

Penrose Margaret

**The Motor Girls in the
Mountains: or, The Gypsy Girl's
Secret**



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CHAPTER I BREAKING THE SPEED LIMIT

“Say, girls, isn’t this the best thing ever?”

Cora Kimball, the girl whose hand was on the wheel of the motor car as it sped swiftly along a sun-flecked country road, put the words in the form of a question, but they were really an exclamation drawn from her by sheer delight in living. She was gloriously indifferent as to an answer, but the answer came just the same from the two pretty girls who occupied the seat behind her.

“It’s perfectly grand!” cried Belle Robinson, the more slender of the two, as she snuggled down still more luxuriously in the soft cushions of the automobile.

“It seems to me yet as though it must be a dream,” declared her twin sister Bess, who was considerably larger than either of her companions. “Pinch me, somebody, so that I can be sure it’s real.”

Cora reached over mischievously and took her at her word.

Bess drew back with a little squeal.

“Ouch!” she exclaimed. “You took a piece out that time!”

“Well, what if I did?” laughed Cora. “You can spare a little without missing it.”

“You ought to be thankful to Cora for helping you to reduce,” put in her sister slyly.

Bess flushed a trifle, for her “plumpness” – she abominated the word “stout” and avoided it as if it were the plague – was rather a tender point with her.

“I don’t care for such drastic methods,” she retorted. “I’d rather take the flesh off more gradually. Besides,” she added with a show of pride, “I’m going down quite fast enough as it is. I’m two pounds lighter than I was last week.”

“Swell chance you have of getting thinner when you will keep nibbling at chocolate creams,” remarked her sister unbelievably. “You might hand some over, you stingy thing, instead of keeping them all to yourself.”

“No such thing!” denied Bess, producing a small box. “They’re lemon drops, and everybody knows *they* don’t make you” – she was going to say “fat,” but checked herself just in time to substitute “plump.”

“Slip one into my mouth, Belle,” commanded Cora. “I don’t dare to take my hand from the wheel.”

“I noticed that you took it away fast enough when you wanted to pinch me,” remarked Bess.

“That was different,” returned Cora. “You asked me to, and I’d do a good deal to oblige a friend.”

“Heaven save me from my friends,” sighed Bess, and then they all laughed.

For laughter came easy on a day like this. The sun of early August was tempered by a light breeze that removed any suspicion of sultriness. The road was a good one, and Cora’s car under her expert guidance glided along with scarcely a jar. Great trees on either side provided a grateful shade. Squirrels scolded noisily in the branches, and here and there a chipmunk slipped like a shadow along the fences and the hum of the locusts filled the air with a dreamy harmony. A bobolink flitted across the road, dropping a whole sheaf of silver notes from his joyous throat. It was a day on which it was good to be alive.

“To think that we’re really on our way to the Adirondacks,” murmured Belle delightedly. “I’ve wanted to go there ever since I wore pigtails.”

“And to Camp Kill Kare,” said Bess. “The very name seems to promise all kinds of fun.”

“Doesn’t it?” agreed Cora. “And how much more fun it is to go this way than in stuffy old railway cars.”

“Are you sure we can get there by to-morrow night?” asked Belle.

“We can if nothing happens to the car,” answered Cora. “It’s in splendid shape now, and we’re fairly eating up the miles. Of course, if it rains and the roads get muddy it may take us a little longer. But after all the rain we had last week, I guess we can be sure of good weather. There isn’t a cloud in the sky now.”

“Did you finally decide to stay at your Aunt Margaret’s house to-night?” asked Bess.

“Yes,” replied Cora. “Isn’t it lucky that her home is just about half-way on our trip? If it hadn’t been for that, we’d have had to bring a chaperon along with us, and that would have been a nuisance. I suppose they are a necessary evil, but I’m awfully glad when we get a chance to do without one.”

“I suppose your Aunt Betty will be at Kill Kare when we get there,” remarked Belle.

“She’s already there,” answered Cora. “We got a letter from her yesterday, saying that everything was all ready for us and that she was just dying to see us. And with Aunt Betty in mind, I’ll take back what I said about chaperons. She’s a perfect dear, and I’m sure you girls will fall dead in love with her.”

“I’ve no doubt we shall,” answered Bess. “I’m prepared to love her just from your description. But say, girls,” she continued, glancing at her wrist watch, “do you know that it’s after twelve o’clock? Don’t you think we’d better be looking about for some place to stop to get lunch?”

“Hear that girl talk!” mocked Cora. “And she’s the one that’s always talking about reducing!”

“Oh, that this too, too solid flesh might melt,” quoted Belle.

“If the truth were known, I’ll wager I don’t eat as much as either of you two,” retorted Bess. “I had only a cup of coffee and two rolls this morning.”

“You had more than two rolls,” declared Belle, “I counted them and there were at least ten.”

“What do you mean, Belle Robinson?” asked Bess, turning to her sister in bewilderment.

“Rolls on the floor, I mean,” explained Belle, “when you were going through your reducing exercises.”

Bess turned her eyes to heaven in mute appeal.

“My own sister giving me away!” she moaned. “Well, our relatives are wished on us, but thank goodness I can choose my friends.”

“Stop your scrapping, girls,” interposed Cora, “and listen to me. There isn’t any hotel in sight, and even if there were, who wants to go indoors on a day like this? Mary put up a splendid lunch before we started. What’s the matter with dining *al fresco*?”

“Listen to the girl!” exclaimed Belle. “What does she mean by that?”

“Sounds to me like a sleight of hand performer,” murmured Bess.

“You’re thinking of ‘presto change,’” laughed Cora. “No, my benighted sisters. To put the thing in terms that your limited intelligence can grasp, I meant that we would eat in the open air.”

“Good!” exclaimed Belle.

“Right here in the car?” asked Bess.

“Why, we could,” answered Cora; “but don’t you think it would be better yet to find some nice little place by the side of the road? I’m a little cramped from sitting so long, and I suppose you are too. It will do us good to have a change.”

“Let’s choose some place where there’s a brook or a spring,” suggested Bess. “I’m dreadfully thirsty.”

“Been eating too many lemon drops,” said Belle.

“No more than you,” retorted Bess.

“No. But, gracious, that’s too many,” sighed her sister. “Less candy and more sandwiches for me when we are in the open air like this! Come, where’s that brook?”

“I’ve no doubt we can find such a place,” observed Cora, as she put a little extra speed in the car. “You girls keep your eyes open and tell me when to stop. I’ve got all I can do to watch the road and save some dog or chicken from untimely death.”

Not many minutes had elapsed before Belle reached over and touched Cora’s arm.

“The very spot!” she exclaimed. “There’s a brook and some trees that were just intended for a picnic party.”

Cora guided the car to the side of the road. The girls got out and stretched their cramped limbs with a sigh of relief. The lunch basket was taken from beneath the seat and carried to a cool and shady spot beneath a clump of great trees that stood a few feet away from the road. From a brook that rippled over the stones with a musical murmur, they brought a supply of water. A robe from the car was spread out on the grass, and napkins from the basket served as miniature tablecloths.

Then Mary’s offerings were brought to light, and amply maintained that person’s reputation for culinary skill. Lettuce sandwiches, hard-boiled eggs, fried chicken legs, lemon tarts and fruit followed each other in rapid succession. Then, too, there was a thermos bottle filled with hot, fragrant coffee.

Their morning in the open air had sharpened the appetites of the girls, and they ate with a zest that would have made a dyspeptic turn green with envy. Bess, to be sure, tried feebly to bear in mind her rules for dieting, but the temptation was too great, and for that once anyway her good resolutions went by the board.

“I could die happy now,” she murmured, between bites of a lemon tart.

“You will die anyway if you eat much more,” said her sister severely. “Bess Robinson, I’m ashamed of you.”

“You’ll have to take twenty rolls to-morrow instead of ten, to make up for this,” laughed Cora.

“To-morrow’s a new day,” replied Bess mutinously. “Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.”

“She’s a hopeless case, I’m afraid,” sighed Belle. “But come along now, girls, and gather up these things. We want to get to the house of Cora’s aunt before it gets dark.”

“Behold a stranger cometh,” remarked Cora, as a horse and buggy came in sight, with a young man holding the reins.

The vehicle approached rapidly, and the eyes of the driver lighted up as he caught sight of the three girls. Instead of driving by, he reined up at the roadside and jumping from the buggy made his way toward the little party.

He was of medium height, flashily dressed, and had a weak, dissipated-looking face. The girls had risen to their feet and drawn a little closer together as he approached.

He took off his hat and bowed, with a smile that he tried to make ingratiating.

“I see I’m in luck,” he remarked. “Just in time to have a bite of lunch, if there’s any left.”

Cora, to whom the other girls looked for leadership, froze him with a glance.

“If you’re hungry, you can probably get something to eat at the next town,” she said. “We haven’t anything for tramps.”

The man flushed uncomfortably, and his impudent assurance went down several degrees beneath her stare.

“What’s the use of being so stiff?” he expostulated. “I’m only trying to be friendly.”

“That’s just what we object to,” replied Cora. “We don’t want your friendship. My brother will be along shortly, and perhaps he will appreciate it more than we do.”

The young man cast a hurried glance up and down the road. It was evident that, however strong his craving for feminine society, he had no desire to meet the brother.

“Oh, well,” he muttered, as he made his way toward the buggy, “you needn’t be so quick to take offence. There are plenty of girls who would be glad of my company.”

And with this, that was meant to be a Parthian shot, but that only provoked a nervous desire to laugh on the part of the girls, he gathered up the reins and drove off.

They saw him go with immense relief, for there was no other man in sight, and his impudence had alarmed as well as offended them.

“Well, of all the nerve!” ejaculated Belle.

“You certainly can freeze when you want to, Cora,” laughed Bess.

“How lucky it was that you thought of Jack,” said Belle. “Did you see the frightened look that came into his eyes?”

“That sort of man always is a coward,” replied Cora. “Perhaps he won’t be so free and easy when he meets girls alone again. But let’s get busy now and hustle these things back into the car.”

They soon had the thermos bottle and the depleted lunch basket tucked snugly away. The twins settled down in the rear seat, Cora threw in the clutch, and the car started.

They had gone perhaps a mile, when they descried a car coming at a rapid rate from the opposite direction.

“That man seems to be trying to break the speed limit,” remarked Cora, as she drove her own car close to the right-hand side of the road so as to give plenty of room.

“Like Jehu, the son of Nimshi, he driveth furiously,” observed Belle.

Just then the gate of a near-by farmhouse was pushed open, and a little child about three years old toddled out into the road, right in the path of the onrushing car.

A shriek went up from the girls.

“Oh, girls,” screamed Bess, rising from her seat, “that child will be killed!”

CHAPTER II

QUICK THINKING

For one tense moment it seemed as though nothing could avert a terrible tragedy.

A woman burst out of the house and ran screaming toward her child. But it was clearly impossible for her to reach the little one in time to save it.

The child, startled by the screams, stood helplessly right in the path of the Juggernaut that seemed doomed to crush it.

The driver of the car had seen the danger, and he instantly threw out the clutch and put on the brakes. But he was too near to stop in time.

There was only one thing to do, and, like a gallant man, he did it. He whirled the wheel around, and the car, its speed diminished but still considerable, dashed into a tree by the side of the road. The driver, an elderly man, was thrown out and lay stunned and bleeding.

The mother rushed to the little one and gathered it up into her arms with sobs and exclamations.

The girls, who had been unable to move and had sat paralyzed with horror, breathed a huge sigh of relief.

“Thank God, the baby’s saved!” cried Bess.

“Yes,” exclaimed Cora, “but the man may be killed! Let’s see what we can do to help him.”

The three girls jumped from the car and rushed over to the injured man.

While the girls are giving first aid to the man, and the mother is crying and crooning over her child, it may be well for the sake of those who have not followed our Motor Girls in their previous adventures to state a little more fully just who they were and what they had been doing up to the time this story opens.

Cora Kimball and her brother Jack – the same Jack who had been brought in so handily in their encounter with the impudent young man – were the children of a wealthy widow living in Chelton, a New England village located not very far from the New York line. They were both healthy, normal, wideawake young people, and took vast delight in motoring. Either in a motor car or a motor boat they were equally happy and equally at home; and Cora was quite as expert in managing them as her brother.

Cora’s special chums were Belle and Bess Robinson, twin daughters of Mr. and Mrs. Perry Robinson, the former a well-to-do railroad man, living in the same town as the Kimballs. Belle, as we have seen, was tall and slender – “*svelte*” was the way she liked to put it. And Bess – well, Bess was “plump,” but a very pretty and charming girl nevertheless. Of the three girls, Cora was the natural leader, and the trio were almost inseparable.

Jack Kimball, Cora’s brother, was a manly, likable chap and devotedly attached to his sister, although at times he liked to “lord it” over her with truly masculine complacency. He was a student at Exmouth College, and his most intimate friend was Walter Pennington, who spent most of his vacations and whatever other spare time he had at the Kimball home. Perhaps Jack’s charming sister was the special magnet that drew Walter there so often – But there, it isn’t fair to delve too curiously into matters of that kind.

Paul Hastings, who had a position in an automobile concern, was a close friend of Jack and Walter, and the girls too liked him very much.

The love of motoring that all six, boys and girls alike, shared in common had led to many trips to various parts of the country, in the course of which they had met with many surprising and sometimes thrilling adventures. Both Cora and the Robinson twins had cars of their own, but as Cora seemed to take the lead in everything, most of the tours were taken in her car.

Their trips took them at one time or another to almost every section of the interior and the coast. At Lookout Beach, through New England, on Cedar Lake, at Crystal Bay, on the coast, even as far as the West Indies, all that happened to them on these expeditions, and it was much, is told in the previous volumes of the series.

In the volume immediately preceding this one, called "The Motor Girls at Camp Surprise," a number of very strange happenings are recorded. To begin with, Cora's car was stolen and she was almost inconsolable, for though her mother would have bought her one to replace it, she had an affectionate attachment for the old one that had so many happy memories connected with it. They found no real track of the thieves until, when they were spending the early part of the summer at Camp Surprise, they came across a gang of ticket counterfeiterers, who had set up their plant in an underground passage leading from the very house where the girls were staying.

And now, as the reader has seen, the girls were on their way to spend the late summer in the heart of the Adirondacks. And right at the outset they had been witnesses of what was so nearly a tragedy that for the moment their hearts had stood still.

All alert, now that their terror for the child's safety was dispelled, the girls hurried over to the driver, who still lay stretched out in the road. As they approached he opened his eyes and looked about him in a dazed way.

"The child," he murmured, as he brushed his hand over his forehead. "Is it safe?"

"It's all right," replied Cora cheerily, immensely relieved to find that the driver was not dead, as she had feared. "But don't try to talk now until you feel a little stronger."

She knelt down and took his head upon her knee.

"Run to the house, girls, and get some water," she commanded, taking charge of things, as she always did in a crisis.

The farmer's wife, who had now got back some of her self-control, led the way into the house, and in a moment the girls were back with plenty of cool water and some linen. Cora washed a cut in the man's head, deftly tied a bandage around it, and put some water to his lips, which he drank eagerly.

The cut was not a serious one, and the farmer, who had joined the group, announced after a brief examination that no bones seemed to be broken. He was urgent that the man should be taken into the house and a doctor sent for, but the injured man, who was getting stronger by the minute and seemed to have a very determined will of his own, vetoed this emphatically.

"There's nothing the matter with me except for the shock and a few bruises," he declared. "I'll be as well as ever as soon as this dizziness passes away."

He proved himself a true prophet, for at the end of ten minutes he was on his feet and looking ruefully at his car.

"Pretty much of a wreck, I imagine," he remarked with a twisted smile, as he walked around it and took stock of the damage.

The girls joined in the inspection, and as they knew as much about automobiles as the man himself, they satisfied themselves that he had not exaggerated much in describing it as a "wreck." The wheels and part of the body were intact, but the machinery was badly knocked out of gear. It was clear that it would not be able to go under its own power.

"There's a garage a few miles further on," the stranger remarked. "I'll have to leave word there and have them come back to get it."

"No need of doing that," volunteered Cora. "We're going in that direction, and we'll be glad to tow you there."

The man hesitated.

"It's very good of you," he replied, "but I'm afraid I've taxed your kindness too far already."

"It won't be any trouble at all," returned Cora cordially. "You can sit in the front seat with me, and as my car is a powerful one we'll be able to tow yours easily."

He demurred a little longer, but finally accepted the offer with hearty thanks. The farmer brought out a rope, and with the aid of a couple of farm hands got the wrecked machine out in the road. Then the two cars were connected and the girls started off, with a parting wave of the hand and a smile directed especially to the little toddler, who was held tightly in the mother's arm.

"That child won't be allowed to go out of the gate alone again in a hurry, I guess," laughed Belle.

"It wasn't the child's fault," remarked the stranger. "I was going altogether too fast. If I'd been moving at a moderate rate I could have stopped in plenty of time. Fact is, I was thinking of something else – none too pleasant thoughts they were either – and I didn't realize just how fast I was going."

"You were very lucky to get off as well as you did, Mr. –" Cora hesitated inquiringly.

"Morley," supplemented the stranger. "Bless my heart, here I am accepting all this service from you young ladies and forgetting to introduce myself. Samuel Morley is my name, and I live in the town of Saxton, about twenty miles from here. Yes, as you were saying, I was very lucky to get off as well as I did – a good deal luckier than I deserved. Though perhaps it would have been just as well if I had been killed after all."

He brought out the last sentence so savagely that the girls were startled.

"You mustn't mind what I say," he said apologetically, as he noted the look on their faces. "I'm just a crabbed old stick anyway. If I hadn't been that, I wouldn't have so many painful memories now. Sometimes they come crowding in upon me until it seems as though I couldn't stand them. But I wouldn't want to say anything that would shadow the faces of young girls. There was a young girl once –"

He caught himself up sharply.

"But here I am doing all the talking," he said. "That's a sign I'm getting old. Now suppose you girls turn the tables. Tell me all about yourselves and where you are going."

The conversation became general then, and from that time on he carefully refrained from saying anything bearing on himself, although the girls, who scented a romance or a tragedy somewhere, would gladly have forborne their own talk in order to hear more of his story.

"There's the garage over there," he said, as they drew near the outskirts of a town, pointing to a low building on the right.

Cora drove her car close in and the keeper of the garage came out and unfastened the rope that bound the two machines.

"I can't thank you young ladies enough," Mr. Morley said gratefully, as he shook hands with them. "I only hope the time will come when I can repay the favor."

"Are you feeling all right now?" asked Cora, as she got ready to throw in the clutch.

"Nothing worse than a headache. You're a first-class doctor," he replied with a twinkle in his eye.

Cora laughed.

"Don't tell any one," she admonished. "It might get me into trouble. You know, I haven't a license to practise in this state."

CHAPTER III

THE MISSING PURSE

“What queer things that man said about himself,” remarked Belle, as she settled back in her seat.

“I was wild to have him go on,” replied her sister. “I’m sure he’s got a romance or a mystery of some kind in his life.”

“Did you see how suddenly he checked himself when he started to talk about that girl?” asked Cora.

“Perhaps it was some girl whom he intended to marry,” said Bess, who had a strong vein of sentiment in her composition.

“Well, we’ll never get a chance to know,” observed Belle. “We’ve probably seen Mr. Samuel Morley for the first and last time.”

“I don’t know about that,” rejoined Cora. “I have a sort of feeling that we’ll run across him again.”

“Listen to the seventh daughter of a seventh daughter,” mocked Belle.

“Sybilla, the reader of the mystic sphere, the gazer into the crystal globe!” gibed Bess.

“I’m no prophetess,” disclaimed Cora. “I just have a feeling that way. Perhaps I’ll have the laugh on you scoffers yet.”

“We’re willing to wait,” returned Belle. “Just now it’s the present more than the future that I’m worrying about. That Good Samaritan act of ours has taken up a good deal of time. And you know that we planned to stop in that department store when we get to Roxbury and buy some of the things we came away without in our hurry this morning. I’ve simply got to have that chiffon.”

“And I need a new box of powder,” put in Bess. “My old one is nearly empty.”

“Such victims of the vanity of this world,” sighed Cora. “But don’t worry, girls. I’ll throw in a little extra speed and you’ll hear the car fairly purr.”

“Not too fast,” cautioned Belle. “After what we saw to-day in the way of fast driving, I’m willing to go a little slower.”

“I’ll be careful,” promised Cora; “but all the same we can afford to go a good deal faster than we are moving now.”

She threw in more speed, and the gallant car responded at once with scarcely an added vibration. In a short time Roxbury was in sight, and turning into one of the main streets, they drew up before the doors of the leading store of the town.

They went at once to the veiling department, where Belle purchased her chiffon. That and the powder that Bess secured in the drug department completed all the buying that they had intended to do. But they were true daughters of Eve, and so many things met their eyes that they were sure they simply could not do without, that before they knew it they had bought quite extensively.

They were standing at one of the counters, waiting for their change, which seemed an unconscionable time in coming.

“Even Job would have lost patience if there had been department stores in his day,” remarked Belle.

“But there *were* department stores then,” replied Cora.

“What do you mean?” asked Bess.

“There must have been,” said Cora. “Don’t you remember where Job says: ‘All the days of my life will I wait till my change come?’”

The girls laughed, but the laugh quickly faded when Cora gave a startled exclamation:

“Oh, girls, I’ve lost my purse!”

“You don’t mean it!” cried Belle.

“Are you sure?” asked Bess.

“I had it in my hand just a minute ago,” replied Cora in much agitation. “I took that ten dollar bill out of it that they’re making change for now. I must have laid it down for a minute, and now it’s gone.”

There were a number of bolts of cloth on the counter near which the girls were standing, and they made a hurried search among them without result.

“And I had nearly a hundred dollars in it,” mourned Cora. “Will you please help me look for my purse?” she asked of the man behind the counter, who had been standing with his back toward them, busily packing pieces of cloth on the shelves.

He turned toward them, rather reluctantly the girls thought, and they were startled to find themselves looking into the eyes of the young man who had annoyed them while they were lunching at the roadside.

A flush suffused his face as the girls looked at him coldly.

“What can I do for you, ladies?” he asked, in an obsequious tone that was in strong contrast with the impudent one he had used a few hours before.

“I’ve lost my purse about here somewhere,” said Cora, “and as it had a considerable sum of money in it I am very anxious to have it found.”

He was profuse in his expressions of regret, and began with apparent eagerness to turn over all the goods on the counter, while the girls watched anxiously. But there was no sign of the purse to be seen.

Just then the manager of the store came along, an alert, keen-eyed man, and seeing the little commotion about the counter, asked courteously if he could be of any assistance.

He listened carefully to what Cora had to say.

“It’s singular,” he said. “There doesn’t seem from what you say to have been anybody standing close by within the last few minutes. Are you quite sure that you had the purse when you came to this counter?”

“Positive,” replied Cora. “I haven’t moved from here since I took the bill out of the purse to pay for the goods I bought.”

“Have you made a careful search, Higby?” asked the manager, fixing his sharp eyes upon the clerk as though he would read him through and through.

“Yes, sir,” replied Higby; “but I’ll go through the goods again to make sure.”

He tossed the bolts of cloth about vigorously, and after a moment gave an exclamation of triumph.

“Here it is!” he cried. “Is this your purse, miss?” he asked, holding the article out to Cora.

The latter pounced upon it with a little squeal of delight.

“Oh, yes, that’s it!” she exclaimed. “Thank you ever so much.”

“You would better look over the money to make sure it is all there,” suggested the manager.

Cora ran hastily over the roll of bills.

“It’s all right,” she announced in a tone of relief.

The manager expressed his gratification at its recovery, coupled with an expression of regret at the annoyance she had suffered, and the missing change having come by this time, the girls hurriedly gathered their purchases together and left the store.

“You lucky girl!” exclaimed Belle, as Cora started the car.

“Luckier than I deserve,” laughed Cora happily. “It was awfully careless of me to let the purse out of my hand for a second. It would have served me right if I had lost it.”

“Do you think you really lost it?” asked Belle significantly.

The girls looked at each other, and it was evident that the same thought was shared by all.

“Perhaps it seems mean to say it,” remarked Cora slowly, “but since you ask me, I must say that the whole thing looks queer. There was the way he kept his back to us when we were looking for it on our own account. But I don’t lay so much weight on that, because he might have recognized us and felt a little sheepish after the way we took him down this afternoon. But why couldn’t he have found it before the manager came along, and why did he find it so promptly when the manager was standing there watching him? Of course, it might have been mixed up in the folds of the cloth the first time, and dropped out when he went over the goods again the second time. I suppose anyway we ought to give him the benefit of the doubt.”

“He doesn’t get the benefit of the doubt from me,” said Bess in so emphatic a manner that the others, accustomed to her easy-going ways, looked at her in astonishment.

“You hard-hearted thing!” exclaimed her sister.

“What do you mean?” asked Cora.

“Listen, my children, and you shall hear,” began Bess in her best manner. “I kept my eye on that young gentleman – ”

“The Gorgon stare,” murmured her sister.

“When he was turning those bolts of cloth the second time,” went on Bess, disdaining to dignify the interruption by noticing it, “and while he was fumbling them with one hand, I saw him bring up the purse from beneath the counter with the other hand and slip it under the cloth. Then, before I could say anything, he called out that he had found it. I could have shaken you when you thanked him so sweetly, Cora Kimball.”

The girls looked at each other aghast.

“Did you ever?” gasped Belle.

“He ought to be exposed!” exclaimed Cora indignantly.

“I suppose he ought,” agreed Bess placidly. “But after all, the proof wouldn’t be strong enough. It would be simply my word against his, and he’d swear black and blue that I was mistaken. We’d only get mixed up in an ugly mess, and nothing would come of it after all. I fancy that that young man will get to the end of his rope soon enough without our having anything to do with it. Thank your lucky stars, Cora, that you’ve got your money back, and let it go at that.”

“To think of Bess playing sleuth and tracking crime to its lair!” cried Belle. “I didn’t think she had it in her.”

“Oh, I’m some little bright-eyes, if you ask me,” remarked Bess complacently, as she reached out for the last of the lemon drops.

“We’ll have to work this up into amateur theatricals when the boys join us,” laughed Cora.

“Yes,” agreed Belle, “we’ll stage a one-act play and call it: ‘The Greed of Gold; or, Bess Robinson, the Girl Detective.’”

CHAPTER IV

THE STERNER SEX

“Talking of the boys – ” began Bess.

“Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth speaketh,” drawled her sister.

Bess flushed.

“You think of them just as much as I do, Belle Robinson, and perhaps more!” she countered. “But what I was going to say when I was so rudely interrupted was to wonder when they were ever going to catch up with us.”

“Jack said they’d surely overtake us before night,” replied Cora. “Walter and he were all ready, but Paul had had some things to wind up for his firm before he started in on his vacation. He had telegraphed, though, that he would be in Chelton before noon, and Jack said he’d show us just how fast that car of his could travel. He’s awfully proud of that car, but between us, girls, I don’t think he has anything on this car of mine in the matter of speed,” and she patted the wheel affectionately.

“Let’s hope they don’t get arrested for speeding,” said Belle.

“Or run over any babies,” put in Bess, with a lively recollection of the thrilling episode of the afternoon.

“I guess there’s no danger of that,” said Cora. “Jack’s keen on speed, but he’s a careful driver for all that. I tell you what we’ll do, girls. You keep a sharp lookout in the rear, for they may come into sight at any minute now, and the minute you see them coming you let me know. Then I’ll let out a little and we’ll try to tease them by keeping just far enough ahead of them to drive them crazy.”

“That’ll be dandy!” said Belle eagerly. “It’ll do them good to take some of the conceit out of them. I suppose they think we’ve been pining to have them with us.”

“Well, haven’t you?” asked Bess mischievously.

“No, I haven’t,” declared Belle, but in a tone that somehow failed to carry conviction.

“That looks like their car now!” cried Bess excitedly, as she caught a glimpse of an automobile that had just swung around a curve in the road about half a mile in the rear.

Belle craned her neck in the same direction.

“I guess it is,” she confirmed. “I can make out three people in it, but they’re too far away to see their faces.”

“We’ll let them get a little nearer so we can make sure,” said Cora, settling herself in her seat and taking a tighter grasp on the wheel, “and then we’ll let them take our dust and see how they like it.”

Belle knelt upon the seat to get a better view.

“Sister Anne, Sister Anne, do you see a man?” chanted Bess.

“Three of them,” replied Belle, “and they’re coming like all possessed. I’m almost sure it’s Jack that’s driving. There, one of them has taken out a handkerchief and is waving it!”

“It’s them,” pronounced Belle a moment later, forgetting her grammar in her excitement, and scrambling back into her seat again. “Now, Cora, it’s up to you to show them what the Motor Girls can do.”

“See that your hats are on tight, girls,” laughed Cora. “We’re going to stir up some little breeze.”

They had a long stretch of road in front of them at the time, with no house or vehicle in sight. The conditions could not have been better for a race, and Cora increased her speed gradually until the car was going like the wind.

The car behind had taken up the challenge at once and was also coming along at a tremendous rate. But Belle, venturing sundry peeks behind, announced gleefully that it was not gaining an inch.

“But that isn’t enough,” Cora flung back. “We want to make them actually drop farther behind. When we’ve once done that I’ll be satisfied. Then we’ll slow up and let them catch up to us.”

Two minutes later, Belle clapped her hands in delight.

"We've done it! We've done it!" she cried. "They're a quarter of a mile farther back than they were when we started in."

"Oh, how we'll rub it into them!" gurgled Bess.

"Well, enough is as good as a feast," laughed Cora, in great satisfaction. "Now we'll give the lords of creation a chance to explain how they came to let mere girls run away from them."

"It will take some explanation," remarked Belle.

"They're great little explainers, though," said Bess. "They'd rather die than admit we had the faster car."

Cora gradually slackened speed until the car, while still running swiftly, had reached a more reasonable rate. Belle's glances behind told her that their pursuers were overtaking them by leaps and bounds.

A moment later there was a wild chorus of shouts, and Jack's car drew up alongside. His two friends, Walter Pennington and Paul Hastings, were with him, both tall, athletic young fellows, with frank, pleasant faces.

The girls looked up with well simulated surprise, and pleasure that was not at all simulated.

"Why, it's the boys!" they cried in chorus.

Both cars had by this time come to a full stop, and the masculine contingent, deserting theirs, came round to the girls' car to greet them and to shake hands. Jack went further and gave his sister a hearty kiss, a proceeding which brought a look of envy to the faces of his companions.

"Where in the world have you slowpokes been?" asked Belle.

"Not much of a compliment, keeping away from us so long," pouted Bess in a way to show a most bewitching dimple.

"I guess they've been glad enough to be rid of us for a while," chimed in Cora.

Looks full of reproach and denial greeted this onslaught.

"That's pretty good!" remarked Paul.

"Rich!" assented Walter.

"Just as if we hadn't been breaking speed laws all day long in order to overtake you," mourned Jack.

"What's the use of living when you're so misunderstood?" groaned Walter.

"After all the ice-creams and sodas we've blown in on these girls, too!" wailed Paul.

"Let's find a hole somewhere and crawl away and die," suggested Jack.

"It seems to me that the shoe's on the other foot anyway," said Walter, becoming accuser in his turn. "It's you who didn't want us. Who was it just now that was trying to run away from us?"

"Run away from you?" repeated Cora innocently. "What do you mean by that?"

"You know perfectly well, you little minx," said her brother with mock sternness. "There we were, waving handkerchiefs at you and hustling the old machine along to beat the band. I know you saw us, for one of you was looking back."

"I did see some one waving a handkerchief," admitted Belle. "But it looked as though some ill-bred person was trying to flirt with us, and of course we didn't pay the least attention."

"No," said Bess primly, "we'd die before we'd flirt."

"If we'd wanted to flirt we had a perfectly good chance to-day while we were eating lunch," said Cora. "He had a perfectly lovely necktie, too, a good deal brighter than any of yours."

Jack threw up his hands with a gesture of despair.

"No use, fellows!" he exclaimed. "You can't pin them down to anything."

"But what did you have to wave your handkerchief for anyway to make us stop?" asked Cora demurely. "All you had to do was to put on more speed and catch up to us. That car of yours is so fast, you know. At least that's what you've always said."

The boys looked at each other a little disconcertedly.

“W-well,” stammered Jack, “the oil – the sparking wasn’t working just right – ”

“Tell the truth, Jack,” spoke up Walter, with a fine assumption of candor. “The real reason, girls, was that we were afraid of bumping into you – ”

“And we didn’t want to spill you all over the road,” finished Paul.

A groan went up from the girls.

“Oh, Ananias!” exclaimed Bess.

“Ananiases, you mean,” corrected her sister. “One’s just as bad as the others. They all hang together.”

“We’re like Ben Franklin when he signed the Declaration of Independence,” laughed Paul. “He said they’d all have to hang together or they’d hang separately.”

“I’ll admit that you have a good car, sis,” said Jack.

“And if that isn’t enough to take us back into favor, we’ll do anything else you say,” said Walter, wringing his hands in pretended agitation.

“We’ll put on sackcloth and ashes, jump through a hoop, roll over and play dead,” chimed in Paul. “No one has anything on us when it comes to humility.”

“It almost affects me to tears,” said Belle, pretending to reach for her handkerchief.

“They say cruel and unusual punishments are prohibited by the Constitution,” laughed Cora, “so we won’t deprive you of the refining influence of our society. Heaven knows you need it badly enough. We’ll let you trail along with us if you’ll promise to be very, very good.”

“We will,” promised Jack.

“There’s one thing yet that needs to be explained, fellows,” remarked Walter, as they climbed into their automobile. “What about that fellow with the iridescent necktie? I feel the demon of jealousy gnawing at my vitals.”

“Come, girls, ’fess up,” admonished Jack.

“He was just charming,” said Cora promptly.

“Perfectly lovely,” agreed Belle.

“Such soulful eyes!” exclaimed Bess languishingly.

“That I should ever have lived to hear this!” groaned Walter.

“I guess our cake is dough,” said Paul.

“Eftsoon and gadzooks!” cried Jack, striking an attitude, “lead me to him, and sooth it shall go hard with me if my trusty sword drink not the caitiff’s blood.”

“I guess you don’t need to go as far as that,” laughed Cora. “Leave him alone and the police will take care of him.”

“A-ha, a criminal!” cried Walter.

“That only makes him the more romantic,” declared Paul.

“It doesn’t help our case one bit,” said Jack. “Haven’t you heard of how women will deck a murderer’s cell with flowers?”

“I don’t think he’d have the nerve to be a murderer,” remarked Belle. “His specialty is stealing purses.”

And while the boys listened intently and threw in occasional indignant exclamations, the girls told of the young man’s attempt to scrape acquaintance, and of how later he had almost succeeded in getting possession of Cora’s purse.

“The cur!” growled Jack. “I wish I’d happened along when he was trying to get fresh!”

“You helped me out just the same, even if you weren’t there,” replied Cora. “You ought to have seen how he made tracks for his buggy when I said my brother would be along shortly.”

“You see,” said Jack, throwing out his chest, “how the terror of my name has preceded me.”

“It’s comforting anyway,” chimed in Walter. “It proves that we men are good for something.”

“And that the girls ought to have us with them all the time as trusty knights and vassals,” added Paul.

“You’re too ready to jump to conclusions,” rebuked Cora. “But now we’d better be hurrying along. It’s getting towards dark, and we’ll have all we can do to get to Aunt Margaret’s in time for dinner.”

“Dinner!” exclaimed Jack. “Where have I heard that word before? Lead me to it!”

“Do you think you can keep up with us in that car?” asked Cora wickedly. “If not, I’ll give you a tow.”

“Listen to her rubbing it in!” moaned Paul.

“It wasn’t enough to beat us,” complained Walter.

“I guess that fellow was right,” remarked Jack, “who said that Indians and women were alike. They both scalp the dead.”

CHAPTER V

A GROUP OF VAGABONDS

The two cars rolled along smartly, for the various happenings of the day had put the Motor Girls behind the schedule they had hoped to make. But despite their best efforts, dusk was settling down and the stars beginning to peep out when they drove up to the Kimball's Aunt Margaret's door.

She greeted them affectionately, and after they had washed off the dust of travel they were seated at the sumptuous meal she had had prepared in anticipation of their coming. After dinner was over, a number of young people in the neighborhood who had been invited to meet the tourists dropped in, and there was music and dancing. But Aunt Margaret's watchfulness over her charges prevented this from being prolonged to an unseasonable hour, and by eleven o'clock all the tired travelers were sleeping the dreamless sleep of vigorous, healthy youth.

They needed a good sleep, for the longest lap of their journey still lay before them. And it was at an early hour the next morning that, after a hearty breakfast and cordial thanks and good-byes to their gracious hostess, they climbed into their cars and drove off.

"Off at last for the Adirondacks!" cried Jack gaily, as he drew in great draughts of the fresh morning air.

"And for Camp Kill Kare!" added Paul.

The girls had started off a little ahead of them, but the boys soon drew alongside and Jack signaled for Cora to stop.

"I would have speech with thee, fair maiden," he remarked, as his sister obeyed.

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Cora in pretended vexation. "Here are those rude boys interrupting us just when we were having the loveliest talk."

"I guess you weren't talking about anything very important," replied Jack.

"No," said Bess, dimpling, "we were talking about you boys."

"And saying what a lovely thing it was to be all by ourselves for a little while," put in Belle.

"Girls," exhorted Walter solemnly, "remember that if there was an Ananias there was also a Sapphira."

"We're not so keen on having a stag party ourselves," explained Jack, "and we thought it would be a dandy thing if one of you girls would come into our car and one of us fellows go to yours. That would make life one grand sweet song."

"It all comes from what Cora said yesterday about the refining influence of feminine society," said Walter. "I feel the need of that. In fact, I have a consuming desire to become refined. And I can't be, as long as I associate with these two low-brows. So you'd better let me ride in your car."

"And leave us in our native coarseness?" queried Paul. "Not on your life, old man! I need refinement just as much as you do."

"Peace, brethren," interposed Jack. "We'll do this thing on the level. My claims to coarseness are just as strong as either of yours, but do you see me engaging in unseemly brawls? Nay and again nay. We'll pull straws for it and may the coarsest man win."

"I don't know that we want any of you," said Cora. "We don't take incurable cases."

"Don't be too harsh, Cora," said Belle. "You know they say there's a spark of good in the very lowest."

"While the lamp holds out to burn
The vilest sinner may return,"

hummed Bess.

There were no straws at hand, but some matches served as well, and Walter proved to be the lucky one. Belle agreed to go to Jack's car, and Walter took her place alongside of Bess.

"Hurrah!" cried Walter, as he availed himself of his good fortune. "I'm saved. I'm doomed to refinement."

"Doomed?" laughed Cora.

"Did I say doomed?" Walter answered. "How careless of me! Of course I meant destined to refinement."

"I suppose you'll be eating lotus blossoms and water lilies before long," called out Jack, as the cars started up again.

"Watch me when lunch time comes," grinned Walter. "But I don't mind what you fellows say. I've got two refining influences while you have only one."

"You need all you can get," was Jack's parting shot.

With merry chaff and banter, the time flew by as though on wings. They had lunch at a quaint little inn by the roadside, and Walter proved that the charms of feminine society had not yet begun to affect his appetite. But then, as he explained, the cure would be all the more effective if it were gradual, and he had plenty of time yet to climb to higher planes.

In the early afternoon they were turning a bend in the road, when Cora gave a sudden exclamation.

"Look!" she cried, pointing to a little glade at the right of the road. "There's a camp of some kind. I do believe it's gypsies!"

"Guessed it right the first time," declared Walter.

"That's what it is," agreed Bess. "Oh, Cora, don't you think we might stop a few minutes? I'd dearly love to have a look at them, if you think we can spare the time."

"I'm not so very keen about it myself," said Cora dubiously, for as those familiar with her previous adventures will remember, her experiences with these picturesque vagabonds had not been devoid of unpleasantness and danger. "But I'll see what Jack says about it, and if he thinks we have time, I won't mind stopping."

She hailed Jack, and, after consulting his watch, the latter agreed that they could easily spare a half-hour or so for a visit to the gypsy camp.

They drew their cars to the side of the road and picked their way through the woods to the little dell where the gypsy encampment lay.

It was a typical camp of those strange nomads in whose blood runs the "call of the wild," and who in their mode of life are almost as far removed from other human beings as though they lived upon another planet.

There were perhaps a dozen vans, from which came strange smells of cooking, amid which onion and garlic predominated. Unkempt children in tattered clothing played with dogs that seemed to be legion, while wrinkled and slatternly women sat on the steps of the vans or made their way through the grounds, whining their requests to visitors to cross their palms with silver and learn in return all that pertained to their present and future. Swarthy men, some of them with huge ear-rings and with sashes and turbans that reminded one of the pirates of tradition, lay sprawled out on the grass watching the throng with eyes that were sometimes indifferent and again sullen and smoldering.

There were just two elements that redeemed the camp from its general aspect of squalor and forlornness. One was the fine horses that were scattered here and there, for the gypsy has the keenest eye for a good animal of any trader on earth. The other was the presence of several gypsy girls of a wild barbaric type of beauty, whose flashing eyes and gaudy trinkets contrasted with the prevailing ugliness of their surroundings.

There were a large number of visitors present, due to the proximity of a large town a mile or so away, through which the automobiles had passed just before reaching the camp.

"Here's the place to have your future told," said Jack.

“Lucky they can’t tell our past,” remarked Walter. “What a give-away that would be for some of us.”

“I hope you haven’t any deep dark secret that would ‘chill the young blood, harrow up our souls’ if it were told,” laughed Cora.

“Walter just wants to make himself interesting,” gibed Bess.

“Well, whatever I may have been, I’m all right now that you girls have undertaken to refine me,” replied Walter.

“I’m realizing more and more what a tremendous contract it is,” Cora came back at him. “But look at that girl over there? Isn’t she a beauty?”

“She isn’t hard to look at, for a fact,” said Jack judicially, as his eyes fell on the gypsy girl his sister had indicated. “I think I’ll get her to tell my fortune. I want to know whether I’m born to be hanged or drowned.”

“It’s safe to say that you’re booked for a long life anyway,” remarked Paul. “Only the good die young.”

The girl had seen that the party were regarding her with interest, and she came over to them.

“Do you ladies want to have your fortunes told?” she asked with a winning smile that showed two rows of beautiful white teeth.

The girls hesitated.

“Go ahead, girls, and show the sporting spirit,” urged Jack. “You can get the promise of a perfectly good husband for fifty cents. And that’s cheap in these days of high prices.”

“It’s more than some of them are worth,” laughed Belle.

“I hope that isn’t a shot at us,” said Paul. “I’d be a bargain at a dollar.”

“She must have been thinking of that Higby fellow over at Roxbury,” said Bess. “Why, what’s the matter?” she asked, as the gypsy girl started violently and turned deadly pale.

Cora sprang to the girl’s side and put her arm around her to steady her.

CHAPTER VI

A PERPLEXING PROBLEM

The gypsy girl regained her self-control in a moment and gently put Cora's helping arm aside. "It is nothing," she said. "I just had an attack of dizziness. The heat of the sun, perhaps."

It was evident that this last remark was only a pretext, for a pleasant breeze was blowing and they were standing under a great tree that shaded them completely.

"I hope it wasn't anything I said that startled you," said Bess curiously.

"How could it have been?" put in Belle incredulously. "You only referred jokingly to that Higby fellow who nearly got away with Cora's purse when we were shopping yesterday. I'm sure there's nothing in that to startle anybody."

Cora had been watching the girl intently, and at this second mention of the young man's name she saw a swift spasm – was it of pain or fright or a combination of both? – sweep over the girl's face.

"Well, never mind," said Cora briskly, "if you're sure you're all right now. Perhaps you'd better have a drink of water. Jack, suppose you go to the car and get one of the drinking cups."

Jack started promptly to obey, but the girl objected so strongly that he stopped and stood irresolute.

"No, no," she said, "please not. Only leetle deezy, but all right now," she continued, dropping into the slipshod gypsy manner of speaking. "Let me tell pretty ladies' fortunes."

But just then one of the gypsy men, who had been watching the group sharply, stepped up to the girl and spoke to her roughly in a jargon that the girls could not understand. It was evidently a command, for the gypsy girl turned instantly and went away, disappearing into one of the vans, while the man, after a scowl that included all the party, sauntered away and dropped on the grass beside some of his comrades.

"Well, what do you think of that?" demanded Belle in amazement.

"Just when she had a husband picked out for each of you, too," chaffed Paul. "But cheer up, girls. We're here yet. Count on us to the last breath. You can't lose us."

"No such luck," retorted Bess. "But what on earth made that man act that way?"

"It isn't like gypsies to let good money get away from them," said Jack, "and they must have seen from our open countenances that we were easy marks and ready to cough up."

"Jack," said Walter severely, "please pass up that line of chatter – I mean, please refrain from such vulgar slang. In my unregenerate days I could have stood for it – I mean, endured it – but since I have become refined it hits me on the raw – I mean, it affects me painfully."

"Oh, stop your nonsense, you boys," chided Cora. "Can't you see I'm trying to think?"

"Cora's trying to think!" exclaimed her irrepressible brother. "Heaven be praised that I have lived to see this day!"

Cora gave him a scornful glance, and Jack sagged down at the knees, pretending to wilt.

"Just how did that girl strike you?" asked Cora thoughtfully.

"A peach," replied Jack promptly.

"A pippin – I mean, she was very good looking," added Walter.

"I'm asking the girls," said Cora witheringly.

"She didn't seem to me like a gypsy at all," answered Bess. "And yet I suppose of course she must be, since she's here with them."

"Did you notice the way she spoke when she was off her guard for a moment?" asked Belle. "She said that she had 'an attack of dizziness.' Later on, she was a 'leetle deezy.'"

"Her eyes were blue," remarked Cora musingly, "and that is something unusual in a gypsy."

"But her complexion was as dark as any of the others," objected Bess.

“That might be accounted for by the tan from the open-air life,” replied Cora. “And then, too, it would be easy to color it artificially.”

“I didn’t know girls ever did such things,” interrupted Jack with a pained expression.

“And then too,” went on Cora, unheeding, “when her sleeve fell back, I saw that her arm was white. But what I’m trying to get at especially is whom she looks like. She resembles some one that I’ve seen before, but I can’t remember who it is.”

“What do you suppose made her act so queerly when I spoke of the stealing of your purse?” asked Bess.

“It wasn’t the robbery itself that startled her,” said Cora. “It was the name of the man, Higby. He was mentioned twice, and each time she looked frightened.”

“I wonder if she knows him,” murmured Belle.

“He said there were lots of girls who would be glad of his company,” laughed Bess. “Perhaps she is one of them.”

“There was no liking in that look of hers,” replied Cora emphatically. “It was positive alarm.”

“If a mere man may break into this discussion,” said Jack humbly, “you fair detectives haven’t yet told us why that pirate over there took the girl away from us.”

“That’s easy,” interposed Walter. “He was jealous. It was my fatal gift of beauty that worried him. The girls all fall for it – I mean, are attracted by it.”

“Girls,” asked Cora exasperatedly, “why are those long legs of Walter’s like organ grinders?”

“Why?” asked Belle.

“Give it up,” said Bess.

“Because,” explained Cora, “they always carry a monkey about with them.”

Walter staggered back.

“Stung!” he moaned. “Penetrated, I mean.”

“Well, don’t suffer too much, poor boy,” said Cora soothingly. “If it’s any comfort to you to know it, your two accomplices in crime are just as bad. Women are the only sensible human beings anyway.”

“Are they human?” asked Walter. “I’ve always thought of them as angels.”

“Stop trying to square yourself,” said Paul.

“Don’t knuckle down to them,” Jack adjured him.

“I must,” replied Walter, “or they won’t let me ride with them any more.”

“We’re not going to, anyway; that is, for the rest of this afternoon,” said Cora. “I want to have the girls in the car with me where we can talk over this thing without being interrupted.”

“Shut out from Eden,” groaned Walter bitterly. “You wash your hands of me. You cast me into outer darkness. Just when the better part of my nature was getting uppermost, you put me back into low company. I wouldn’t have believed it of you, girls.”

“Back to the kennel, you hound!” exclaimed Paul, seizing him by the collar. “You might have known that the girls would throw you down. They always do, sooner or later.”

“Well, now that Lucifer as lightning has fallen from heaven,” remarked Jack, “what do you say to hustling along? The afternoon waneth and my appetite waxeth. Dinner at Camp Kill Kare sounds awfully good to me.”

“I suppose we’ll have to,” assented Cora reluctantly; “but I would like to have another glimpse of that gypsy girl first.”

“Nothing doing,” said Jack. “We’re only visitors here anyway, and we haven’t any right to intrude on their private affairs when they show us so clearly they don’t want us to. Ten to one it’s only a mare’s nest anyway that you’re stirring up, sis, about the girl. Probably she’s an honest to goodness gypsy, just like the rest of them.”

“That’s what my common sense tells me,” agreed Cora, “but something outside of common sense tells me that she isn’t.”

“That’s the way I feel about it too,” echoed Bess.

“I too,” agreed Belle. “She may have been stolen when she was a child. That happens often enough.”

“Not so often as it used to,” said Paul. “The telegraph and the telephone make it too risky.”

“Well, how about it?” said Jack. “Are you three Graces coming along, or do we three scapegraces have to wend our way to Camp Kill Kare alone?”

“There she is now!” exclaimed Bess, as she caught sight of the gypsy girl looking at them from the door of the van.

But a wrinkled crone who was sitting on the top step of the van reached out a skinny arm and angrily pushed the girl inside and out of sight.

“They’ve evidently made up their minds that we’re showing too much interest in her, and for some reason they don’t like it,” sighed Cora. “Well, come along, girls. We’ll have to go. But that gypsy girl has a history and a secret, and I’d give a good deal to find out just what they are.”

CHAPTER VII

THE MOUNTAIN CAMP

The Motor Girls, followed by the boys, made their way briskly back to the cars and climbed in, Walter resuming his place with the other boys and Belle going back to Cora and Bess.

For some time previous to running across the gypsy camp they had been rising higher and higher into the mountains, and now the road became still steeper. They had to run more slowly in consequence, for although both cars were good hill-climbers, it took a good deal of power to make any kind of speed. Besides, as they got farther into the wilderness, the road was rougher and more neglected. But it was just this wildness they had come to seek, and their spirits rose with the difficulties they encountered.

"You go in advance, Jack," said Cora, as the road grew narrower until it was difficult for the two cars to go side by side. "Of course, having the faster car, I suppose we ought to show the way, but we're nothing if not magnanimous. If your car balks we'll push you along. Besides, you have the map."

"Don't worry about pushing us along," retorted Jack. "Just for that, I ought to shoot ahead out of sight and leave you to bitter regrets when you find yourselves lost in the wilderness. But I'm too noble to treat helpless girls that way, so you're safe for the present. But beware, woman, of goading me too far! It's a long worm that has no turning."

"If you're as mixed in your road directions as you are in your proverbs, I'm afraid we won't get to Camp Kill Kare to-night," rejoined Cora. "But go ahead now like a good boy, and think up some more bright things to spring on us. We want to be by ourselves so that we can talk without foolish interruptions."

"They want to talk," muttered Jack. "What a novelty!"

"If women talk a good deal, I notice that lots of men take after their mothers," replied Belle, as Jack's car darted into the lead.

"Isn't it tantalizing," said Cora to her chums, resuming their interrupted conversation, "that I can't think just whom that gypsy girl looks like? Don't you know how it is when you are trying to recall a word or a line of poetry or something, and have it just on the tip of your tongue but can't quite get it? I feel just that way about this resemblance. I'm perfectly sure I've seen some one very much like her. Can't you girls help me out? We're together so much, and we know the same people. Put on your thinking caps and see if you can't give me a hint."

"I only wish I could," replied Belle thoughtfully. "There *was* something a little familiar about the girl, though it didn't strike me as strongly as it did you."

"There was a certain look in her eyes that suggested somebody I've seen," said Bess, "but for the life of me I can't remember who it was. But even suppose we did remember? It wouldn't prove anything. There are lots of people in the world who look alike and yet who haven't the slightest relation to each other."

"I know it," admitted Cora. "But just the same I have what the boys would call a hunch that in this case it would give us a clue to the gypsy girl's secret."

"If she has any," laughed Bess.

"Get out your crystal sphere, Sybilla, and pluck the heart from this mystery," smiled Belle.

"You girls can laugh if you want to," rejoined Cora, "but all the same I'll think about this and perhaps dream about it until I recall the face I'm groping for."

"I shouldn't wonder if we'd have something more practical to think of before long," remarked Belle, pointing to the sky. "Do you see those clouds coming up there? I've been watching them for the last five minutes and they're getting bigger and blacker all the time. I'd hate to be caught in a thunderstorm."

“And get into Camp Kill Kare all wet and bedraggled,” added Bess. “Oh, Cora, let’s hurry!”

“It isn’t getting wet that bothers me so much,” replied Cora. “We could put up the top and keep dry enough. But a heavy storm would turn the road into a quagmire, and goodness knows it’s bad enough as it is.”

The boys ahead had seen the signs, and Jack shouted back:

“Give her all the juice she can stand, sis! If the storm only holds off for fifteen minutes we’ll make the camp.”

His own car shot ahead, and Cora threw in the speed and kept close behind. They could hear now faint rumblings of thunder, all the more noticeable because of the sudden hush that had fallen over the forest, as birds and animals and insects sensed the coming storm.

Darker and darker it grew and faster and faster the cars sped along, as their drivers called on the last ounce of speed they had in them. Despite their fluttering of anxiety, the girls had a keen sense of exhilaration in this race with the elements. Their veils whipped about their faces and their glowing eyes and reddened cheeks showed their inward excitement.

A jagged flash of lightning shot across the sky, followed by a deafening peal of thunder. It was evident that the bolt had struck not far off, for a moment later they heard the crash of a falling tree at a little distance to the right.

“Oh, hurry! hurry!” urged Bess and Belle.

“Do you think I’m creeping?” Cora called back. “I can’t talk to the car and encourage it as I might a horse. You’ll notice that the boys aren’t leaving us behind.”

As a matter of fact, the cars were nearly touching.

“Keep up your pluck, girls!” Jack called back. “If this map is all right, we’ll make the camp in five minutes more.”

“If we didn’t have an old tub in front of us, we’d make it in four,” sang out Cora.

“If the rain will only hold off,” murmured Belle.

But the prospect grew ever more threatening. The peals of thunder were redoubled and the lightning played so vividly across the sky that Bess covered her face with her hands.

“Suppose the car should be struck!” she exclaimed.

“If it were, we’d probably never know it,” was all the comfort her sister could give.

Just then there was an appalling roar, and a great tree, split from top to bottom, swayed for a moment and then fell with a deafening crash right across the road, about a hundred feet in front of the leading car.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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