I wish it was all over!”

Sim had nothing to say to this. She reached over and tugged at the blankets covering the still slumbering Terry, saying:

“You might as well wake up, too. It’s morning.”

Terry grunted sleepily. “What? Oh—it’s you, Sim. I remember. Today’s the day. What time is it?”

“Seven-thirty,” supplied Arden, looking at her watch. “Let’s get dressed and have it over with. We can see Tiddy in an hour.”

Yawning and stretching, the girls dressed and started down for breakfast.

CHAPTER XIV

The Dean Decides

Breakfast was, if anything, duller and more gloomy than usual. So many “shining morning faces” only made the three freshmen involved in the escapade of the night before more nervous. When the meal was over and Arden, Sim, and Terry were waiting in the dean’s outer office, they were almost sick with dread.

“Come in, young ladies!” Tiddy opened the door to the inner sanctum herself and, with an almost imperious gesture of her lean brown hand, waved the three in ahead of her.

The office was large and bright. Green carpet covered the floor to the uttermost corners. The windows were draped with neutral-toned curtains. The founder of the college, in the form of a highly-varnished oil painting of a stern-faced, dark-featured and white-haired man, looked down at the three from a vantage point over the dean’s desk.

Miss Anklon asked and noted down the names of her visitors, though they were quite sure she well knew them already. She began:

“This prank of yours, my dear girls, is something we do not countenance at this college. You were put upon your honor when you went into New York and were expected to return as your classmates did.”

She looked sternly over the tops of her glasses. Then she resumed:

“If I remember correctly, you two were in your night clothes and this young lady was still dressed. Is that right?” She directed her gaze specifically at Sim.

“Yes, Miss Anklon,” Sim answered in a weak voice.

“Perhaps you will explain yourself, then.”

“I never thought it would cause so much trouble,” Sim began. “When I learned that the sophomores didn’t make as much money at the dance as they hoped to, I just decided to go to my father and ask him for it.” She paused uncertainly. “I came to this college, instead of going to some other, because I hope to become—” she paused and then went on—“because the swimming pool looked so lovely in the catalog.” Sim glanced shyly at the dean, whose face betrayed none of her feelings. It was no time to speak of expert diving ambitions.

“That is hardly a reason for coming to college, Miss Westover. But go on with your story. Why were you returning at such a late hour?”

“My father wasn’t where I thought he would be, and I forgot to leave the notes I wrote, explaining my absence and—and _____”

Gradually Sim blurted out the whole story, Arden and Terry now and then adding a little to the telling. When Sim finally ended her recital, Miss Anklon was as stony as before. She sat behind her polished desk and looked at the girls more sternly than ever.

“I believe you have told me the truth, Miss Westover, although it seems strange you should be so heedless.” Miss Anklon tapped her desk with a pencil. “You other girls were

almost as much to blame as Miss Westover. If anything had happened, you would have been responsible. While you are here in this college we are entrusted with your welfare.”

She paused a moment, looked up at the dark-faced founder as if for inspiration, and continued:

“Besides the seriousness of your act, I must tell you that you three girls do not seem to be starting your college life in the right spirit. Although you have been here for only a short time, you have already attracted some, shall I say, undesirable attention? Yes, that is it. Those stories about the orchard were your doing—am I not right?”

This time the dean looked directly at Arden.

“They were not stories, Miss Anklon,” Arden began. “We really were chased by something while we were in the garden gathering apples as a hazing stunt. And we did find the gardener’s helper lying wounded on the ground.”

The dean bowed her head in frosty acquiescence and said:

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“It would have been better if you had come to me and told me of your—your experiences, instead of telling them to so many impressionable girls. Do you know I have received letters from several worried parents as a result of your spreading of this tale?”

“We tried not to talk of it, Miss Anklon, but it got around in some way. I think everyone in the college would like to know what really happened in the orchard.” This time it was Terry who spoke with all the dignity at her command.

“As to that, Miss Landry, the gardener, Tom, fell over a tree root, so I am told, and struck his head. Anything that chased you must have been a product of your too vivid imagination.”

“Oh, no—no, Miss Anklon!” Arden was emphatic in her denial, but the dean held up a quieting, protesting hand. Arden looked at Sim as if to say: “I’d like to tell her how it hurt when I sat down hard upon those stones!”

The dean, seeming to gather herself together for a final statement of the case, said:

“All this has nothing to do with your latest escapade. I regret very much that I must take this action, but I am forced to tell you that all three of you will be campused for three weeks and lose all your privileges.” Miss Anklon was stern and unsmiling. “I do not wish you to tell your classmates of your foolish experience, Miss Westover. It is best kept quiet. You may all go now.”

For several seconds the three freshmen stood facing the dean but saying nothing. The severity of their punishment was so great that they were stricken speechless. No going into town to shop or to the movies. No week-end guests. And not to leave the college grounds at all for three weeks!

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“Miss Anklon,” Sim was the first to speak, “you don’t know how much my swimming means to me. I realize, now, how wrong I was to go away without permission, but Arden and Terry——”

“That will do, Miss Westover, I have made my decision!” Tiddy was at her fearful worst. “Good-morning!” The girls realized that the interview was over and that the decision was final.

Responding with almost whispered “good-mornings,” the three left the office and walked slowly toward the tennis courts. With one accord they sat on a white-painted bench and gazed moodily at a spirited doubles game.

The ping of the balls seemed to find echoes in the dull throbbings of their hearts.

“I suppose we were fortunate not to be expelled,” Arden said timidly, after a long silence.

“We might just as well have been. We can’t go anywhere. We can’t do anything. Added to that, we can’t even swim!” Sim was quite unhappy as she answered Arden’s attempted philosophy.

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“Don’t take it so to heart, Sim,” Terry advised. “We’re all in the same boat. We can have lots of fun here, just the same. It will be a good chance for me to get caught up on my French.”

“That’s the spirit!” exclaimed Arden. “We can give more time to solving the mystery of the orchard. And I’ll have that pool fixed yet: you’ll see!”

“You mean with the reward money you’re going to get for finding that missing Pangborn chap?” asked Sim.

“Yes,” Arden nodded.

“We haven’t done a thing toward that yet,” spoke Terry. “We don’t even know whether or not he has been found, restored to his worried friends, and the reward paid to someone else. Don’t you think we had better check up on it?”

“Yes, we must,” Arden agreed. “And though we can’t leave the campus even to go to the post office and see if that reward poster is still there, still, perhaps we can do something. They can’t keep us out of the orchard, anyhow.”

“Except that I’m not going there again at night, not for ten swimming pools!” declared Terry.

“Nor I,” Sim added. “But I don’t suppose,” she went on, “that the mystery or the terror, or whatever you want to call it, of the orchard has anything to do with the missing man and the thousand dollars reward, do you, Arden?”

“I don’t know.”

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“What a delicious mystery it would be if it worked out that way, wouldn’t it?” exclaimed Terry.

“If you’re making fun of my well-meant efforts,” spoke Arden a trifle stiffly, “why, I——”

“Oh, not at all!” Terry made haste to say, Sim chiming in with a murmured denial also. “And we’re going to help you all we can as soon as this horrid campusing is over. Really, there must be some reason for thinking this missing young man might be in this neighborhood, or it wouldn’t have said so on the poster.”

“Arden has the right of it there,” Sim declared, “and it’s sweet of both of you not to mind this so much. But I feel very badly about it. I got you into trouble, and I got Tiddy down on all of us.” Sim was impatiently kicking a clump of grass. “Well, we can’t do anything about it now. So let’s go back and write the real story home before our families have a chance to hear it from Tiddy.”

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CHAPTER XV

The Alarm Bell

When it came to writing letters home, each girl approached her family from a different viewpoint, naturally. Arden, who was the most interesting writer of the three, was inclined to dramatize. Her missive was filled with descriptions, reflecting the fears they had felt at Sim's disappearance and their resentment at the punishment inflicted by the dean. All this was set forth vividly.

Terry was diplomatic in her letter. Her mother, she knew, would worry needlessly if she felt that the girls were in any danger. So she made prominent mention of the good times they were having, culminating in a mistake they had mutually made which resulted in a curtailment of some of their privileges.

Sim was writing rapidly, her eyes bright and her lips compressed into a stern, determined line. She finished first, and after closing the envelope and sealing it, she scratched on the address and turned to her friends.

"I may as well tell you, before you hear it outside," Sim began and hesitated, "but I've written to my father for permission to come home!"

"Sim! Not to stay! Don't leave us now, when things will be so dull here for Arden and me if you go!" Terry begged.

Sim looked uncompromising.

“Please don’t go, Sim! Don’t mail your letter. I feel as though I am to blame. Anyhow, Sim, there’d be nothing for you to do at home. Three weeks aren’t so long.” Arden arose and patted Sim maternally on the shoulder.

“It isn’t just three weeks. It’s the whole school year!” Sim declared. “It will take a long time to fix the pool, even if they get the money. Besides, I was told by my math teacher that I’d probably flunk out at mid-year if I didn’t improve, and I’d rather go home before that happens.”

“But we can help you, Sim,” Terry promised. “Won’t you think it over? Even if we are campused, I know of a few parties the girls have planned, and they’ll be fun.”

Arden decided to try a new method of approach.

“Sim, I wouldn’t mention it if I didn’t want you to stay,” she said. “But you got us into this, even if you meant it all for the best, and even if you do leave, Terry and I will still be campused. There are lots of other things to do besides swimming, and, don’t forget, we have a mystery here that no one dreams about but us.”

“I am sorry about you and Terry, but right now I don’t feel like being a good sport. I’ll go to Tiddy and ask her to let you two off.” Sim hesitated. “But I want to go home, Arden. Don’t ask me to stay.”

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“If you feel you must go, Sim, all right. But what I ask you to do is not to mail your letter for a few days. Write another in its place, at least temporarily, and say everything is settled. And then, if you still feel the same way——” Arden shrugged and turned aside.

Sim left her desk and walked slowly to a window. The peacefulness of the scene below, framed by the trees in their bright autumn array, must have had some influence on the perturbed girl. For, after a few moments of silent contemplation, Sim swung around and exclaimed:

“All right, Arden. I’ll think it over. You can hold this letter for three days, and I’ll write another to send home. But it’s only because of my friendship for you both that I’m doing it.”

“That’s great, Sim! You won’t be sorry. We’ll forget about it now and——”

A small shuffling noise stopped Arden in the midst of her exultation. It came from the direction of the door, and, even as the three looked, a bright blue and white envelope was pushed under the portal. Terry picked up the missive and opened it.

“Why!” she exclaimed in delighted surprise, “it’s an invitation for a party tomorrow in the gym. The sophomores are giving it to the freshmen, and we must,” she was rapidly reading the note, “all wear some sort of a costume. Oh, how precious!” She was gleefully excited.

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“What fun!” With the suddenness of youth Arden closed her mind to the subject of Sim threatening to go home and she began to plan for the party.

“What can we wear?” asked Terry.

“We haven’t much in the way of costumes,” Arden admitted. “I suppose, though, we can wear riding habits or blacken our faces and slick back our hair. We’ll probably have more fun that way than if we wore draperies.”

“Oh, yes,” Terry agreed.

“It will be a little break for us after what we know is in prospect,” said Sim in a low voice.

After lessons, the next day had been gotten through in some fashion and, following supper, the three hurried back to their room. Sim put on Terry’s riding clothes, which were much too big, and Terry wore a part of Sim’s sport suit with a woolly cap belonging to Arden. As for Arden, she put on a short, tight skirt and a sweater belonging to Jane Randall and knotted a scarf about her throat, Apache style.

Then, using a soft eyebrow pencil, the girls adorned their lips with villainous mustaches.

“How do we look?” asked Sim, trying to pose in front of a mirror that showed only part of her.

“Terrible!” laughed Terry.

“That’s the way we want to look,” decided Arden.

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Down in the large gymnasium crêpe paper was used to cover the steam pipes, and many streamers, in the college colors, disguised the bare whitewashed walls. The room was crowded with noisy, laughing girls. At one end a portable phonograph was playing, with the loudest needle obtainable, a popular dance tune.

Arden and her two particular friends were met at the door by their sophomore tormentors, Toots Everett, Jessica Darglan, and Priscilla MacGovern.

Toots came forward and gave Sim a large paper carton made in imitation of a traveling bag. It was adorned with huge purple and green paper bows.

“A gift for our most widely traveled freshman!” said Toots with a laugh. “You must keep this with you until refreshments

are served. Those are the rules.”

Sim smiled grimly and accepted the box gracefully. So her story was known all over college in spite of the dean’s prohibition?

Arden and Terry received large, blank exercise books in which to keep a record of their engagements: gentle sarcasm when it was evidently known they couldn’t make any for three weeks at least.

One by one the freshmen were given articles to show up their various faults, failings, and follies.

The party was soon well under way and progressed happily. The girls who could lead were the most popular dancers that night. In fact, those girls were booked well ahead as partners.

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Arden was dancing with Jane Randall at the far end of the gymnasium when she happened to glance up at one of the windows. What she saw startled her so that she made a mis-step and caused Jane to exclaim:

“Look out!”

Arden wanted to say she was looking with all her eyes, but she did not dare call her partner’s attention to what had so disturbed her. For, as she glanced up at the window, Arden saw gazing down at her with strange malevolence a mocking, smiling face. Then, in a second, it was gone, and only the black square of glass remained.

Arden was almost shaking with fright, so much so that she faltered in the dance. She glanced quickly at Jane to learn whether she had noticed the face, but now Jane was smiling over Arden’s head at the antics of some capering freshman.

As she circled the room with Jane, Arden's fears subsided somewhat, and she resolved to say nothing about it to Jane. Then, when the record had played itself out, that dance came to an end. For a moment following the last strains of the music there was a lull in the noise of talk and laughter.

Then, suddenly, breaking in on the happy, peaceful silence, as though it had been planned, came the slow and mournful tolling of a heavy bell.

Dong! Ding-dong! Ding-dong!

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"What is it?" questioned several.

"Do we unmask now?" others wanted to know. They thought it a signal.

"I've never heard a bell ring like that since I've been here at Cedar Ridge," said a demure little sophomore in a low voice.

"It hasn't rung—in a long time," said one girl in a low voice.

"But what is it?" Arden demanded.

"Why does it ring now?" Terry wanted to know.

"Come on!" called the impulsive Toots Everett. "There's something wrong somewhere."

"That old outside fire-alarm bell hasn't been tolled since we had the modern telephone system installed," said one of the teachers who was overtaken in the hall by a rush of students from the gymnasium. The dance was momentarily forgotten.

"Oh, a fire!" gasped Terry.

"Let's hurry out!" proposed Sim.

They were all hurrying.

CHAPTER XVI

Arden's Adventure

The moon looked down upon a strange party of girls a moment later, for they had all rushed out of the gymnasium after the ringing of the alarm bell. Blackened faces and slicked-back hair, some in tattered garments and others in borrowed finery, sophomores and freshmen crowded forward to that side of the building where hung the bell.

But when they reached the spot nothing was to be seen. The bell rope was still swaying as though recently tugged at, but the hands that had done it were not in evidence. The bell itself still faintly vibrated from the recent violent clanging.

“Well, at least here's something they can't blame us for,” said Sim to the curious Arden and Terry. “We have perfect alibis and dozens of witnesses. This time somebody else can be campused.”

“Of course, Sim,” Terry agreed. “But the point is—who did it? It's rather a childish thing to do—going about pulling bells and then running away. It doesn't frighten anyone in the least, if that's what it was intended for.”

“It was silly, that's true, Terry; but listen to this.” Arden motioned for her two chums to come closer to her. “Come over here where the others won't hear. We don't want to have Tiddy blaming us for any more alarming stories.”

“Arden! You have something to tell us, I know!” Terry was pulling Sim away from a group of chattering girls. “Come over here, Sim. Arden knows something!”

The three from 513 separated from the main crowd of disguised girls, and Arden began.

“I was dancing with Jane Randall when something made me look up at one of the high gym windows, and there I saw a strange, white face staring in at me.”

“Arden—you didn’t!” gasped Sim quickly. “Do you mean directly at you the face was staring?”

“It seemed so.”

“Do you think that was the person who rang the bell?”

“That, my dear Watson, is just the point. It was such a short time after I saw the face that the bell rang, it couldn’t have been done by the person who looked in at me through the window.”

“How thrilling! For Pete’s sake, don’t let anyone know what you saw, Arden. If you do we’ll be in more trouble!” Terry said.

“She’s right,” Sim agreed. “We’ll keep it under our hats until we find out something more. The others are going back in, now. We’d better go in.”

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The sophomores and freshmen, so rudely disturbed at their reconciliation party, having investigated as best they could in the uncertain moonlight, and having discovered nothing more than that the evidence of the swaying rope indicated the bell had rung (which evidence their ears already testified to), were returning to the gymnasium.

But before they went in, though just how it started no one appeared to know, they were all doing a sort of snake dance in the silvery sheen of the moonlight.

Twisting and turning, the line of masquerading girls in fantastic figures circled beneath the old alarm bell that hung on a projecting beam out from the side of the building. It thus projected to allow the sound of its alarm to vibrate freely in all directions. Above their heads and out of reach of the hands of the tallest of the girls, dangled the weathered rope attached to the bell.

“It must have been a very tall person who could reach that rope!” panted Terry as she circled with Sim.

“A veritable giant,” was the answer. “None of the girls could have done it.”

“No. That’s what I thought.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded Terry, who had been caught in the human maelstrom by some strange girl and whirled about.

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“We don’t quite know,” said Arden.

Screaming and laughing, the sophomores in the lead took the freshmen running across the campus and stopped in front of the dormitory.

“Good-night, freshies!” cried Toots and some of the leaders. “And happy dreams!”

“That means the end of hazing,” said Arden. “It’s always done this way.”

“Thank goodness for that!” murmured Terry.

The party was over. Then the girls, sophomores and freshmen, formed a friendly circle and sang “Autumn Leaves,” the alma mater song. The girls’ voices carried softly through the moonlit night and even the most unromantic was impressed with the beauty of the words and melody.

Then, bidding one another good-night, the happy students hurried to their respective rooms, talking excitedly. And the dean and her helpers settled more comfortably in their beds, knowing that for another term this affair was successfully over.

The door of 513 shut on Arden, Sim, and Terry. For a moment they stood looking at one another, and then, as if by agreement, they began to laugh; hysterical laughs but none the less hearty.

“Oh, you do look such a sight, Sim!” Terry gasped.

“Why bring that up?” Sim chuckled.

“But we had a lovely time,” Arden said. “Even if there was a mysterious bell ringing and a face——”

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“Tell us more about that,” begged Sim.

“I’ve told you all I know. I saw a face—an old man’s, I’m sure, staring in at me from the window. Then the bell rang.”

“But why?” demanded Terry.

“If we could find out, perhaps we could solve the mystery of several other things that have happened around Cedar Ridge,” Arden said.

“But that bell,” went on Sim. “I heard some of the girls talking. It seems it is an old alarm bell, to be rung in case of fires. But when the telephone system was put in the rope that

originally reached close to the ground, so help could be summoned from the town and from nearby residents, was cut off. And it was cut off so high up that no ordinary person, standing under the rope, could reach it.”

“Why was that done?” asked Terry.

“Because it was found,” Sim explained, “that when the rope was left long enough to be reached, some students, thinking it fun, rang the alarm. That was long before our time. So the dean had the rope cut short.”

“Why didn’t she take it off altogether?” asked Arden.

“I asked a soph that,” explained Sim, “and she told me it was thought best to leave most of the rope in place so if ever it was necessary to sound the old bell, it could be done.”

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“But how, if the rope was high up?” Terry inquired.

“By standing on a ladder, I suppose. Don’t ask me, for I really don’t know.”

With determination they began washing off the marks of the eyebrow-pencil mustaches, using cold cream, and finally they were ready for bed.

“Well,” remarked Arden in tones that told her chums she had made up her mind seriously, “something is going to happen, I feel sure of it.” Pressed for details, she would say nothing more.

But a few evenings after this, up to which time nothing of moment had happened save that the three from 513 began to feel more and more their campused bonds, a thick hazy fog enveloped the college grounds, spreading to the near-by town and villages about. Arden was walking alone from the library back to the dormitory. The fog seemed suddenly swept in

from the distant sea, settling in the low places so that the upper stories of the building seemed floating in the air.

Arden thrust her hands into the deep pockets of her skirt and in one felt the letter Sim had entrusted to her—the letter asking her father for permission to leave college. The excitement of the masquerade party and the mysterious bell-ringing had done nothing to lighten Sim’s depression. She was still determined, it seemed, to carry out her intention.

Sim didn’t seem to care about anything. She was not the least bit excited by the bell-ringing nor by the strange face, and evidently had dismissed them from her mind.

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Arden felt there was no time to be lost if Sim was to be kept at Cedar Ridge. The strange face she had seen through the obscured window when she was dancing with Jane Randall had seemed vaguely familiar, but she had glimpsed it for so short a time that it was impossible to recognize it. No one else had seen it, of that Arden was certain, for no one had spoken of it, and there were no more stories current of mysterious doings about the college.

“Sim will just pack up and go home unless something is done to make her change her mind,” thought Arden as she walked along through the fog. “And I’m going to do it!”

Campused or not, she would now go to the little railroad station and send a telegraph message to her always sympathetic father, asking him for the money to put the swimming pool in order. That would cause Sim to remain.

Arden had everything in her favor for concealment, and she needed concealment in this risky undertaking. The fog, becoming more dense every minute, and the fact that she was alone, would allow her to reach the station unobserved. Also it was just the time when most of the students were in their rooms preparing to go down to supper in a short time.

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Arden ran through the gathering gloom across the campus and toward the post office. The yellow gleaming lights of the railroad station beckoned to her with their flickering rays from the other side of the tracks.

There was always the chance that someone from the college might be in the little suburban station looking up trains, inquiring about baggage or express shipments, or sending a telegram. But Arden, risking the discovery of her voidance of the campus prohibition, kept on her rather perilous way. At the same time she was trying to be cautious.

First, she walked with light footsteps toward the window of the telegraph and ticket office nearest the tracks. She tried to peer through this window into the waiting room beyond but could see nothing through the murky glass and the heavy mesh of wire that covered it, save the indistinct figure of the ticket agent whose duties were combined with those of baggage-man, train dispatcher, telegraph operator, and occasional expressman.

“I’ll try the side window,” Arden determined, and through this she was able to glance into the deserted station. There was no one in the waiting room, as far as she could see: not even one of the few town taxi-drivers escaping from the heavy fog and the chilly dampness of the approaching night.

“Here’s luck!” Arden thought. “If I’m quick I can send the telegram and be out of here before anyone sees me. Of course, the smart thing to have done would have been to write out my message before I came here. But I think it won’t take long.”

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The dark brown door leading into the waiting room was heavy and stuck at the sill. That many feet had kicked it loose was evidenced by several dents and scratches showing at the bottom in the dim glow of an outside lamp under the station platform covering. After one or two futile efforts Arden managed to push back the door and enter.

The ticket and telegraph office was faintly lighted, but as Arden looked in through the little window, protected by a wicket of brass, she could not make out the form of the agent she was sure she had seen when she peered in from the outside platform.

“Oh, dear!” worried the girl. “He must have gone out, and before he comes back to take my message, someone from the college may stop in here and catch me. That’s the worst of these country places. I suppose there isn’t another train for some time and the agent went out for a rest. If I could only reach in and get a telegraph blank I could write the message, with a notation to send it collect, and leave it here for him. Let’s see—what shall I say? ‘Must have a thousand dollars at once. Can you send it? Letter follows.’ Dad will probably think I’ve embezzled some of the college funds or stolen some jewels. Oh, where is that agent?”

She drummed impatiently with a pencil on the shelf of the window and stood on tiptoes to look in. As she did so the agent suddenly emerged from where he was crouched low in a stooping position halfway into a small supply closet in one corner of his cubbyhole of an office, out of Arden’s sight. The agent stood up so quickly, directly in front of the wicket window confronting Arden, that it was as if some gigantic Jack-in-the-box had popped out at her.

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“Oh!” she gasped, preventing herself, by a strong effort, from springing back. Then again, but less hysterically: “Oh, here you are!”

“Well?” asked the agent and he smiled.

Arden opened her mouth to say she wanted to send a telegram, but the sudden appearance of the man, popping up into her view in that manner, was so disconcerting that she could only stand there and stare at him. And as she stared she realized, with a shock, that she had seen the face of this man

somewhere before. She stood there, silent and perplexed, trying to solve the puzzle, trying to remember. Could she have seen the man before?

He stood patiently waiting for her to state her wants.

But Arden went into a strange panic of fear and uncertainty.

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“I—I think I’ve forgotten something!” she gasped, backing nervously away from the window. “I—I’ll come back—later.” She forced to her face a rather sickly smile.

“Very well,” said the man behind the wicket. “I’ll be open for quite a while yet.”

Then, turning away, Arden fled, pulled open the door, scurried across the tracks and rushed back to college. Her one thought was to bring Terry and Sim with her to the station on a strange errand. She wanted them to help her identify the man in the ticket office as the missing Pangborn heir, pictured on the placard in the post office.

For that was exactly what Arden believed. So obsessed had she become with the poster picture and the reward offered for information about the original, that she was sure she was right.

The man who had popped up at the wicket window was Harry Pangborn.

“I’m positive of it!” murmured Arden as she ran faster. “But I must get Sim and Terry to look at him. I’ll need their evidence.”

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CHAPTER XVII

In Danger

With startling suddenness, the night, aided by the dense fog, settled down over Cedar Ridge. Arden was alarmed. She had not thought it was so late, though she was quite sure the supper bell had not yet rung. She ran faster, her beating heart keeping time with her pattering feet.

“Oh, I hope Terry and Sim will come back with me and see this for themselves,” she thought. “How wonderful that I have made this discovery! I need not wire Dad for that money after all. I’m sure,” she tried to convince herself, “that I am right. Quite sure!”

There was no time to be lost. Supper would soon be served and the three from 513 dared not be absent from their places at the table very long. Nor would they want to be. Appetites were remarkably keen at the college, in spite of all the mystery and excitement and notwithstanding the eating that was done between meals.

As Arden approached the main building which loomed up out of the fog like some dream castle, she called on her childhood friend, the “good fairy.” She murmured: “Good fairy, please don’t let us get caught, and for a wish, I wish that Terry and Sim will come back with me right away!”

It seemed the good fairy did not entirely desert her child, for, as Arden started up the stairs, she met her two chums coming down.

“Terry! Sim! I’ve the most exciting thing to tell you!” Arden gulped and continued: “Come outside a moment.”

“Good heavens! You look as if you’d seen a ghost! Take a breath—or something—before you pass out!” advised Terry, a little incredulous.

“Well, tell us, Arden!” Sim begged, wringing her hands in simulated melodramatic fashion. “This suspense is awful! It’s making an old woman of me!”

“I don’t want anyone to hear,” Arden confided. “Can’t you step outside for a few seconds? You won’t be cold. I want you to do something for me.”

Sim and Terry looked at each other.

“Better humor her, Sim. She might turn violent. Come on,” Terry said in an exaggerated attempt at soothing a patient.

“If I get violent it will be because you two show such little natural curiosity, Bernice Westover,” Arden retorted testily. “When you hear what I saw——”

“How can we *hear* what you *saw*?” mocked Sim.

“Oh—you——” began Arden, really provoked now.

“All right, my dear.” Terry held open the main entrance door and motioned the other two out ahead of her. “If anyone wonders why we are going out when the supper bell has almost rung, we can say we want a breath of fresh air for an appetite.”

“As if anyone who knows the feed here would believe that!” mocked Sim.

But in spite of the banter, Arden finally herded her chums down to the cinder path in front of the dormitory building.

“Come along a little farther,” she urged. “No one must hear!”

Terry and Sim followed, now really convinced that Arden had something of moment to impart to them. She looked around half in caution, half in fear. When they were some distance from the main entrance and shrouded in the fog, Arden said in a low voice:

“I was just over to the station——”

“You were!” interrupted Sim. “Why, Arden Blake! If you were seen, it’ll be just too bad! What if Tiddy finds out?”

“Yes, I know. But there are times when rules have to be broken,” admitted Arden. “If George Washington and Thomas Jefferson or some historic personages like that hadn’t drafted a new constitution in Philadelphia when they had no right to do so, I wouldn’t be telling you all this.”

“All what? That you were over to the station? It’s a grand night to break rules but a better one for murders,” declared Terry, sniffing the fog with her head thrown back and her eyes half shut.

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“If you’d stop interrupting I could tell you.” Arden was beginning to lose patience. “I was over at the station, as I said, and I saw someone there: the night ticket agent, who is the very image of the missing man whose picture we saw on the reward notice in the post office! There!” Arden paused to see what effect this statement had on her friends. They seemed to take it very calmly, and Terry said, most practically:

“Nonsense, Arden. If he was the man you think he is, someone else would have noticed him long ago and claimed the reward.”

“Besides,” added Sim, “no young man, or old one either, who wanted to keep his whereabouts secret would be so foolish as to appear in so public a place as a railroad ticket office, and near the place where there was hanging a poster offering a thousand dollars for information about him.”

“Not necessarily,” countered Arden calmly. “I have read somewhere that the cleverest criminals (not that Mr. Pangborn is one, though) always stay right in the place where they have committed a crime or are supposed to have vanished from. The trick is, that no one ever thinks of looking so near home for them. Poe has a story about a missing letter that was all the while right in the open, stuck in a rack with a lot of others.”

“Oh, yes, we had to read that in English lit,” admitted Terry.

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“Well, what do you want to do, Sherlock—go over and identify the corpse?” asked Sim. “If you do, I’m afraid I can’t come. I have to go to Mary Todd for a notebook.”

“Please, Sim, it won’t take a minute, or only two or three, anyhow. You can come right back and be in time for supper. Think how thrilling it would be if——”

“It most likely won’t be,” finished Terry. “But I’m game. I like fog. It’s good for the complexion.”

“If you and Terry go, I’ll come, too, of course. But I think you’re on a wild-goose chase,” declared Sim.

“But I tell you he looked exactly like the poster!” affirmed Arden. “I stood here looking at him, with my mouth open like a fish, while he waited for me to speak. I was so surprised I

just had to stammer something about forgetting what I came for, say I'd be back later, and run away. I don't know what he thought of me."

"Maybe he can't think. Anyhow, come on, Sim. But make it snappy. I've got something else to do more important than this," said Terry.

Arm in arm the three girls, a little nervous when they realized what would happen if they were caught breaking the campus rule in effect against them, started for the station. Arden hurried them impatiently, but Terry was in one of her teasing moods and refused to be hastened, pausing now and then to remark on the beauty of the night and attempting to point out, in the dense fog, places of interest on their brief journey.

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At the station a quick look through an end window showed the waiting room to be unoccupied except for a man standing near the big white pot-stove.

"There he is—the agent!" whispered Arden. "He's come out of his coop."

"You'd think he was a chicken!" chuckled Sim.

"Oh, be quiet!" Arden begged. "Now you two go in and look at him."

"Aren't you coming?" asked Terry.

"No. I'll wait outside here. I don't want him to see me again. You two go in. Get a good look at him. Ask for—for time-tables. Oh, I'm so excited!"

"Don't be so nervous," Terry admonished. "You'll be so disappointed if you're wrong. However—come on, Sim!"

Terry and Sim, with none of the reluctance Arden was sure she would have experienced, marched around to the door. Arden drew back into the shadows of the fog and waited. She heard her chums enter, dimly heard the murmurs of their voices as, presumably, they asked for time-tables and caught the squeak of the door hinges again.

“Where’d she go?” Terry murmured. Evidently she and Sim could not see the hidden Arden.

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“I hope this isn’t her idea of a joke, to get us here and then run back,” grumbled Sim.

“No! No! Here I am!” exclaimed Arden, coming forth out of the gloom. “Did you—was he—is he——”

“Arden, my pet,” began Terry, flipping a damp time-table, “we fear for your reason, we, your devoted friends. That agent looks no more like the picture of Harry Pangborn than you do!”

“No?” gasped Arden. “I thought he was the very image of the poster picture.”

“Sorry, Arden,” Sim continued. “But you’ll have to do better than this to claim the reward. That’s that, and as I’m dripping with dampness, I’m going back where it’s light and dry and warm and where I can eat.”

“Yes, let’s go back!” agreed Terry, feeling a little sorry for Arden.

Arden looked sadly at her chums. “And I was almost sure,” she murmured. “Don’t you think there’s a small, a tiny resemblance?”

“Not the slightest!” chorused Terry and Sim.

“Well, then, we must get back, I suppose. But I certainly feel like a balloon that has suddenly lost its gas.” Arden sighed.

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Slowly the three started down the station platform to the walk that led across the tracks and on to the college. As they were about to leave the shadowy shelter of the overhanging roof, Arden, who was in the lead, reached back two cautioning and restraining hands toward Terry and Sim.

“Wait!” she whispered.

“What is it?” they asked.

“Ye gods! Here comes Henny—our reverend chaplain! He mustn’t see us here at this hour! Oh, what shall we do?”

Arden was in a panic of fear.

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CHAPTER XVIII

In Hiding

The tall, slim figure, like a black ghost in the white fog, was approaching with measured stride, characteristic of Rev. Dr. Henry Bordmust.

The three girls, toward whom he was unwittingly walking, looked wildly around for a place to hide. The platform was clear except for some benches, now holding only dripping fog drops.

“Inside—quickly! Perhaps he won’t notice us!” whispered Arden.

“Perhaps he will, though, and we mustn’t take a chance!” objected Terry. “Don’t forget, we’re over here without permission.”

Forward stalked the tall black figure, splitting the fog into damp, swirling masses of mist as he trudged along.

“Come on, girls!” hissed Sim. “He’s almost here! We can hide in the baggage room at the end of the station.”

Quickly the girls scurried around the corner of the building toward the baggage room. Fortunately the door was open. Inside, showing beneath a small incandescent lamp, hung high, festooned with cobwebs and dust, were several trunks,

valises, suitcases, and boxes. Some of the pieces of baggage and express seemed to have been forgotten, uncalled for or lost a long time. Dust was thick on them.

“It isn’t very bright,” whispered Terry. Which was true. The high little light only made the gloomy shadows and corners more gloomy. “I wonder if there are rats here?” Terry breathed in alarm.

“Oh!” gasped Arden. “Why do you have to think of things like that? Stop it!”

“Hush!” cautioned Sim. “I hear footsteps coming this way.”

“Shut the door!” begged Terry.

Arden pushed it so that it was almost tight in the frame. There it stuck. It would close no farther.

“Look!” she murmured. “The light will show around the cracks and the sill. We can’t shut it off. Oh, what’ll we do? If he comes in here he’ll be sure to see us. We were better off outside. Then we could run and vanish in the fog.”

“He may not come in here,” spoke Sim hopefully.

“Oh, but he’s coming—or someone is—right this way!” gasped Terry.

They were in real panic now—fluttering about seeking concealment. Once Arden and Terry bumped together in their mad race around the little room, but they hadn’t a giggle among them.

“Here—in here!” Sim suddenly hissed from a distant corner. “I’ve found some kind of a big packing box with a hinged cover like a trapdoor. We can hide in that.”

“Can we all get in?” asked Terry. “I don’t want to be left standing outside like this.”

“I think we can make it,” Sim answered. “We must try, anyhow. Here, Arden——” She held out her hand, and Arden grasped it. “Now, Terry! I’ll guide you. It’s very dark in this corner, but I can make out the box. I’ll climb in first and you two follow.”

Terry and Arden half heard, half saw Sim partly climb and partly fall over the side of a great box in one corner of the dim room.

“Come on, Arden,” Sim urged. “It’s easy.”

Arden put one leg over the side and raised herself up by her hands as if climbing a fence. As she did so there was a ripping, tearing sound.

“My good stocking and part of my leg, too! Oh, dear!” lamented Arden.

“Get in quickly. Never mind about that!” urged Sim. “All right. Cuddle down. Now, Terry!”

“Oh, this is awful!”

“Don’t talk! Climb in! Shrink a little, Arden!” commanded Sim. “She thinks she’s in bed and taking more than her half.”

“I’m not!” Arden affirmed. “But I’ll shrink all I can!”

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“That’s better,” voiced Sim. “Now, Terry!”

“Here I come! Oh! Oh!” Her voice indicated lamenting terror.

“What is it?” Sim wanted to know.

“I can see out through the crack in the door. The station agent is headed right for this place, and Henny is with him. Oh, they’ll find us, sure!”

“Not if we stoop down and keep still!” declared Sim. “Why don’t you come in, Terry?”

“I can’t! I’m caught—or something.”

“Well, pull yourself loose! You’ve just got to!”

“Here goes!”

Again the ripping, tearing sound.

“My best skirt on a big nail!” sighed Terry. Then she flopped over the side and down upon Sim and Arden.

Despite the discomfort of their positions and the imminent danger of detection, Terry began to giggle. It was quickly infectious, and Arden and Sim held grimy hands over their mouths to stifle the dangerous sounds of hysterical mirth.

They could hear the voices of the chaplain and the station agent just outside the baggage-room door. They were surely coming in, the girls thought, though whether to detect the culprits or for some other reason could not yet be determined.

Suddenly Sim reached up and pulled down the large, hinged cover of the packing case. It was light but strongly made.

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“Oh, we’ll smother!” protested Arden in a whisper.

“No, we won’t! There are plenty of cracks for air,” said Sim.

Hardly was the cover down, shutting the girls inside the now very dark case, than the door of the baggage room was pushed open and, through cracks in the packing case the girls could see Rev. Dr. Henry Bordmust, dressed neatly in black, step in

ahead of the agent in his blue coat with brass buttons. With the two men wisps of fog drifted into the room.

In the closeness of the box, Arden tried vainly to push Sim's left elbow away from her ribs. Terry was slowly settling down, half on Arden, with her legs twisted around Sim's neck. Sim had the best position, as she was the smallest. Her eyes were on a level with a crack between the lid and the top edge of the box. She squinted to accustom her eyesight to the dimly lighted room. She saw the chaplain looking at a tag on a worn and dusty trunk.

The reason for his visit now seemed obvious. He wasn't after the girls.

"Have you any trace of that trunk of mine yet?" asked the chaplain.

"No, sir, I haven't," the agent answered, following the example of the clergyman and looking at several labels on various pieces of baggage. "But that there trunk ought to be around some place, if it was shipped when you say it was."

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"Of course it was shipped when I say it was!" testily replied the Rev. Henry. "Why would I say it was if it wasn't, my good man? This is the third or fourth time I've been over here looking for it. I've been expecting it over a week now. Come, be a little quicker! You ought to be able to find it for me!"

"Yes, sir, I am looking. It might have got over in behind this here packing case. Lots of things get behind these cases. They are shipped up here filled with raw silk for the factory over at Tumeville. But sometimes the drivers take the silk out here and leave the empty cases to be shipped back. I'll have a look back of this case."

With hearts that beat faster than ever, the girls could look through the cracks in their prison and see the agent

approaching their hiding place.

“Somebody musta left this case unfastened when they emptied it,” muttered the agent. “It’s dangerous, with the nails sticking out of the cover like the way they do. I’ll tap ’em in.”

With an iron weight from the platform scale near him, the man hammered down the nails projecting from the lower side of the lid into the front rim of the box.

He had nailed the girls in! With just a couple of whacks!

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Hardly daring to breathe, lest they betray their presence, Arden, Terry, and Sim listened speechless.

“Nope, nothing behind this case ’ceptin’ some old valises nobody ever called for,” reported the agent, peering behind the big box after his nailing work.

“How about this pile of trunks?” asked the chaplain, his voice, this time, coming from a distant corner of the room.

“I’ll help you look there, sir, but I don’t believe what you want’s there,” the agent replied, as he shuffled away.

The girls breathed more freely, and Sim hoarsely whispered:

“Heavens! We’re nailed in!”

“Oh, Arden! What a pickle you got us into!” gasped Terry.

“Hush! They’ll hear us! Wait until Henry goes out,” counseled Arden. “Then we’ll try to force the cover up with our shoulders.”

There was a sudden silence as the agent and the clergyman peered at another pile of trunks. The girls could hear their hearts beating and Terry, interested in the phenomenon,

inquired cautiously whether it was Sim's heart she heard or her own.

"It's your own, silly!" replied Sim. "I'm almost smothered! I wish they'd go out so we could breathe! Don't hiss so; they'll hear you."

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"That there trunk of your'n might have got over in th' freight office by mistake," said the agent. "S'posin' we look there."

"Suppose we do," agreed the chaplain, who was fast losing what little patience he had.

Then the two men left the baggage room, and on his way out the agent pulled the switch controlling the dim and dirty ceiling light.

The imprisoned girls were left in darkness!

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CHAPTER XIX

Strange Talk

“It seems to me,” remarked Terry disgustedly, as the agent pulled the door of the baggage room shut and his footsteps and those of the chaplain died away in faint echoes, “it seems to me that we just get into one scrape after another. This is a pretty kettle of fish!”

“Or something!” gloomily agreed Sim.

“Can you turn around so you can be sort of on your hands and knees?” asked Arden, ignoring Terry’s remark. “Try it. Sim and I will squeeze away over to one side.”

“Oooff!” grunted Terry as she attempted to change her position. “I’m almost over! Don’t mind if you get a black eye, Sim. It will only be from my elbow.”

“I shall mind, though, so you’d better fold up your arms. There! She’s over, Arden. Now I’ll do it!” said Sim.

Sim accomplished the feat more easily than had Terry, and then Arden did it. All kneeling, they braced with their legs and arms, arched up their backs, and tried to force off the nailed lid of the packing case.

“Heave!” exclaimed Arden, having heard this expression used by the foreman of a gang of section men on the railroad near

the college grounds. “Heave hard!”

All together they raised their backs.

“Ouch! That doesn’t do any good! We’re in here for the night unless someone comes back to release us!” groaned Terry.

“Rest a minute,” advised Arden. “Then we’ll try it again. Once more—all heave!”

But the second try only made the box shift a little on its base.

“We must make some noise! Bang on the sides or yell or scream! We must get out of here!” Arden was getting desperate.

“Hey! Hey!” shouted Terry. “Come back! Let us out! We’re smothering! Hey!”

“Hurray! Hurray!” screamed Sim.

“What are you cheering for?” demanded Terry.

“That wasn’t a cheer. But I can make my voice carry farther that way than any other.”

“Help! Help! Help!” appealed Arden shrilly.

They listened, their hearts beating fast from fear and the exertion of shouting. They thought they heard footsteps approaching.

Then, by the rays of light streaming through the fog from the station platform, as they peered out of the cracks in the box, they could see the door of the baggage room flung open. Near it stood the agent.

“He’s alone, thank goodness!” said Sim.

“Help!” cried Arden again.

“Let us out!” shouted Terry.

“Fer th’ love of cats, who are you? Where are you?” exclaimed the agent, for the voices were muffled.

“In this packing case! You nailed us in!” answered Arden.

With a muttered expression of great surprise, the agent picked up the same scale weight he had used to drive the nails partly in, and by pounding on the lower edge of the cover he forced it up, flung it back, and let the rays of the overhead light, which he had switched on, flood upon the three disheveled girls in the big box.

“My sakes!” cried the man. “What are you girls doin’ in there?”

“You shut us in,” Sim answered, standing up and stretching, as did her chums. “We didn’t want Dr. Bordmust to see us, so we hid in this box.”

“Then,” continued Terry, “you nailed it shut.”

“How was I t’ know you was in there?” demanded the agent, with much justification. “It’s a lucky thing, after Dr. Bordmust left, not finding what he was after, that I come back here t’ make sure I’d switched off the light for th’ night.”

“Very lucky,” agreed Sim.

“I never could of heard you yellin’ once I got back t’ my office,” went on the man.

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“We’re awfully glad you came here. Thanks, so much!” murmured Terry, with much relief.

“Where you from—Cedar Ridge?” asked the agent.

“Yes,” Arden answered, “and we’re in an awful hurry to get back. Supper must have started,” she told her chums.

“I guess so,” sighed Sim. “I only hope there’s some left.”

“We’ll explain to you another time,” continued Arden. “Come on, girls!” she urged.

The girls, a trifle stiff from their cramped positions, climbed over the side of the box. This time there were no ripping or tearing accidents. The agent stared uncomprehendingly at the trio as they landed on the floor of the baggage room and shook their garments into some semblance of order. Then they hurried out, Sim flinging back a perfunctory but none the less sincere “thank you,” as they pushed past the agent and again went out into the cold, damp fog.

As they hurried along the platform they heard the agent muttering to himself:

“What’ll them girls do next?”

“Good old air!” breathed Terry as they ran along. “I never thought it could be so welcome, even all messed up with fog as it is.”

“We were very lucky to get out,” murmured Sim. “Suppose he hadn’t come back and no one ever found us until years later, when we’d be only skeletons! What a scandal for the college!”

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“Very cheerful, Sim,” replied Arden. “Now we’re late again and we shall just have to dash back.”

“I never did so much dashing in my whole life. I’m always running to some place or hurrying away from it, by golly!” complained Terry. “Tomorrow I’m going to take time out and just *sit!*”

“Well, you can’t sit now. It’s almost supper time, if not already past it. One more last dash for dear old Cedar Ridge!” pleaded Arden. “Be a sport, Terry. I know it was all my fault. But I’ll translate your French to make up for it.”

So the girls dashed through the pea-soup fog toward the college. They went around to the rear door, where they would be less likely to be seen. A few yards ahead of them, as they reached the college grounds, as far as they could see through the swirling mist, were two dim figures. Arden and her chums slackened their pace.

“It’s Henny talking to someone!” gasped Sim. “Compose yourselves, girls. Be very demure!”

“I hope he doesn’t stop us,” Terry remarked. “Who is he talking to—or should I say ‘whom’?”

“You should say ‘whom,’” declared Arden.

“Well, anyhow, I said it,” countered Terry.

“I knew what you meant,” responded Arden. “But look!” she whispered. “Isn’t Henny talking to Tom Scott, the gardener?”

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“Yes, he is,” said Sim.

Composing themselves, the three girls walked at an ordinary pace along the shrubbery-lined path that led to the rear door of the dining hall. The chaplain and the young gardener were in earnest conversation, somewhat off the path on the edge of a large round flower bed. Just as the three reached the two men, who did not seem aware of their approach, the girls could hear the Rev. Henry ask, somewhat crossly:

“How much longer are you going to keep this up? It’s dangerous! I don’t like it at all. I am almost resolved——”

“Just give me a little longer chance,” pleaded the other. “I have almost settled it. I’ll see you again.”

Then Tom Scott faded away in the fog and darkness, and the chaplain, muttering something the girls could not catch, turned back toward his own residence near the chapel.

Now he caught sight of the girls, and turning toward them, and by doing so disturbing more wisps of the swirling fog, he greeted them in his most benign manner with:

“Good-evening, young ladies! Walking in the fog?”

“Yes, Dr. Bordmust, we like it,” answered Arden, with a great assumption of innocence.

“Hum—er—yes,” mumbled Henny. “Though it isn’t good for old throats,” and coughing raspily, he swung on his way.

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“That’s lucky!” exclaimed Terry as they hurried on.

“What do you suppose they were talking about?” asked Arden.

“As if we could guess,” sighed Sim. “But I know one thing,” she added as they slipped in at the door, “if that agent at the station doesn’t tell anyone what happened, we’re all right.”

“Hello, freshies!” exclaimed a voice close to them. “Rather late to be coming back from the station, isn’t it? I was behind you all the way from the post office.”

The three whirled around. The speaker was Jessica Darglan, smiling sardonically.

“I thought,” she continued, “that you three were campused. But that’s your worry,” and she brushed past them and went into the dining hall.

CHAPTER XX

A Dire Threat

“If Jessica Darglan tells where she saw us,” said Terry, next morning, “we’re sunk!”

“She won’t. Nobody could be so mean,” remarked Arden as she combed her hair in front of the bureau.

“You never can tell, Arden,” supplemented Sim. “Some people take a positive delight in doing things like that.”

“There’s nothing we can do about it, even if she does. So we won’t worry until we get a notice to go see Tiddy,” decided Terry.

“I meant to ask you after supper last night,” began Arden, “did you two think any more about what Henny was saying to Tom Scott as we came along?”

“I didn’t pay much attention,” confessed Sim. “I was too busy being demure.”

“Well,” went on Arden, “he said something about it being dangerous and asked Tom Scott how long he was going to keep it up.”

“Sort of funny,” admitted Terry. “That’s the second time we have heard those two talking together. I wonder what it all

means?”

“It doesn’t worry me much,” declared Sim as she pulled on her stockings. “Because I think I’ll go home the way I planned in a few days. I’ll leave before I’m expelled for going out while campused.”

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“Oh, Sim! Do we have to go over all that again?” pleaded Arden. “Can’t you stick it out? If we have to be expelled, let’s all go home together.”

“Don’t go, Sim,” begged Terry. “We’re just beginning to enjoy it here. You know, deep down in your heart, that last night in the station was fun, even if it was uncomfortable.”

“I’ll talk about it later,” answered Sim. “I have an early class this morning. See you when I get back.” She gathered up her books, gave a last look in the glass, and hurried down to breakfast without waiting for her friends.

Back in 513, Arden and Terry went on with their dressing. If Sim felt like being alone, it was wise to let her go. They would see her at breakfast, anyhow.

But at the table Sim devoted herself to Jane Randall and seemed deliberately to be avoiding her roommates. For, as she finished her meal, Sim linked arms with Jane and started for Bordmust Hall, leaving Terry and Arden by themselves.

“Sim is in one of her moods,” remarked Arden as she swung along beside Terry. “But she’ll forget all about it by lunch time.”

“I think she’s awfully disappointed about the pool. And being campused, while it doesn’t make a great deal of difference, just rubs Sim the wrong way. She hates to feel that she is being persecuted,” observed Terry.

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“It doesn’t bother me a bit,” declared Arden. “I’m keeping occupied by trying to straighten out this mystery and get the reward money.”

“You have an even disposition,” suggested Terry. “We are not all as lucky as you.”

Terry sighed deeply and shifted her books from her right arm to her left. Arden and she trudged silently along up the hill to Bordmust Hall.

The fog of the night before had blown away, and the distant hills shimmered in a soft blue light. The leaves were beginning to fall, and at the steps of Bordmust the head gardener, Anson Yaeger, was raking the lawn with sullen viciousness.

As the girls reached him he stopped moving the rake and looked at them penetratingly. His little beady eyes narrowed into bright slits. Resting part of his weight on the rake he shook a grimy finger at the freshmen.

“You’re two of them girls I seen down in my orchard!” he snarled. “You’ve no right there! Mark my words, no good will come of it! And don’t concern yourselves with what’s none of your business. There’s things going on around here that nobody knows about but me. I wouldn’t like to see you hurt, foolish as you are!”

Terry and Arden stood dumbfounded. Completely taken by surprise, they moved on past the surly gardener and involuntarily looked back at him without attempting to answer him.

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The heavy, thickset man in tattered overalls and an old-fashioned, gray coat-sweater looked over his shoulder with wild eyes, as though expecting someone to come along and stop his tirade.

“If I was to tell you all I know,” he went on, “what with alarm bells ringing and all, you’d pack up and take the next train home. Why, last night——”

Terry nudged Arden, murmuring:

“Don’t let’s stand here like a couple of ninnies and let him talk to us this way. Come on! I think he’s a little crazy!”

Arden pulled away from Terry. “But I want to hear what he’s saying.”

Anson heard them whispering.

“Heedless young things!” he scolded. “You’ll be sorry if you don’t do as I say.” Turning abruptly, he picked up the rake that had slipped to the ground and shuffled off through the rustling leaves in the direction of the orchard.

“There, you see!” exclaimed Arden. “I told you there was something weird down in that old orchard!”

“I’ve a good mind to follow him and see where he’s going,” said Terry. “What do you say, Arden, to a little more sleuthing?”

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“I’m game,” Arden answered. But even as she spoke the electric bell in Bordmust Hall announced the beginning of the first classes.

“We can’t go now,” said Terry. “We’ll have to let it wait.”

“Yes,” agreed Arden reluctantly.

The two girls entered the building, having a last glimpse of the mysterious gardener still shuffling his way through the rustling leaves toward the orchard where so many strange things had happened.

CHAPTER XXI

A Bold Stroke

With great difficulty Arden concentrated on her French literature. Daudet's "My Old Mill," seemed very silly and unnecessary. Who cared about a sleepy French town, drowsing under a provincial sun? A real present-day mystery story would have been much more interesting and to the point.

Twice Mademoiselle cautioned Arden to pay more attention and finally called upon her to translate aloud. Arden arose and stumbled through two paragraphs which she had known perfectly the night before.

"That will do, Mees Blake," drawled the gentle Frenchwoman. "Eet is obvious you have not prepared ze assignment. You will please geeve me a written translation, tomorrow morning, of today's work."

"Yes, mademoiselle," gulped Arden and sat down.

The events of the last few days were too much for even the conscientious Arden. She simply could not put her mind on the lesson but sat looking as though all that mattered in her life was the charming essay the girls were studying. In reality, however, Arden's mind was far away from the little mill town.

While her classmates went on with their somewhat halting translations, Arden decided on a bold stroke. In her free period, directly after mathematics, she would go alone over to town and hurry to the police station. There she would inquire as to the latest developments of the Pangborn case. If there was nothing to be learned no one would be the wiser for her daring escapade. For escapade it was, viewed in the fact that she was campused: forbidden to leave the precincts of Cedar Ridge.

Suddenly Arden felt something of a thrill go through her.

“I’ll do it!” she exclaimed impulsively and half aloud. Then she looked very foolish as her classmates stared wonderingly at her.

“Mees Blake, you are behaving very strangely today,” said the French teacher. “Please compose yourself.”

Arden shook her head as if in compliance and smiled weakly.

“I wonder what that gardener, Anson, was talking about?” she mused. “I’m sure he knows what strange mystery is in the orchard, anyway.” Mentally she reviewed the startling happenings since she and her chums had come to Cedar Ridge. It was all so puzzling. On wings of thought Arden flew over to the little stone building in town—Police Headquarters. Boldly entering, she announced to the officer in charge her solution of the baffling case of the missing heir and claimed the reward and then, in triumph, presented it to the dean for the repair of the swimming pool so Sim would remain in college.

“All a daydream, though,” murmured Arden.

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As the bell rang, marking the end of the French period, Arden recovered herself with a start. Quickly gathering up her books and papers, she hurried to her class in mathematics.

This was worse than the preceding session. Now she was absolutely unable to concentrate in the least. Her poor brain whirled with visions of geometric figures punctuated with policemen in the disguise of gardeners. She flunked miserably and heard, with a sigh of relief, the ringing of the bell for which she had waited so impatiently.

When the mathematics class was dismissed, Arden left hurriedly, for once getting away without Sim or Terry. She took a short cut across the hockey field and crawled through a hole in the hedge after a hasty and fearsome glance backward to observe if anyone might be observing her.

“Not yet, anyhow,” she sighed with relief.

This route brought her much nearer her destination.

Arden hastened along the peaceful main street of the suburban town still clutching her books. In front of a two-story building of mellowed red bricks, partly overgrown with dull green and bronzed ivy, she stopped. Two bright green lamps on each side of the doorway were in readiness to leap into emerald illumination of the sign POLICE HEADQUARTERS which caught and held her attention.

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“Dare I go in?” she mused.

She dared. Gathering together all her courage, she opened the heavy door, its knob of bright brass, and entered. Inside a rather large bare room all was serene. The dark wooden floor was scrubbed immaculately clean. Behind a heavy desk of light oak, around which high lights played on a glaring brass rail of heavy proportions, a man was reading a paper. Arden could see him around one end of the desk, his two thick-soled shoes elevated and his hands holding the paper.

“Ah—a-hem!” she coughed when, after several seconds, he did not seem aware of her presence.

With a rustle of surprise the paper was lowered, displaying a red-faced middle-aged man who looked considerably startled. When he noticed Arden he lowered his feet from the desk and tried to look business-like.

“I didn’t hear you come in, young lady,” he began. “What can I do for you?”

“Good-morning,” Arden replied. “I didn’t mean to startle you.” To gain time to think, she remarked about the beauty of the morning.

“Very nice day,” agreed the chief, for it was the head of the small country department whom Arden had intruded upon: a fact she observed when he donned his cap, officially, and buttoned his gilt braid-encrusted coat, which gaped wide open. He arose and stood at attention behind the desk, smiling as he asked:

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“Is there something I can do for you?”

“Well—yes. That is—you see——” Arden was quite flustered. But gaining control of herself she began again:

“I am at school—Cedar Ridge. The college, you know.”

The chief nodded helpfully, and a little look of wonder came over his face. It was seldom he came in contact with the college girls.

“I saw a circular in the post office, across from the college,” went on Arden. “It was about a man named Harry Pangborn, who is missing and——”

“Oh, yes,” interrupted the chief, very interested now. “The Pangborn poster—the place is full of them. Missing person posters. We put them up in public places and sometimes forget to take them down.”

Arden felt something of a chill.

“Oh!” she gasped. “Are they so old, then?”

“Some are. What did you want to know?”

“That one about Harry Pangborn.” Couldn’t the chief have heard the name at first?

“Yes,” he answered, without much encouragement.

“It says a thousand dollars reward,” Arden reminded him.

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“Just a moment.” He smiled at her from behind his heavy desk, a safe breastwork, and went to a filing cabinet. Running his fingers along the tops of a row of cards he brought out one that had a poster fastened to it. “Is this the one?” he asked, holding it out to Arden.

“That’s it!” she answered. “I’m sure I’ve seen that man’s face somewhere around here—in town, perhaps. Don’t you know anything about him?”

“Hum! No, not much. That’s rather an old and dead case. We haven’t much to go on about him. I don’t think you’ve seen *him*. If he was around here any place, you can be sure we’d have apprehended him and claimed the reward ourselves.”

“Oh,” murmured Arden, rather dismayed. “Then you don’t think there’s a chance that I might have seen him?”

“There’s a bare chance, of course. But you want to make pretty sure before you turn a man in as a person missing and for whom a reward is offered. False arrest or detention is rather a serious charge, you know.”

“Yes, I know; that is, I suppose it is.”

Dispirited, Arden looked down at her dusty oxfords. Another of her cherished plans had fallen through. She took a long breath and, looking at the chief again, remarked:

“Well, thank you—very much. I must get back to class now.”
She turned to leave.

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“Just a moment!” called the chief rather sharply. “Why are you so interested in this man?”

“Oh, of course.” Arden smiled disarmingly. “Only just so I might claim the reward if I found him and have our college pool repaired. The swimming pool, you know. It’s broken.”

“Yes?” encouraged the chief.

“Yes. It seemed like a good way to get the money. A friend of mine is awfully disappointed that she can’t swim. I mean she can swim, but with the pool broken she can’t, and so I was trying to help and—and——”

Arden was at the end of her resources. She turned and fled—beat a most undignified retreat as she told herself later. But the chief was not so easily disposed of.

“Just a moment!” he called rather sharply, and came out from behind the desk.

“Oh!” gasped Arden to herself. “Is he going to arrest me—detain me for questioning just because I have asked about the poster? If he does—what a terrible disgrace on top of what has already happened to me!”

But the chief was kindly sympathetic and soon had drawn from Arden all the story. She told him everything, about Sim’s failure, her late return, about being campused and having to hide in the packing case. At this last the chief could not restrain a smile.

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“So that’s why I wanted to find this man and claim the reward,” finished Arden. “You see?”

“Oh, yes, I see,” admitted the chief, going back behind his massive desk. “And I’m sorry. I can’t help you any. We don’t know where this missing young fellow is any more than you do. But don’t forget I’ll always be here if you need me, and I’ll help you all I can.”

Arden murmured her thanks, promised to remember, and, bidding him good-bye, left the building. She breathed a sigh of relief.

Standing for a composing moment on the sidewalk in front of police headquarters, Arden looked up and down the quiet street.

“Oh, my heavens!” she suddenly exclaimed. “Here comes Toots Everett!”

And indeed it was. Toots, with her hair freshly finger-waved, was walking briskly in Arden’s direction.

Without waiting to greet her, Arden cut across the street and hurried back to the college.

CHAPTER XXII

Arden Admits It

The clatter of dishes and the clink of glasses vied with the chatter of eager young voices as the girls began their evening meal at Cedar Ridge. The dining room was brightly lighted, and each table, seating twelve students, was fully occupied.

Arden and her friends began passing the food among themselves.

“Gold fish again!” announced Jane Randall as the waitress put a large dish of creamed salmon in the center of the table.

“And boiled potatoes and beans,” Terry added before that number of the bill of fare was in evidence.

“What do you guess for dessert?” Jane asked Terry. “Library paste or pie?”

Terry considered a moment, during which time Sim, on her left, held a heavy white plate beneath her nose.

“Library paste—always on Tuesday,” Sim finished, giving the college slang name to cornstarch pudding of a pale yellow hue. “I could do nicely with some extra food tonight.”

“Good idea, Sim,” remarked Mary Todd. “What do you say we raid the kitchen later?”

“Fine!” agreed Sim. “We’ll get Arden, Terry, Jane, Ethel, you, and me. That makes a good-sized party.”

“You come for us, Mary,” Terry suggested. “Knock on our door when you’re ready to go, and we’ll have a feast.”

“All right. It’s settled.”

It was quite possible in that noisy room to be talking to one girl at the head of the table while the girl at the other end knew nothing of the conversation. So it was very surprising and equally diverting when Elizabeth Kilmore, sitting some distance away from Terry and her chums, announced forcefully:

“Gather round! I have some choice gossip!”

“Let’s have it!” begged Sim. “Brighten up our lives a little.”

“I got it from an upper-class girl who got it from somebody else who had it from some other individual along the grapevine route,” said Elizabeth, “that a freshman has been arrested.”

“No!” gasped two or three girls in a chorus.

“Never!” murmured others.

“Well, at any rate, she was seen coming out of police headquarters here in town this morning. What do you make of that?” asked the triumphant Elizabeth.

The girls looked at one another smilingly. Such exciting rumors did not often come their way. It was fun to speculate on the fate of such a student caught in the toils of the police. Ah!

Arden, as the echoes of this choice gossip went around the table, maintained a discreet silence. She had not yet told her

roommates of her trip to town that morning, but she could readily understand, now, that when they were back in 513 she would have some explaining to do. But, for the time being, she decided to try to change the subject. So she remarked casually:

“It was probably nothing. Lots of people in this town look like college students. See how the natives try to copy our clothes.”

“Always belittlin’, Arden,” remarked Terry. “Can’t you let us enjoy the scandal? Heaven knows things have been pretty quiet around here of late.”

“If you ask me, more likely it had something to do with a minor traffic violation,” Arden continued. “You’re all very silly. Please pass the bread, Terry!”

Terry reached for the bread plate but, at the same time, shot Arden a quick appraising look. Arden took a slice and innocently asked for further plans of the night raid.

“We’ll call for you girls in 513 about half-past ten—after lights are out,” Jane said.

The others nodded assent. The dishes continued their barrage of sound, successfully concealing the plans from those not included in them.

As Sim had foretold, at the close of the meal large bowls of “library paste” made their appearance. Arden’s particular group decided to forego it and make something else, later, take its place. Forbidden sweets were always more tasty.

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When the meal was at an end, the dean, suddenly and somewhat out of the ordinary, signaled for silence by tapping a bell kept for that occasional use at her right hand at the faculty table.

Immediately a hush descended over the noisy room. Miss Anklon arose and stood teeteringly and frostily in her place, having pushed back her chair to make room.

“A story has come to my ears,” she began, “to the effect that a student of Cedar Ridge was seen at police headquarters here in town today. It seems incredible to me. However, I wish the girl who has allowed herself to cause such a horrid rumor to circulate to come to me before twenty-four hours pass and explain herself.”

She gave the bell another “ding,” and the conversational flood was at once loosed again, but with new import.

So the dean had also heard the rumor. Worse and more of it!

Terry herded Arden and Sim through groups of chattering and surprised girls, at the same time whispering:

“Arden Blake, you know something about this! Come upstairs!”

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Arden nodded silently. Sim objected to Terry’s bustling about and tried to hold back. But Terry, well versed in the art of telling her friends something without being overheard by others near by, soon had Sim tractable and under control.

Safe in the sanctuary of their room, Terry started in.

“Well, Arden, what did you do this time?”

“Oh, don’t be so smart, Terry! I didn’t do anything.”

But her face flushed.

“What do you know about the college student seen coming out of police headquarters?” demanded Sim. “Come on—come clean, as the detectives say—at least, in books.”

“I know all about it!” calmly replied Arden. “I am that girl!” she announced in her best stage manner. “I’ll tell you all about it,” and she did.

“Are you going to Tiddy?” Sim wanted to know.

“I think not—little one,” drawled Arden, still calmly but with firm decision, as her friends could tell by the look in her eyes. When Arden made up her mind, it was made up. “It would be useless to explain,” she continued. “Besides, I really didn’t do anything.”

“Well, if you’re found out, it might just as well be murder—we’ll all be sent home,” Terry decided.

“You’re right, Terry,” Sim agreed. “We ought all to leave for home before we suffer the ignominy of being sent.”

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“Not tonight, at least,” Arden temporized. “I may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb. I say let’s wait until something really happens. Besides, I think it will be lots of fun to raid the kitchen.”

“Do you think Tiddy has any real evidence?” asked Sim.

“Let’s try to guess what we shall find to eat in the raid,” said Arden demurely.

“My dear roommate,” laughed Terry, “you are, without doubt, a peer in the art of changing subjects. But I do agree with you about the raid. We must all wear tennis shoes and carry flashlights.”

“Let’s get our work done quickly, then,” proposed Sim, “and wait, with what patience we may, for Jane,” and she swept her chums a bow in her latest amateur dramatic rôle.

With unusual willingness, the three girls began to open their books, look for pencils and paper, and soon the room was in silence as they labored at their lessons for next day.

CHAPTER XXIII

The Injured Chaplain

The three freshmen in 513 worked diligently and with a minimum of conversation. Now and then Arden inquired about the spelling of a word, or Terry put a question as to the correct ending of a Latin verb, but on the whole their time was well occupied.

At about nine o'clock the lights all over the dormitory building were dimmed for a moment, a warning that in five minutes more they would be extinguished in every room. Arden announced happily that she had finished her assignments.

"I have, too!" cried Terry. But Sim sighed deeply as she said:

"I just made it. But I think my math is all wrong."

"Never mind," soothed Arden. "Perhaps you're a genius. Lots of them can't do math for a cent."

The lights went out suddenly, and the girls threw themselves on their beds to await Jane Randall's knock, summoning them to the pantry raid.

Arden and her chums must have fallen asleep, for they were startled when, some time later, Jane, afraid of knocking too

loudly on their door pushed it open and tiptoed in. She groped her way to Terry's bed, shook her and hissed:

“Wake up! It's time to go!”

“Oh!” gasped the startled Terry, the other two echoing her surprise with their own. They had no idea that they had slumbered.

Silently they took their flashlights and crept down the darkened corridor. The kitchen was far below on the same floor with the dining room. The kitchen was bright enough by day, for there were windows on three sides, but it was as dark as a cave at night. A large long table-bench ran the length of one side of the room. On this the plates were served to be carried into the dining hall by waitresses. Above the bench were racks for holding dishes. Gleaming pots, pans, and kettles hung on the wall near the huge stove, its fire now banked for the night. Shining copper tanks for hot water to make tea and boil the coffee caught and reflected the beams from flashlights carried by the marauders.

Unaccustomed to the strange place, the girls all stood still for a few moments to get their bearings. Arden gave a sudden frightened squeal as a startled mouse ran across her foot.

“Oh,” she gasped. “The place is overrun with the little beasts!”

“Hush!” cautioned Jane Randall. “That watchman may hear us. He comes in here on his rounds.”

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“Where's the food, Jane?” whispered Terry, advancing farther into the room which, somehow, had a spooky atmosphere.

“It ought to be around here some place,” Jane replied cautiously.

“Ah-a-a-ah! Pies!” suddenly exclaimed Terry as she opened the door of a large cupboard.

“Let’s take a few. They are for tomorrow, I suppose, and must have been baked late this afternoon. What do they smell like, Terry?” asked Sim.

“They all smell pretty much alike to me. I’ll take four, one off each shelf. We ought to get a variety that way,” suggested Terry.

The other girls were silently exploring, by means of their electric torches, the dark corners of the kitchen. They decided against taking bread or rolls as being too unromantic for a midnight feast. Jane convinced them that milk would do nicely to wash down the food, and it was when Arden opened the door of the immense refrigerator that she made the prize discovery of the evening.

“Look what I’ve found!” she exclaimed. “Two roasted chickens!”

“Lovely!” breathed Sim. “Come over here, kids! Arden has struck a gold mine!”

Temporarily leaving their own investigations, the other girls crowded around the ice box and focused their lights on the innocent browned birds.

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“The sight of them makes my mouth water!” announced Sim. “But we must have enough food, now, with these as a background. Milk, pie and roast chickens! Lovely! Let’s take them and go quickly before we are caught.”

Arden reached in and lifted out one of the doomed chickens. She turned half around to hand it to Sim, who was waiting to take it, when the whole party of girls was suddenly frozen into immobility with terror.

For through the silence of the night sounded mournfully:

Dong! Ding-dong! Dong! Dong!

It was the old alarm bell again sonorously clanging at the mystic hour of twelve—the hour when “witches, warlocks an’ lang-nebbied things” are free to roam.

“Heavens! What’s that?” gasped Jane Randall, though well she and the others knew.

“It’s that bell again,” said Arden unnecessarily. She stood holding firmly to a leg of the chicken while Sim dug her fingers into the soft browned flesh beneath a wing. They laughed over it later, of course. But just now terror gripped them.

Terry was holding the pies so tightly in her fright that her fingers punctured the crust and went messily into the fruit beneath. They all stood like children who had been playing “statues”; in just the positions they had assumed when that ghostly bell began to toll.

It stopped for a moment and then began to peal again, if anything more loudly than at first. Then the girls came back to life, and while it was still clanging the second time, Arden had presence of mind enough to close the refrigerator door, to stave off discovery as long as possible if the authorities entered the kitchen. Then, with the other girls, who were also holding to the food they had captured, Arden ran to the low windows on the north side of the kitchen. They all crowded close to the glass casement and peered out into the night. The bell sounded more clearly from this vantage point.

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“Who can be ringing it?” murmured Jane. “I hate bells or whistles in the night. It always seems so—ghostly!”

“Stop it!” someone implored.

“I’d like to run around outside and find out about it,” declared Terry. “Of course, it must be *someone* pulling the rope. Bells don’t ring of themselves.”

“Maybe the wind,” suggested Mary Todd.

“The wind couldn’t ring that old bell,” declared Arden. “It’s too heavy to be swayed by what little breeze there is tonight. And it’s high up on the wall, under a sort of canopy. No, someone pulled that rope.”

“But the rope is high up, out of reach from the ground,” said Sim who had noticed that fact.

Puzzled, alarmed, and in momentary fear of being discovered in the midnight raid, the girls stood at the window. It was in a sort of extension of the building and faced the north, so that from it a view could be had of the rear college grounds leading down to the orchard.

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It was at this scene the girls were now gazing, some illumination being furnished by a pale and watery moon now and then hidden by scudding clouds.

Suddenly Ethel Anderson clutched Arden by the arm, so violently as almost to cause the dropping of the chicken, and Ethel exclaimed:

“What’s that dark thing on the lawn near the orchard?”

“Where?” asked several, crowding closer.

“There!” Ethel pointed at a moment when the moon came out of the clouds.

“Looks like a black dog, to me,” Terry said. “Or perhaps _____”

Terry’s sentence was never finished, for Arden broke in with:

“It’s a man! A man crawling on his hands and knees! It is! Look!”

The last wisp of cloud was wiped from the face of the moon. The form of the crawling man was seen plainly.

“Oh, heavens!”

“We must tell someone!”

“What’ll we do?”

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“We must wake Tiddy!”

“Oh, let’s get out of here!”

“Who is it?”

Questions, exclamations, fearsome gasps and excited advice all tripped pell-mell from the girls.

Then, quickly, Arden took control of the situation.

“Hush, girls!” she calmly advised. “All of you keep quiet. Now, just a moment, please.”

Her calm voice had its effect, and they all grew quiet, though there was not one whose breathing came naturally. Arden managed to raise the lower sash a little way.

And then, through this opening, as the girls watched the black, crawling figure, came a voice feebly calling:

“Help! Help! Help!”

“It’s Henny!” exclaimed Terry as she and the others recognized the squeaky voice of the aged chaplain. “Dr. Bordmust; and he’s hurt!”

CHAPTER XXIV

The Dean Explains

The mysteriously tolled bell had ceased ringing now. Fascinated, the girls remained at the window looking at the prone black figure of Rev. Dr. Bordmust lying on the edge of the sinister orchard. That the orchard was sinister at least Arden, Sim, and Terry were ready to testify.

The last cry for help from the aged chaplain and the final echo of the tolling bell came together.

“What shall we do, Arden?” murmured Terry.

“We must do something!” insisted Jane.

“Yes, it’s sort of up to us, since we’re here on the scene,” agreed Sim.

“The dean will have to know about this,” suggested Terry.

“But there’s something else to do first,” spoke Arden.

“What?” chorused her chums.

“That poor man is hurt,” went on Arden. “He needs help, and we must hurry to get it. I’ll tell you what. We three,” she motioned to herself and her roommates, “are already campused. Whatever happens can’t make much difference to

us, even if we're caught now. We'll go out and see what we can do to help poor Henny, and you others go tell Tiddy."

"A good idea!" assented Sim. "Jane, you and the others can take the food with you when you go to tell Tiddy. It's a wonder she or some of the others haven't been aroused already by the bell. But when you go to her, hide the food, somehow. No use wasting it after all the trouble we had getting it."

"No, indeed," said Ethel Anderson.

Quickly the two groups separated. Arden, Sim, and Terry hurried out of a rear door, which they unlocked, while Jane and the others, stuffing the pies, chickens, and bottles of milk under their big sweaters, hastened to take word to the dean.

Arden, Sim, and Terry ran with all the frightened speed they could summon across the damp grass of the rear campus toward the edge of the orchard. By another gleam of moonlight they had a glimpse of the chaplain resuming his painful crawling after a period of rest following his cries for help.

When he saw the girls running toward him, Dr. Bordmust, as if giving up the fight, now that assistance was at hand, collapsed on the leaf-strewn ground.

Terry was the first to reach him.

"Are you hurt, Dr. Bordmust?" she asked. "What happened?"

"Do tell us! Tell us how we can help you," appealed Sim.

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"Are you badly injured?" faltered Arden.

"My leg—I think my right leg is broken," he faltered. "It is very painful. I cannot bear my weight on it. That is why I had

to crawl along.”

“Did you fall?” asked Arden.

“Not exactly. I was struck by something—something attacked me as I was walking through the orchard. It was some great, black, rushing shape that threw itself upon me. I went down heavily—I could feel the bones of my leg snap. I—I must have lost consciousness—for a time, at least. When I came to, I found myself lying beneath a tree. I managed to get this far, and then the pain——”

“We heard you call for help,” said Sim.

“You heard me—up in your room?” His voice was querulous.

The girls did not care to go into particulars.

“We have sent someone to bring help,” said Arden, kneeling down beside the aged chaplain. “But can we do anything to ease you until help comes?”

“Rest yourself, Dr. Bordmust,” Sim begged. She sat down in the wet grass and lifted the tired white head into her lap.

“You—you are very kind, young ladies,” the chaplain murmured. “I shall see that——”

“What’s the matter?” suddenly cried Arden as she saw his head sag queerly to one side.

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“He’s fainted, I guess,” answered Sim.

“Oh, dear!” wailed Terry. “The poor man! But here come the girls and the dean, I think, and two men. Now we’ll be all right.”

“At least he will, though as for us——” Arden did not finish.

An excited throng of students and others hurried toward the three alarmed freshmen surrounding the chaplain. The dean, rather neatly dressed in spite of the hurry under which she had donned her garments, was in the lead.

Behind her was Miss Lucant, the college infirmarian. Then came Jane and her chums with the gardener, Anson Yaeger, and his helper, Tom Scott, bringing up in the rear.

“You certainly got a lot of help in a short time, Jane,” whispered Arden as the girls mingled.

“Oh, the dean was quick enough once she was awake. She sent me for Miss Lucant and had one of the girls telephone to the gardener’s house to rouse him. Tiddy certainly got organized quickly!”

Miss Anklon, who even had the forethought to bring a flashlight with her, focused it on the pale face of the chaplain, who still was stretched on the ground, his head in Sim’s lap.

“Take him to the infirmary at once!” the dean ordered. “Anson—Tom—you’ll have to get some sort of a stretcher to carry him. That leg, to me, looks to be broken.”

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“It is,” said Arden.

The dean flashed a look and a gleam of light on her but said nothing, nor did she ask how Arden knew.

“I’ll have to run back and get a board—or something,” said Anson. “A stretcher is what we need, but——”

“We can pull a door off the old tool-shed!” suggested Tom Scott.

“Do that,” advised the dean. “Lose no time.”

Tom Scott hurried off in the darkness, before Anson could make up his mind what to do, and soon came back with a light door. On this Dr. Bordmust was carefully rolled, Sim pulling off her sweater to make a pillow for his head, and then the gardener and his assistant started on the melancholy journey to the college hospital.

Having seen this procession on its way, the dean spoke sharply to the nervous girls.

“Go at once to your rooms,” she ordered. “We shall have something to say about this in the morning.”

Realizing that they could do nothing more, and feeling that they must have excited the dean’s curiosity by all being dressed at that hour of the night, Arden and the others hurried into the dormitory and dispersed to their various rooms.

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Meanwhile Dr. Bordmust, who had recovered consciousness, was taken to the infirmary, where Anson and Tom carefully undressed him and put him in bed, with an elderly teacher, who was also a nurse, to look after him. A physician was hurriedly summoned from town and set the broken leg. This much the girls guessed from observation and rumors that floated along the corridor’s grapevine route. For none of those engaged in the raid felt like going to bed at once.

And as the food had escaped the watchful eyes of the dean, it having been successfully hidden under sweaters, it was available for the post-midnight feast which was soon under way. Nor was the usual caution necessary, with the excitement over the chaplain’s strange adventure still seething.

As the girls ate they talked, naturally, each of the two groups telling the other their parts in the affair. They all admitted it was a queer mystery.

“Do you think the bell had anything to do with it?” Sim wanted to know.

“It might have been rung to draw our attention away from the orchard,” suggested Arden.

“But no one was paying the least bit of attention to the orchard in the first place,” objected Terry.

“But why was Henny there in the orchard at midnight?” Jane Randall propounded. “He had no business there.”

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“No more than we had in the kitchen,” suggested Arden.

“But he *was* there,” declared Mary Todd.

“And something attacked him,” said Sim.

“And if you ask me,” said Arden positively, “I think that whatever it was that came at us, the night we had to get apples for the sophs, attacked our chaplain.”

“Well, what was that?” demanded Ethel.

“I don’t know,” Arden had to admit.

The girls were silent a moment, and then Sim asked:

“Did you have much trouble rousing Tiddy?”

“Yes,” Jane answered, “she sleeps like a horse. We couldn’t make her understand for the longest time. She never even noticed how we all bulged with food, and I think she didn’t hear the bell at all.”

So they talked until there was nothing left to eat though there was still much to wonder at. Arden hid the milk bottles in a closet. Jane Randall opened the door and was followed out by

the other visitors to 513, who stole silently down the dark corridors and to their own rooms.

In spite of all the excitement, Arden and her roommates were soon sound asleep.

The next day the very walls of Cedar Ridge must have vibrated, so great was the talk. Rumors of the wildest sort were passed from girl to girl. Arden and her friends were a little afraid to tell of their part in the night's adventure and so listened to the various stories and volunteered nothing.

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At lunch, when the whole college was assembled, Tiddy rang her little bell, and immediately a deep hush followed the talk, laughter, and clatter of dishes.

“Young ladies,” began the dean, “so ridiculous are the rumors that are rife here today that I feel I must do a little explaining. Rev. Dr. Bordmust, while strolling through our orchard last night, was attacked by a huge black ram which knocked him down, and in the fall our chaplain's right leg was broken below the knee. The ram, which it is learned is a savage beast, broke loose from a near-by farm.”

There were uneasy twistings and turnings on the part of the girls, and many whispered comments, despite the frowning warnings of various teachers scattered about the room.

“But you need have no further fears,” the dean went on. “The beast has been caught and penned up securely. It will be kept under restraint from this time on. So no one need have any fears of going into our orchard—if she has occasion to go there.”

“So this is what the taxi-man must have been hinting at,” thought Arden. “Though why he didn't dare speak of it I can't imagine. And I suppose it was the ram that knocked me down. I was lucky!”

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“This is the explanation of the greater part of the night’s alarm, young ladies,” continued the dean. “It is all very simple. It is unfortunate that Dr. Bordmust was injured, but he is now resting comfortably, and another clergyman has been temporarily engaged, so there will be chapel service—as usual.” The dean smiled with dry humor, having noted flashes of joy on the faces of several students at the idea of escaping from morning devotions.

“Dr. Bordmust has asked me, as a favor to him,” stated the dean, “not to punish the girls who were out of their rooms against rules after hours. They kindly went to his assistance and summoned much-needed help. I am happy to accede to our chaplain’s request, for I know the whole undergraduate body is extremely fond of him. I will ask no questions of those girls. In fact, I hereby publicly thank them for their great presence of mind. There is only one thing I must insist on.”

There was a portentous pause, and the dean ended the silence by saying:

“If the ringing of the alarm bell was done as a joke—please don’t repeat it.” She smiled benignly. “Now you may go on with your lunch.”

CHAPTER XXV

Arden Is Convinced

Silence—a somewhat stunned and portentous silence—followed the dean’s explanation and remarks. Then a buzz of talk began. It spread all through the room, for the orchard mystery had grown to greater proportions than the faculty of Cedar Ridge had believed.

Arden secured the attention of Sim, who was excitedly talking to Terry, and propounded this:

“Do you seriously think that what Tiddy said just now is true? Or, at least, do you think it is a logical explanation? It sounds fishy to me. If it was a ram that hurt Tom Scott and the chaplain, the beast planned his attacks with almost human cleverness.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Sim answered. “I suppose it’s possible _____”

“But not probable,” Arden interrupted.

“Oh, let’s forget about it,” suggested Sim.

“I wonder,” thought Arden as they finished lunch and walked from the dining room to the sun-flooded campus, “I wonder if Sim is going to do anything about the pool? She didn’t seem much interested in the way the dean solved the mystery.”

“What do you think?” inquired Terry. “Aren’t you satisfied, Arden, with the dean’s statement?”

“It satisfies me, Arden, m’sweet!” drawled Sim. “I find this sun very satisfying, too,” she went on as she stretched her arms high above her head and ran her fingers through her thick hair.

“You, also, Terry?” inquired Arden.

“Yes,” Terry answered. “You’ll have to look further for doubters of the dean.” She threw herself down on the warm grass and opened her Latin grammar for a last look before class.

Arden stood over her chums in uncertainty, for now Sim had joined Terry on the grass. The sun was bright, the sky unclouded and of a deep blue. Arden pulled her bright red sweater down lower over her tweed skirt and adjusted a small scarf about her neck. Cedar Ridge was not a particularly “dressy” college, nor did it have a reputation for displaying on its campus carelessly dressed students. Rather a happy medium was struck. High heels were out of place. One could not make a swift last-minute dash up the boardwalk to Bordmust Hall in open pumps, as several girls had found out to their sorrow.

Arden and her chums dressed in sports clothes, topped, usually, by the inevitable mortar-boards. Now that hazing was over, the college settled down to a peaceful routine, with not so much stress on the poor freshmen.

“Well,” Arden finally remarked, “I must say you girls show very little of the stuff which made our country the great place it is today. You have no curiosity. That’s your trouble!”

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“My trouble is not enough sleep,” murmured Sim drowsily.

“Latin will be the death of me,” declared Terry.

“Then I’ll leave you to yourselves,” announced Arden, turning away. “I’m off to see what I can see.”

“Not mad, are you?” questioned Sim.

“No, just curious.” Arden was soon beyond talking distance.

She was a little surprised, though she would not let Sim or Terry know it, that they took the dean’s explanation so calmly and believably.

“For my part,” reasoned Arden to herself, “I’m going to find out if an old black ram really caused all the scares and trouble.”

Once her mind was made up, Arden acted quickly. Her next class was an hour away. There was time enough, she knew, as she swung off in the direction of the orchard. She went in through the hedge entrance. It was dark and gloomy there, even with the sun shining, and for a moment the girl hesitated. But she kept on, and was soon in the grove of gnarled and fantastic trees. The sun was shining down through their twisted branches and glinting on the vari-hued apples. Arden drew in a deep breath of a tangy perfume.

She picked up a red and yellow apple, wiped it off on her skirt, and bit into it. Distinctly it was good. She walked on farther. All was serene. There was no ram, no sign of a ram, though Arden did not really expect to find one roaming about. But she did think she might see the marks of the beast’s feet. But she saw none.

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“And there’s no one lying here unconscious and injured by any black beast,” said Arden smiling a little at her conceit. She walked over to a corner where stood a shed in which were

kept barrels and ladders for the harvesting of the apples. It was nearly time for the harvest now.

The door, that had been taken off for use as a stretcher the night the chaplain had been attacked, had been replaced. The door swung open, and Arden had a glimpse inside the shed of various farm implements.

“Ho, hum!” she yawned. “I guess the girls and the dean were right. There’s no use trying to find anything different. I shall have to admit I was wrong, and I don’t want to, for really I don’t believe in that ram story. If I could only find something else to bear out my theory.”

She was looking around the orchard, gazing toward distant corners for something she could investigate when she was startled by a rustle of dried leaves caused by some feet pattering rapidly among them. There were a whistling snort and a loud sniff.

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Arden wheeled about and screamed in terror.

Rushing straight at her, with lowering head and menacing horns curved in the typical design of such creatures, was an immense black ram. The animal must have been hiding behind a tree. Attracted by Arden’s presence in the orchard, and perhaps incensed by her red sweater, it had come to give battle.

Snorting in rage, like a miniature bull, and scattering the leaves with his pounding feet, the ram was coming on, Arden thought, like an express train. For one wild moment she felt resentful against the dean who had said the beast was now securely penned. Then Arden turned and made a jump for the tool shed.

She got inside just in time, pulling the door after her. And a moment later the whole structure was shaken as the ram

butted his horns against the thin portal.

“Oh, my gosh!” gasped Arden. And as there followed a moment of silence and inaction on the part of the creature, she saw a hook on the inside of the door and slipped it into the staple.

Then came another butting attack on the door.

“He’ll break it in!” cried Arden, her heart beating fast. “It isn’t very strong. Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?”

The ram was snorting, puffing, and blowing outside the shed. Arden could hear him pawing in the dried leaves. Then for the third time he rushed with those heavy curved horns at the barrier which kept him from the human he wanted to attack.

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“No wonder Tom Scott and the chaplain were hurt with such a creature as that rushing at them!” gasped Arden. “Oh, dear! I wish I’d taken the dean’s word. It’s a ram all right. A terrible ram!”

She wondered if a human voice in command would have any effect on the creature. She would try.

“Go away! Get out of here!” she ordered through a crack in the door. She waited. She heard nothing. Perhaps the beast had gone. She loosed the hook a little, making a crack wide enough out of which she could look. The ram hadn’t gone. He was balefully eyeing the shed from a little distance, and when he saw the door move again he lowered his head and butted it harder than before.

“Oh, this is awful!” groaned Arden. “I guess I’ll have to stay in here until he goes away or falls asleep. I suppose rams do sleep, sometimes. This is what I get for doubting Tiddy. I wonder if there is a back door that I could sneak out of while he’s butting the front one?”

But there was no rear exit, as Arden discovered when she peered through the jumble of ladders, barrels, and tools. Sheds aren't usually built with two doors.

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There was nothing to be done but to wait for a rescue or until the ram should get weary of the siege and raise it.

“When the girls find out about this they’ll have the laugh on me all right!” Arden ruefully mused.

The ram was quiet again, but Arden thought it useless again to give any orders or to tantalize the brute by partly opening the door. Time was passing. It was getting late. She would soon be due at her class. If she did not appear, her chums might think something had happened to her and start a search.

“But I didn’t tell them where I was going,” Arden reflected. “They don’t know where to start looking, and they’ll never imagine I came to the orchard after all that’s happened.

““Oh, to be in England, now that Spring is there’—or any old place but in this shed,” the imprisoned girl murmured. She was getting panicky. Almost without knowing what she was doing, Arden found herself shouting:

“Go away, ram! Go away!”

She paused and caught her breath suddenly. She heard voices outside; men talking. The sounds came nearer. Someone said:

“That certainly was a mighty poor job you did on that pen, Anson. The ram got out without half trying. There he is now, down by the tool shed. And by Jove, Anson, I believe he’s got someone penned in there! He wouldn’t act that way unless there was someone in the shed. Look, there he goes, butting the door!”

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It was Tom Scott. Arden recognized the voice. And Anson Yaeger, the grim farmer, answered:

“I did as good a job as I could with the wood I had. I’d like to see you or anybody else——”

“Never mind that now!” interrupted Tom. “The thing to do now is to catch that ram again! He’s dangerous. Come on!”

Arden could hear footsteps running now, and though the ram once more butted the door, nearly cracking some of the boards, she knew that rescue was on the way.

There was silence outside the shed for a moment, and then Tom Scott said:

“You slip around back, Anson, and sort of hold his attention by peering out at him around the corner. While you’re doing that, I can slip up behind him and get this rope around him. I’ll lasso him, and we’ll hog-tie him, cowboy fashion.”

“Very well,” agreed the farmer.

Arden could not see what they did, but she was told, later. Tom, who had provided himself with a noosed rope when he and Anson started out in search of the escaped ram, skillfully tossed it over the beast’s head from the rear. The noose fell in a choking loop around the ram’s neck, and Tom pulled tight.

The surprised animal turned to charge Tom, but by this time Anson attacked him with a heavy timber, knocked him down, and both men threw themselves upon the creature. He struggled and bleated, but was soon well tied so he could not move.

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“Good work, Anson!” complimented Tom.

“Hum!” was the grunted answer. The farmer was winded.

Arden was debating with herself whether to come out and show who the ram had imprisoned or to wait until the men had taken the beast away. But she had no choice, for Tom said:

“Now we’ll see what unfortunate this ram was after.”

“I’m going out,” Arden told herself and unhooked the door.

Tom Scott and Anson fairly jumped with surprise as they saw her.

“He chased me in here,” she volunteered. “I got in just in time, but I didn’t dare come out again.”

“No, it’s wise you didn’t,” said Tom, smiling at her. “This is a dangerous beast. I thought he was after someone, the way he stood near this shed. Your red sweater must have attracted him. Not hurt, are you?”

“No, only frightened. At least I was. I’m so glad you came.”

“Well, he can’t hurt you now,” chuckled Tom, looking at the bound ram. Anson said nothing. “He’s a tricky beast. Worked his way out of the pen we shut him up in temporarily until his owner can dispose of him. I believe the dean has threatened to make a complaint unless the ram is removed from around here.”

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“I hope he goes,” said Arden. “The orchard will be safer without him and less—less mysterious.”

“Mysterious?” questioned Tom, somewhat wonderingly.

“Yes. But I must be going. I’ll be late for my class. Thank you for rescuing me.”

“It was a pleasure,” Tom said, bowing and smiling. “Also a pleasure to choke the beast that gave me such a whack.”

Still Anson Yaeger did not speak. He seemed to be glaring at Arden with his little beady eyes almost hidden under shaggy brows. But Arden was looking only at Tom Scott. She could not seem to help it. And he was looking at her. Arden began to feel embarrassed. It was as if, she said later, she had met the good-looking gardener at some previous time but could not remember where. She was puzzled and annoyed.

“Well, I really must go!” she announced, and this time she did, hurrying past the bound and recumbent ram that seemed to eye her with much malevolence. But he was helpless now.

Arden hurried up through the orchard, turning for a final look at the scene of her latest adventure. She saw Anson bringing a wheelbarrow out of the shed to be used in taking the ram to a new prison. Then she ran to Bordmust and reached it just in time for English lit.

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CHAPTER XXVI

The Challenge

Terry and Sim were in other rooms, so Arden did not see her chums until after the last class of the day. Then she met them on the steps of Bordmust, where they usually waited for one another.

If ever Arden astonished Terry and Sim, it was on this occasion, when she related her startling adventure with the ram.

“No, never!” gasped Terry in disbelief.

“Yes,” asserted Arden.

“Oh, my aunt’s cat!” shouted Sim, and then she and Terry went into spasms of laughter. Though they realized Arden had been in some danger, the funny side of it was now uppermost in their minds.

“Let’s go over to the orchard and look around,” suggested Terry as their mirth subsided.

“There won’t be anything to look at, now that Arden is out,” said Sim.

“I know,” answered Terry, “but I’d like to see what the place looks like now that the danger is removed and the mystery

solved.”

“I guess you’re one of those persons who go around gathering souvenirs from houses where murders have been committed,” laughed Arden.

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“The sort who sneaks up on the Sphinx and knocks a chip off the nose for an Egyptian tidbit,” suggested Sim.

“Come on,” urged Terry. “We haven’t anything else to do, and we can’t go anywhere, as we’re still campused, and it’s a nice day.”

“All right,” assented Sim.

The girls were in a jovial mood as they started toward the orchard, which had been bereft of some of its peril and mystery by the dean’s announcement and by Arden’s rather perilous adventure.

This was several days after the night of the kitchen raid, the ringing of the bell (which was as yet unexplained), and the attack on the aged chaplain by the vicious black ram. During those days the college had buzzed with talk and rumor, and among the chums of Arden and her two friends considerable was known about the midnight taking of the chickens, milk, and pies.

But the bottles had surreptitiously been restored to the kitchen, the bones of the chickens had been successfully disposed of, and there was nothing left of the pies save a few grease spots on several sweaters. Whether the dean knew about the raid and chose to ignore it or whether she was still in blissful ignorance, Arden and her friends neither knew nor cared.

“Sometimes I think she knows all about it but doesn’t say anything because of what we did for Henny,” said Sim.

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“Anyhow, she hasn’t piled any more punishment on us, so why should we care?” asked Terry.

“That’s right,” agreed Arden. “But though that part seems to have blown over, we still haven’t found out why Henny was in the orchard at midnight.”

“And we probably won’t until you locate that missing Pangborn chap and get the reward so the swimming pool can be repaired,” said Sim, a little sarcastically, it seemed.

“Don’t talk about it!” begged Arden. “I guess I’m a failure as a detective. As for the pool, perhaps around Christmas we can prevail on our respective families to chip in and subscribe enough to fix it.”

“That’s a thought!” exclaimed Sim. “I must remember that!”

What the dean publicly had said about the ram was quite true in the matter of its ugliness, as Arden could testify. A farmer not far from the college grounds owned the big black brute, kept for stock exhibitions. It was larger than the average ram, with immense horns, curving back over a hard head, and when free would run to attack any persons who crossed its path. The beast was supposed to be kept secure in a barn or field but had managed to get out more than one night, roaming afar, and was said to have killed several dogs which had had the temerity to attack it.

“Probably it was attracted to our orchard by the apples,” suggested Terry as the three walked along, talking of the brute’s acts.

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“It must have been attracted to me also,” murmured Arden as she recalled the circumstances of the hazing and how she was knocked down by what she thought was a dark whirlwind.

“Henny couldn’t have been in the orchard as a hazing stunt to be attacked by the beast,” said Terry thoughtfully. “What was he there for?”

“Perhaps wandering under the midnight stars to think up a theme for a sermon,” suggested Sim.

“Maybe,” said Arden, though her voice had no conviction in it. “Well, here we are,” she added as they left the campus lawn and found themselves under the first row of trees in the orchard. It was the first time since the hazing they had entered it without fear or apprehension. It was very calm and peaceful this bright morning.

“It was right about here,” said Arden, indicating the base of a large tree, “that the ram knocked me down that night, and over there is the shed where I locked myself in,” she added, pointing.

“And there is where we found Tom Scott,” Terry said, indicating the spot.

“Here, Terry,” said Sim, breaking off a twig from one of the old gnarled trees. “Here’s a souvenir for you.”

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“Thanks, darling,” remarked Terry sarcastically. “What kind of apples are these, anyhow?” She picked up a fairly good windfall and gingerly took a small bite after shaking off an ant or two.

“I haven’t any idea,” answered Arden, and then, as she remembered something, she suddenly asked: “Oh, Sim! What about that man you saw in the orchard with a lantern the night Mr. Newman brought you back from New York?”

“Oh, yes!” said Sim. “Why, it must have been someone looking for the ram, who was on the rampage then. How disgustingly simple mysteries always turn out to be!”

“Not so simple,” Arden objected. “How about the bell and the missing Pangborn chap?”

“Oh—well,” Sim temporized. Then, as a distant rustle of footsteps in the dried leaves was heard, she added in a lower voice: “Here comes your hero!”

Arden glanced toward where Sim indicated. Tom Scott, the good-looking young fellow who was assistant to grim and dour old Anson Yaeger, was swinging along beneath the trees toward the girls. As he caught sight of them he paused, looked behind him as if to see that a way of retreat was clear, and then, with a shrug of his shoulders as if shaking off a weight, advanced again.

Not only to the eyes of Arden, but to those of her chums, it was evident a great change had taken place in Tom Scott. For one thing, he no longer wore blue overalls. He was attired in a well-fitting gray business suit. Instead of clumsy boots his feet had on neat ties well polished.

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“How nice he looks!” murmured Terry. “Why!” she exclaimed. “He’s shaved off his mustache. I’m sure he had one when I saw him raking up leaves a couple of days ago!”

“Yes, he has,” agreed Sim. “But what of it? I think he looks better without it.”

“Hush! He’ll hear you,” warned Arden. She was staring in a strange manner at the young man.

“He’s coming right this way,” went on Sim in a low voice. “Can’t we do something besides standing here and staring at him as though we came here purposely to see him? Walk, talk—do something!”

“Let’s pretend we’re after some apples,” suggested Terry, stooping down but gathering only a small nubbin.

Sim followed her example, but Arden appeared to be fascinated by the oncoming Tom Scott. She did not move or speak. She just stared at him in a way that would have drawn rebukes from her chums had they seen her fixed gaze.

Tom Scott came on, grinning cheerfully, as he was close to the girls, disclosing white, perfect teeth.

“Altogether too good-looking for a gardener at a girls’ college,” Sim found herself reflecting as she looked up.

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“We—we thought we’d take a few apples,” faltered Terry. “I suppose there—there’s no—objection.”

By this time she and Sim were aware of Arden’s queer actions or, rather, lack of action, for Arden was still motionlessly staring.

“Try one of these,” suggested Tom Scott, reaching up and picking off a perfect apple from a branch over his head. “You’ll find the flavor rather good.” He handed the apple to Arden.

“Thank you,” she said, in a toneless voice. “What kind is it?”

“Spitzenberg. A very choice variety. You’ll not find many of them around here. This is the only orchard I know of where they grow.”

“How nice—I mean how strange,” murmured Arden. She was not looking at the apple. She was looking at Tom Scott, and she asked: “Have you recovered from your—your accident?”

“Oh!” He laughed. “You mean when the black ram butted me? For it was the sable beast that knocked me out. Yes, thank you, I’m all over that. It wasn’t much. Too bad I didn’t do for that beast before he had a chance at the chaplain. He fared worse than I did—the chaplain, I mean.”

“Yes, he did,” agreed Sim. “But you saved Arden from the same ram.”

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“It so happened,” admitted the good-looking gardener.

“Thank you,” said Terry as Tom gave her an apple like the one he had handed to Arden and then passed one to Sim.

“Well, I must be going,” said Tom Scott. “I have an errand in town and——”

“Just a minute!” cried Arden excitedly. In all this time she had not removed her gaze from the young man’s face, not even to munch her apple, as Terry and Sim were doing with theirs. “Wait, please——!”

The young gardener stood uncertain, his eyes roving from one girl to the other and back to Arden.

“You—you——” faltered Arden. “I know! Yes, I’m certain now! You are Harry Pangborn!”

“Arden!” gasped Sim. “Arden!”

“What are you saying?” exclaimed Terry, dropping her half-eaten apple.

“This is the man we saw in the post office!” went on Arden, her words and breath coming rapidly. “I mean he’s the picture we saw—I mean he is the original of the man wanted in the police poster. You are, aren’t you?” she challenged.

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CHAPTER XXVII

A Telegram

For a moment it seemed as if the young man was going to deny Arden's statement or at least flee from the scene. But again he smiled in a disarming and friendly fashion, shrugged his shoulders as though getting rid of another weight, and, spreading his hands in a helpless and surrendering gesture, said:

"Yes, I am Harry Pangborn. You have found me out. I thought it wouldn't be long after I shaved off my mustache. Well, I'm just as glad it happened this way since it had to happen. I was about to end the little masquerade, anyhow."

"Oh, please let us end it!" begged Arden. "I mean if we are allowed to tell——" She seemed confused and blushed.

"Yes, I know," said young Mr. Pangborn. "Well, have it your way. I would rather see you profit by it than anyone else. You did me a favor the night the ram came at me."

"But what does it all mean?" asked Sim.

"Why did you give up your inheritance of millions to come here as a gardener's helper?" asked Terry.

"It's a short story, simple enough, and perhaps you may not believe it," said Harry Pangborn, "but I just didn't want my

inheritance.”

“Not your grandfather’s wealth?” asked Arden.

“Well, perhaps it would be more exact to say I was in no hurry for it. Oh, I’m not going to pass it up altogether,” he laughed. “But here’s the story briefly. As the poster explains, I disappeared about the time I was to inherit a large sum. But there was nothing criminal in it, and I wasn’t kidnaped as some thought. All my life I have wanted to be the owner of a big farm estate, ever since I used to go to my grandfather’s farm when I was a boy. I knew I could inherit the farm all right, but I wanted to know something about running one, especially an orchard, since I hope to raise fancy apples.

“I figured that the best way to learn from the ground up, so to speak, would be to get a job on a farm or an orchard. I knew I couldn’t do it under my own name. I’d have a lot of tabloid paper reporters after me—a millionaire apple grower and such rot. So I just quietly disappeared, as I knew those in charge of the estate I was to inherit would object, and I roved around. I finally landed here, and I may say I like the place very much.” He smiled frankly at the three attractive girls. “I liked everything about it but the ram. But now the time has come to end the masquerade. I’ve learned what I wanted to learn. Old Anson is a good teacher, if he isn’t all he should be in other ways. He taught me many secrets of the soil.”

“Why did you happen to come to Cedar Ridge?” asked Arden. [233]
“The poster said you might be found around here.”

“I know it did. I ran a risk in coming here. But I didn’t just happen to. You see, my grandfather and Rev. Dr. Bordmust are old college chums. I had that in mind when I came to this college farm as assistant gardener. In case of accident I wanted someone who knew me to know where I was. So I told my story to your chaplain, swore him to secrecy, though much against his will, and then I just let matters drift along.

“More than once Dr. Bordmust urged me to give up what he called my mad scheme, and he half threatened to disclose everything. But I prevailed on him to wait just a little longer. But finally, one night just before he was hurt by the ram, he came to see me in my garden residence and said he would keep silent no longer. Then, as I had gotten all I wanted to in the way of apple knowledge, I agreed to do the disclosing myself. This made Dr. Bordmust easier in his mind. It was when he was going home through the orchard, after leaving me, that he was attacked. I can’t tell you how badly I felt over it.”

“Yes, it was too bad,” agreed Arden, still gasping with astonishment.

“Say,” broke in Sim, “was it you who rang the alarm bell?”

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Harry Pangborn smiled again and said:

“No! It was Anson who did it.”

“Anson!” chorused the surprised three.

“Yes. I am on my way to the dean now, before I go to town, to tell her she had better get rid of her gardener. I can do it freely, as it can be proved I have no ulterior motive since I am giving up my place. But old Anson is a man with a warped mind and a queer sense of humor.”

“Why did he ring the bell?” asked Terry.

“And how?” asked Arden.

“He reached up with a long-handled rake and tangled the teeth in the rope,” said Mr. Pangborn. “That was his method. As for his reason, well, it may have been one of several.

“But slyly ringing the alarm bell with the rake and then running away wasn’t all of his peculiar sport,” went on Mr. Pangborn.

“What else did he do?” asked Terry.

“Once I caught him perched up on the ledge of one of the high gymnasium windows, peering in. He jumped down and ran away as I came along the walk, but I had a chance to see him, and also to note that he was wearing some kind of a mask, that of an evil old man.”

“Oh!” gasped Sim. “The face you saw at the dance, Arden!”

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“Yes, it must have been,” Arden agreed.

“Oh, then you saw that trick?” asked Mr. Pangborn.

“I just had a glimpse of a face at the window,” Arden answered. “Then the bell rang, and we all hurried out to try to solve the mystery.”

“Yes, that was the night,” young Mr. Pangborn agreed.

“But what could he hope to gain by such a trick?” asked Arden. “He really didn’t frighten me.”

“I think that was to have been the start of a campaign on his part for a certain purpose,” the late Tom Scott answered. “He probably thought the girls would report to the dean about a strange face peering in at them out of the night. Then Anson, very likely, might have offered to drive the Peeping Tom away, which he could easily do by just ceasing his own antics. In this way he would be commended, I think he expected.”

“How strange!” murmured Sim.

“He must be crazy!” echoed Terry.

“Do you think,” asked Arden, “that he may have done it all as a joke? Perhaps he was joking the time he threatened Terry and me.”

Mr. Pangborn indicated his disbelief in the joke theory by shaking his head. Then he added:

“He may have had very queer ideas as to what was a joke, but I really think he was building up a case for himself.” [236]

“A case for himself?” asked Terry.

“Yes. When he had rung the bell enough times and it had become a sort of terrifying mystery, I think he intended to have it solved in a way that would not implicate him and so gain credit and perhaps a raise in wages. That’s only a theory, but it may be true. One night I spied on him, discovered his trick, and was preparing to denounce him when the chaplain forced me to give up my masquerade. So it’s all over, and you are the first, outside of Dr. Bordmust, who knows my secret. And I suppose you won’t keep it long?”

“We just can’t!” said Arden. “As soon as I saw you coming along just now I knew you were the man of the poster. I half recognized you before, but the mustache deceived me. I’ve done a lot of foolish things trying to remember the two faces—yours and the one on the poster.”

“Well, anyhow, Arden,” said Sim, “it was fun doing it.”

“Yes, it was,” Arden agreed. “But, Mr. Pangborn, will you let us notify the police or lawyers and claim the reward?”

“I would prefer to have you notify the lawyers,” he said genially.

“We don’t want the money for ourselves,” Terry made haste to explain. “We are going to give it to the dean to have the [237]

swimming pool repaired for Sim.”

“For Sim?”

“Yes,” exclaimed Arden, indicating the blushing Miss Westover. “She threatens to leave college because she can’t go in the pool.”

“Arden!” rebuked Sim.

“Then you will let us notify the lawyers that you are here?” persisted Arden.

“Please!” begged Terry in a way she had.

“Well,” he laughed, “I suppose I must. I guess my little adventure is over. Go on—tell on me!”

“How wonderful!” cried Arden, while Sim and Terry looked at each other happily.

“I had about made up my mind, Arden,” said Sim, “not to go home after all. Now, of course, I’ll stay, with the prospect of the pool. I’ll stay until I’m sent home.”

“That’s fine, Sim!” Arden declared. “Everything is coming out so beautifully!”

“We can have the pool fixed, Sim isn’t going to leave us, and the horrid old ram is caught,” murmured Terry.

“And the mystery of the bell is explained,” added Sim.

“Have you a piece of paper?” suddenly asked Mr. Pangborn after a vain search in his own pockets.

“We nearly always carry books and papers,” said Sim, “but this morning——” She looked helplessly at her chums.

“Here!” exclaimed Arden. “Use the back of this envelope. It’s the letter you gave me to keep, Sim. I was always afraid she’d mail it herself if I left it around,” she explained to Terry, “so I’ve been carrying it with me.”

She handed the crumpled envelope to the young man, who had managed to find a pencil, and he wrote on it quickly. He handed the envelope back to Arden.

“There,” he said. “That’s a telegram to my lawyers. Sign your name, send it, and the reward is yours.”

“You won’t run away meanwhile, will you?” asked Arden shyly.

“No, I’ll stay around or go and give myself up, as you direct—just so you’ll get the money.” He seemed happy to comply.

“Thanks, so much!” Arden said warmly. “Do you mind if we go send this telegram right away—before we have to report in class?”

“Run along,” he said, laughing. “I’ll go telephone my people and relieve their anxiety. Though I don’t really believe they were worried. I’ve traveled pretty much around the world alone and been out of touch with them for months at a time.”

“Good-bye!” chorused the three freshmen as they literally “ran along” to the main building to telegraph the surprising message to the lawyers named on the poster. Harry Pangborn, a quizzical smile on his face, watched them go.

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“Well, it was fun while it lasted,” he murmured as he swung on through the orchard. “And I think it did me good. Those are mighty pretty girls. I wouldn’t mind knowing them—after I come into my kingdom,” he chuckled. “Perhaps I may. Who knows?”

The girl at the college telephone switchboard was almost as excited as the breathless Arden, who asked to be connected with Western Union and then dictated the startling news of the missing heir.

“This will be something for the papers!” thought the telephone operator. And it was—later.

Terry and Sim waited impatiently outside the booth for Arden to emerge. Girls clustered around them, and many were the exclamations of wonder, delight, and surprise as the news was told.

“Now we must go inform the dean,” said Terry as she came out, flustered but triumphant.

On the way to Miss Anklon’s office the girls passed the college post boxes, where each girl had a niche of her own, with a dial lock, for incoming mail. Sim begged them to wait while she looked in her box. There was a letter slanting to one side.

“Oh, I have one!” Sim announced as she twirled the combination and took out the missive.

“Who’s it from?” asked Terry before Sim had half read it. But she was quick to answer:

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“It’s from Ed Anderson. He wants me to go to a dance during the Thanksgiving holidays. I didn’t think he’d ever speak to me again after the way I disappeared at the tea dance.”

At this news Arden and Terry decided to look in their boxes.

“You’re not so much!” Terry cried. “I have a letter myself. It’s from Dick Randall!”

“Me too!” announced Arden, succinctly if not grammatically.
“It’s from Jim Todd.”

“What fun!” exclaimed Sim. “And the holidays begin the end
of next week.”

CHAPTER XXVIII

A Disturbing Message

Hardly realizing the good fortune that had come to them so unexpectedly, and while they were rejoicing over their letters and the prospects of the Thanksgiving holidays, with dances in the offing, Arden, Terry, and Sim saw one of the college messengers making her way toward them through a throng of other students. For the messengers were young women who, like the waitresses, were working their way through Cedar Ridge by making themselves useful to the dean.

“I have a message for you,” said this girl, without smiling. She looked at Arden but included Sim and Terry.

“A message for me?” Arden exclaimed. Could the Pangborn lawyers have sent the reward money by telegraph already?

“Yes, you three young ladies must report to the dean at once.”

“Whew!” faintly whistled Sim.

“What’s the idea?” asked Terry.

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“I’m sure I don’t know,” answered the bearer of what was generally considered ill tidings. “But you had better see her at once.”

“Come on!” urged Arden. “Let’s get it over with. I had half a mind to go there, anyhow, and tell her the news.”

“Maybe she’s heard it already,” suggested Terry.

“More likely,” suggested Sim gloomily, “she’s heard we were trying to flirt with the good-looking assistant gardener and we’re going to be expelled. If she sends us home, Arden, don’t you give her a penny of that reward money!”

“No!” exclaimed Terry. “Not a cent!”

“Well,” said Arden doubtfully, “I don’t know——” and then she urged her two chums on toward the dean’s office while little groups of other girls, among which strange rumors were filtering, watched the three freshmen, with a variety of expressions.

“Come in,” greeted Miss Anklon as Arden knocked. And when Sim and Terry had filed in behind her it needed but one look at the smiling face of the dean to let them know they were meeting her on a different footing than ever before.

“For Tiddy was actually *grinning!*” Sim told some of her friends later.

“Please be seated, young ladies,” invited the dean, indicating chairs. “And, not to make them anxious seats for you, I may say that news of your good fortune has preceded you here. Mr. Pangborn has just left me and has told me all about it. I congratulate you, and I hope you will put the reward money to good use.”

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In a chorus Arden, Terry, and Sim breathed audibly in relief.

“And about the bell,” went on Miss Anklon. “I am sorry if, even remotely, I suspected you or any of the girls of that trick. I shall make a public announcement about it. Sufficient to say

now that I have dismissed Mr. Yaeger as gardener and we shall have a new one in a few days. I never realized what a strange mind he had until Mr. Scott—I should say Mr. Pangborn—enlightened me.”

Arden and her chums began wondering if this was all the dean had summoned them for—to congratulate them and inform them about old Anson. It was not in her nature to be thus trifling.

“This is not all that I asked you to come here for,” resumed the little dark-faced dean. “It was to warn you——” Her telephone rang, and she had to pause at a most critical point as she answered into the instrument, saying: “I am engaged now. Call me in five minutes.” Then to the waiting three: “I want to warn you not to talk too much about this matter for publication, for I realize that it must get into the papers and I desire no unseemly publicity for the college. Also, I wish to caution you about wildly spending that thousand dollars reward which, Mr. Pangborn informs me, will soon come to you. I wish——”

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“Oh, Miss Anklon!” Arden could not refrain from interrupting, though she arose and bowed formally as she did so. “Didn’t Mr. Pangborn tell you what we are going to do with the money as soon as we get it?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Wasn’t that nice of him?” whispered Sim to Terry. “He knew we would get a kick out of telling for ourselves.”

“Why, Miss Anklon,” went on Arden, “we have decided, we three, for Terry and Sim will share the reward with me, we have decided to donate it to the college.”

“To the college?” The dean plainly was startled.

“Yes. To repair the swimming pool.”

A momentous silence followed Arden’s dramatic announcement, and then the dean said, “Oh!” and “Ah!” and “Er!” She was plainly taken by surprise and was as near to being flustered as the girls had ever seen her. But she found her voice and usual poise in a moment and said, with as much warmth as she was capable of:

“Why, young ladies, this certainly is most generous of you. I cannot adequately thank you now. That will come later—more formally and publicly. But are you sure you want to do this?”

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“Oh, yes, Miss Anklon!” answered Sim and Terry together.

“We decided that long ago,” added Arden.

“Well, it is indeed fine of you,” Miss Anklon said, fussing with the papers on her desk and not looking at the girls. “You have shown a very laudable college spirit.” The three freshmen smiled a little weakly and shifted about. “I can be generous, also, young ladies!” the dean remarked more firmly as she looked at them again. “I think your gift deserves some immediate recognition. That is—suppose we forget all about your being campused?” she asked, and smiled disarmingly.

“Oh!” murmured Arden and her chums. For they had felt hampered by the campus rule even though they had not strictly kept it. Then Arden added:

“Thank you ever so much! We appreciate it ever so much!” And she told herself: “Hang it, I meant to say ‘greatly’ in that second sentence.” But the dean smiled again, held up a restraining hand as Terry and Sim evinced indications of opening up a barrage of thanks, and with a dismissing gesture said:

“I suppose you will want to tell all your friends the good news. You may go now, and—I hope you enjoy yourselves!”

“Really, she’s human after all!” murmured Sim as the three hurried down the hall to find anxious girls awaiting them.

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Then such talk as buzzed in Cedar Ridge was never known before! Arden, Terry, and Sim were overwhelmed with questions, and their room resembled Times Square at a subway rush hour.

“This rates another pantry raid!” declared Toots Everett who, with other sophomores, came in to congratulate the three.

That second pantry raid was much more successful than the first, which had, however, ushered in the solution of the orchard secret and the ending of the peril beneath the gnarled trees.

“Well, here’s to our holidays!” exclaimed Arden at the midnight feast, drinking from a glass of milk in one hand. The other held a piece of pie.

“Long may they wave!” chanted Sim.

“Pass me some chicken,” mumbled Terry.

A week later, after many crowded hours, and perhaps it may be said after as minimum an amount of study as was ever noted in Cedar Ridge, Arden and her friends were waiting on the station platform at Morrisville for the train that was to take them home for the Thanksgiving recess.

Jerry Cronin, the taxi-man who had first driven the three to the college, was sauntering around waiting for a fare. He smiled at the girls, and they nodded. They knew him better now, for they had frequently used his car.

“I guess you’re glad it’s all over,” he remarked, coming closer to where they stood and taking off his cap.

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“What?” asked Arden.

“That there orchard business. You know,” he was almost whispering now, “I couldn’t tell you about it at first. I dassn’t. But I warned you, didn’t I? Here’s how it happened. Now that old Yaeger is gone I can tell. I caught him up to some of his tricks once, making scares and all that. And once I saw him drive that old black ram into the orchard at night. I couldn’t figure out why, but now I know. That there young gardener told me. Yaeger was planning some credit for himself.

“Yep, I caught him at it, and when he saw I knew, he threatened that if I told he’d see that I didn’t get any more college taxi trade, so I had to keep still. But now I’m glad I can tell.”

“And we’re glad it’s over,” said Terry.

The girls resumed their own talk as the taxi-man walked away.

“Wasn’t it thrilling when Arden gave the dean the reward check!” Sim exclaimed, her arm through Terry’s.

“It certainly was! And wasn’t Harry Pangborn nice when he posed for those newspaper photographers?” Sim inquired.

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“Swell!” laughed Arden. “And the party the girls gave us last night in the gym—lovely! Everything has been just wonderful. I can hardly wait to get home to tell Mother and Dad all about it. I could write so little in my letters.”

“Don’t forget our dance Thanksgiving eve,” Sim reminded her chums.

“As if we’d forget—when those nice boys are coming!” exclaimed Arden. She turned to look at the college. The buildings were outlined by a glorious red sunset. “I can understand, now, how one becomes attached to one’s Alma Mater. Cedar Ridge *is* a dear old place,” she concluded.

“And to think,” murmured Sim, “I wanted to leave it!”

“Oh, well,” said Terry, “I can understand. I’d have done the same thing if I was as crazy as you are, Sim, about being an expert swimmer and diver. You couldn’t help it.”

The girls lapsed into silence and looked at the gray stone buildings standing so bravely in the gleam of the red sun. The chapel spire seemed to pierce the blue sky and the white clouds now beginning to be tinted with rainbow colors. Bordmust Hall seemed to peer shyly at the departing girls from its distant hill. In the window of his official manse, Dr. Bordmust, recovering from his injury, looked out of a window near which he was propped up and smiled.

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The girls waved friendly hands at him, and he waved in return.

“A jolly gentleman, after all,” commented Terry.

“We must call on him when we come back,” suggested Arden.

“I suppose we will be coming back,” murmured Sim.

“Of course!” exclaimed Arden. “We’re going to have a lot more adventures at Cedar Ridge.”

“But I doubt if any will be like the ones we’ve just finished,” laughed Terry.

That remains to be seen. And those who are curious to learn may do so in the next book of this Arden Blake mystery

series. It will be entitled *The Mystery of Jockey Hollow*.

The girls walked on.

“Look!” Sim suddenly exclaimed, pointing to the swimming pool soon to be repaired. Its windows were a glory of red and gold from the setting sun. “It’s doing its best to announce the fact that it will no longer be a despised vegetable cellar. Oh, girls, I’m so happy!”

“So say we all of us!” chanted Arden.

The puffing train came at last and stood at the station, panting for breath, it seemed, as if to get up courage to take away so many happy, laughing, chattering, and joy-bubbling students. As it pulled out of the station along a row of bare trees, the three freshmen of 513 had a glimpse of the stone deer of the campus looking at them with startled eyes.

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THE END



Transcriber's Note

- Silently corrected a few typographical errors (but left nonstandard spelling and dialect as is).
- Rearranged front matter to a more-logical order.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE ORCHARD
SECRET ***

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