RUTH FIELDING AND THE GYPSIES; OR, THE MISSING PEARL NECKLACE

ALICE B. EMERSON

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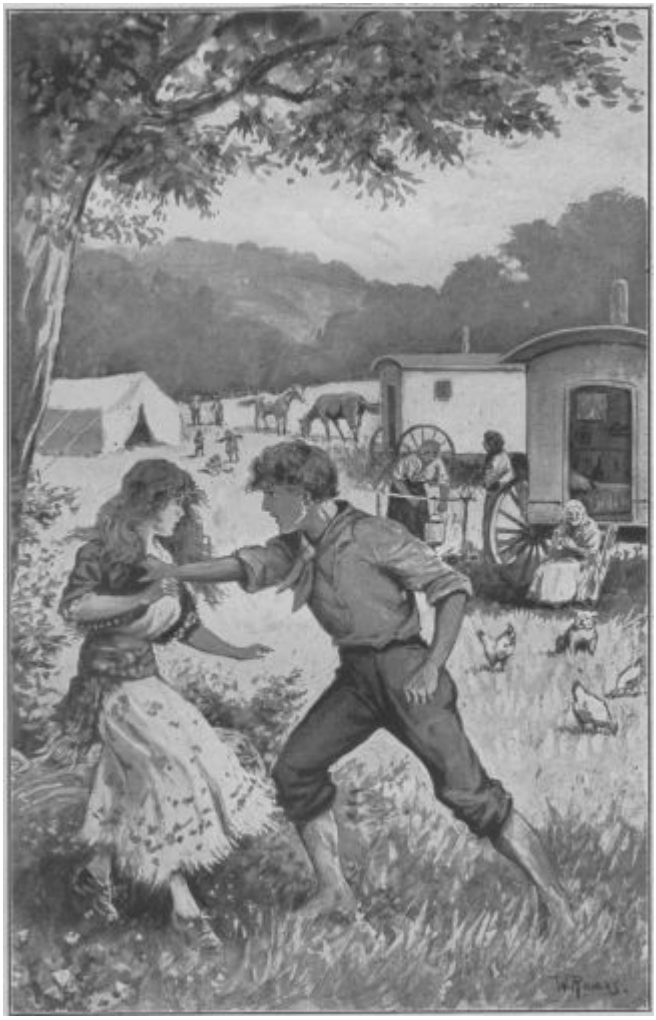
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HE PUSHED RUTH ROUGHLY BACK INTO HER SEAT.

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Ruth Fielding and the Gypsies

OR

THE MISSING PEARL NECKLACE

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL,"
"RUTH FIELDING AT SILVER RANCH," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED



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Books for Girls

BY ALICE B. EMERSON

RUTH FIELDING SERIES

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RUTH FIELDING AND THE GYPSIES
Or, The Missing Pearl Necklace.

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RUTH FIELDING AND THE GYPSIES

CHAPTER I

ON THE LUMANO RIVER

The steady turning of the grinding-stones set the old Red Mill a-quiver in every board and beam. The air within was full of dust—dust of the grain, and fine, fine dust from the stones themselves.

Uncle Jabez Potter, the miller, came to the door and looked across the grassy yard that separated the mill and the farmhouse attached from the highroad. Under a broad-spreading tree sat two girls, busy with their needles.

One, a sharp-faced, light-haired girl, who somehow carried a look of endured pain in her eyes in spite of the smile she flung at the old man, cried:

"Hello, Dusty Miller! come out and fly about a little. It will do you good."

The grim face of the miller lightened perceptibly. "How do you reckon a man like me kin fly, Mercy child?" he croaked.

"I'll lend you my aeroplanes, if you like," she returned, gaily, and held up the two ebony canes which had been hidden by the tall grass. *They* told the story of Mercy Curtis' look of pain, but once she had had to hobble on crutches and, as she pluckily declared, canes were "miles better than crutches."

"I ain't got no time, gals, an' that's a fac'," said the miller, his face clouding suddenly. "Ain't ye seen hide nor hair of Ben an' them mules?"

"Why, Uncle," said the second girl, quietly, "you know how many errands Ben had to do in town. He couldn't do them all and get back in so short a time."

"I dunno about that, Niece Ruth—I dunno about that," said the old man, sharply. "Seems ter me I could ha' gone an' been back by now. An' hi guy! there's four sacks o' flour to take acrost the river to Tim Lakeby—an' I kyan't do it by meself—Ben knows that. Takes two' on us ter handle thet punt 'ith the river runnin' like she is right now."

The girl who had last spoken folded the work in her lap and got up agilely. Her movements were followed—perhaps a little enviously—by the gaze of the lame girl.

"How quick you are, Ruthie," she said. When Ruth Fielding looked down upon Mercy Curtis, her smile started an answering one upon the lame girl's thin face.

"Quick on my feet, dearie," said Ruth. "But you have so much quicker a mind."

"Flatterer!" returned the other, yet the smile lingered upon the thin face and made it the sweeter.

The miller was turning, grumblingly, back into the shadowy interior of the mill, when Ruth hailed him.

"Oh, Uncle!" she cried. "Let me help you."

"What's that?" he demanded, wheeling again to look at her from under his shaggy eyebrows.

Now, Ruth Fielding was worth looking at. She was plump, but not too plump; and she was quick in her movements, while her lithe and graceful figure showed that she possessed not only health, but great vitality. Her hair was of a beautiful bright brown

color, was thick, and curled just a little.

In her tanned cheeks the blood flowed richly—the color came and went with every breath she drew, it seemed, at times. That was when she was excited. But ordinarily she was of a placid temperament, and her brown eyes were as deep as wells. She possessed the power of looking searchingly and calmly at one without making her glance either impertinent or bold.

In her dark skirt, middy blouse, and black stockings and low shoes, she made a pretty picture as she stood under the tree, although her features were none of them perfect. Her cheeks were perhaps a little too round; her nose—well, it was not a dignified nose at all! And her mouth was generously large, but the teeth gleaming behind her red lips were even and white, and her smile lit up her whole face in a most engaging manner.

"Do let me help you, Uncle. I know I can," she repeated, as the old miller scowled at her.

"What's that?" he said again. "Go with me in that punt to Tim Lakeby's?"

"Why not?"

"'Tain't no job for a gal, Niece Ruth," grumbled the miller.

"Any job is all right for a girl—if she can do it," said Ruth, happily. "And I can row, Uncle—you know I can."

"Ha! rowing one o' them paper-shell skiffs of Cameron's *one* thing; the ash oars to my punt ain't for baby's han's," growled the miller.

"Do let me try, Uncle Jabez," said Ruth again, when

the lame girl broke in with:

"You are an awfully obstinate old Dusty Miller! Why don't you own up that Ruthie's more good to you than a dozen boys would be?"

"She ain't!" snarled the old man.

At that moment there appeared upon the farmhouse porch a little, bent old woman who hailed them in a shrill, sweet voice:

"What's the matter, gals? What's the matter, Jabez? Ain't nothin' broke down, hez there?"

"No, Aunt Alvirah," laughed Ruth. "I just want Uncle Jabez to let me help him——"

The old woman had started down the steps, her hand upon her back as she came, and intoning in a low voice: "Oh, my back! and oh, my bones!" She caught up the miller's remark, as he turned away again, very sharply, for he muttered something about "Silly gals' foolish idees."

"What d'ye mean by that, Jabez Potter?" she demanded. "If Ruth says she kin help ye, she *kin*. You oughter know that by this time."

"Help me row that punt across the river?" snarled the old man, wrathfully. "What nonsense!"

"I dunno," said the old woman, slowly. "I see Tim's flag a-flyin'. I guess he wants his flour bad."

"And I can pull an oar as good as *you* can, Uncle Jabez," added Ruth.

"Oh, all right! Come on, then. I see I shell hev no peace till I let ye try it. Ef we don't git back fer supper, don't blame *me*, Alviry."

The miller disappeared in the gathering gloom of the

mill. Soon the jarring of the structure and the hum of the stones grew slower—slower—slower, and finally the machinery was altogether still.

Ruth had run for her hat. Then, waving her hand to Mercy and Aunt Alvirah, she ran around to the landing.

The Lumano River was a wide stream, but at this season of the year it was pretty shallow. There was little navigation from Lake Osago at any time, but now the channel was dotted with dangerous rocks, and there were even more perilous reefs just under the surface.

Uncle Jabez's boat was not really a "punt." It was a heavy rowboat, so stained and waterlogged in appearance that it might have been taken for a bit of drift-stuff that had been brought in to the Red Mill landing by the current.

And truly, that is probably the means by which the miller had originally obtained the boat. He was of a miserly nature, was Uncle Jabez Potter, and the old boat—which its first owner had never considered worth coming after, following some spring freshet—served the miller well enough to transport his goods across the river.

Tim Lakeby's store, on the north shore of the river, was in sight of the Red Mill. There were four sacks of flour to be transported, and already Uncle Jabez had placed two of them in the bottom of the boat, upon a clean tarpaulin.

"Ef we go down the river an' swamp, I shell lose this flour," grumbled Uncle Jabez. "Drat that Ben! I tell ye, he'd ought to be hum by now."

Ben was the hired man, and if the miller had not

really been kindlier underneath than he appeared on the surface, Ben would never have remained as long with him as he had!

Uncle Jabez balanced the weight in the boat with judgment. Although there seemed to be no real danger, he knew very well the nature of the treacherous current. Ruth slipped into the bow seat with her oar, and Uncle Jabez took stroke.

The girl unknotted the painter, and the boat drifted out from the landing.

"Now, set yer feet square, an' *pull*!" ejaculated her uncle, thrusting the blade of his own oar beneath the rippling surface.

They were heavy ash oars—one was all the girl really could manage. But she was not afraid of a little hard work, her muscles were supple, and she had rowed one season in the first eight at Briarwood Hall, and so considered herself something of an oarswoman.

The miller, by stretching to see over his shoulder, got the boat pointed in the right direction. "Pull, now!" he commanded, and set a long, forceful stroke for the girl to match. With the water slapping against the high side of the craft, sometimes sprinkling them with spray, they drove her forward for some minutes in silence.

The boat lumbered heavily, and it was true that Ruth had all she could do to manage the oars. In some places, where the eddies tugged at the blade, it seemed as though a submerged giant seized it and tried to twist it from her grasp!

"I guess you air gittin' yer fill-up of it, Niece Ruth," growled the miller, with a sound in his throat that might have been a chuckle. "Look out, now! ye'll hev

us over."

Ruth knew very well she had done nothing to give the boat that sudden jerk. It was the current; but she had no breath with which to argue the matter.

On and on they pulled, while the sinking sun gilded the little wavelets, and bathed both river and the shores in golden glory. A homing bird shrieked a shrill "good-night," as it passed above them, flying from shore to shore.

Now the northern shore was nearer than the landing they had left. Only occasionally Ruth turned her head, for she needed her full attention upon the oar which she managed with such difficulty.

"We gotter p'int up-stream," growled Uncle Jabez, after wringing his neck around again to spy out the landing near Lakeby's store. "Pesky current's kerried us too fur down."

He gave a mighty pull to his own oar to rehead the boat. It was a perilous move, and in a perilous place. Here the water ran, troubled and white-capped, over a hidden reef.

"Oh! do be careful, Uncle!" cried Ruth.

"Pull!" yelled the old man, in return.

By chance he sunk his own oar-blade so deeply, that it rubbed against the reef. It lifted Uncle Jabez from his seat, and unbalanced the boat.

Like a flash the heavy oar flew out of its socket, and the old man sprawled on his back in the bottom of the boat. The latter whirled around in the current, and before Ruth could scream, even, it crashed broadside upon the rock!

The rotting planks of the boat could not stand such a

blow. Ruth saw the plank cave in, and the water followed. Down the boat settled upon the submerged part of the rock—a hopeless wreck!

This was not the worst of the accident. In seeking to recover his seat, Uncle Jabez went overboard, as the old boat tipped. He dove into the shallow water, and struck his head heavily on the reef.

Blood-stained bubbles rose to the surface, and the old man struggled only feebly to rise.

"He is hurt! he will be drowned!" gasped Ruth, and seeing him so helpless, she sprang nimbly over the canted side of the boat and sought to draw her uncle's head out of the water.

Although she was a good swimmer, and was not afraid of the water, the current was so swift, and her own footing so unstable, it was doubtful if Ruth Fielding could save both the miller and herself from the peril that menaced them.

CHAPTER II

ROBERTO, THE GYPSY

Ruth Fielding, following the death of her parents and while she was still a small girl, had left Darrowtown and Miss True Pettis, and all her other old friends and acquaintances, to live with her mother's uncle, at the Red Mill. Her coming to the mill and her early adventures in and about that charming place were related in the first volume of this series, entitled "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill."

Ruth made many friends in her new home, among them Helen and Tom Cameron, the twin, motherless children of a wealthy dry-goods merchant who had a beautiful home, called "the Outlook," near the mill, and Mercy Curtis, the daughter of the railroad station agent at Cheslow, the nearest important town to Ruth's new home. Ruth, Helen, and Mercy all went to Briarwood Hall, a girls' school some distance from Cheslow, while Master Tom attended a military academy at Seven Oaks, near the girls' institution of learning. The incidents of their first term at school are related in the second volume of the series, while in the mid-winter vacation Ruth and her friends go to Snow Camp in the Adirondacks.

Later, our friends spent part of a summer vacation at Lighthouse Point on the Atlantic Coast, after which they visited Silver Ranch in Montana. The sixth volume tells of another mid-winter camping adventure on Cliff Island, while the volume previous to our present story—number seven, in fact—was entitled "Ruth Fielding at Sunrise Farm."

This story narrated Ruth's particular interest in Sadie Raby, a strange, wild girl who ran away from cruel people who had taken her "to raise." Her reunion with her twin brothers, Willie and Dickie, and how they all three became the special care of Mr. Steele, the wealthy owner of Sunrise Farm, is told. It is

through Ruth's efforts that the Rabys are settled in life and win friends.

Now Ruth and her schoolmates had returned to the Red Mill and Cheslow, and but a brief space would elapse before the girls would begin their third year at Briarwood Hall; they were all looking toward the beginning of the fall term with great eagerness.

Had Ruth Fielding been able to think at this moment of the boat's overturn, or of anything but her uncle's peril, she might have considered that the possibility of her ever seeing Briarwood Hall again was somewhat doubtful!

The hurrying water tugged at her as though a hundred hands had laid hold of her person. She was nearly arm-pit deep in the flood, and her uncle's body was so heavy that she had all she could do to hold his head above the surface.

She could not get him back into the boat, even, and perhaps that would not have been a wise move. For the old skiff, shaking and rocking, was likely to be torn free by the battling current. If it should swing into deep water, it must sink almost at once, for the water was pouring in through the hole that had been battered in its side.

The flour was fast becoming saturated with the river-water, and its increased weight would bear the boat to the bottom, if it slipped from the reef.

Unable to see any good of boarding the boat again, Ruth tried to work her way along the reef until she stood upon a higher part of it. Uncle Jabez was unconscious, blood flowed from a deep cut on his head, and he lay a dead weight in her arms.

Never had Ruth Fielding been in greater peril. She

was frightened, but mostly for the old man who seemed so seriously hurt.

Tossing her loosened hair out of her eyes, she stared longingly at the landing near Lakeby's store. It was some distance up-stream, and not a person was in sight. She feared, too, that it was too far away for her voice to carry.

Yet she must scream for help. She shouted again and again, endeavoring to put all the strength of her voice into the cries. Was that an answer? The girl held her uncle high in her arms and looked all about.

Nobody was at the store landing. Nobody was behind on the other shore of the river—and she was glad that Aunt Alvirah and Mercy had not seen the accident, for neither of them could have helped in this predicament.

Yes! there was the repeated shout—and nearer. Ruth's eyes turned to the north shore of the Lumano again. There was somebody running down the bank —not near the store kept by Timothy Lakeby, but directly opposite the rock on which the old boat had stranded.

"Oh! oh! Help! help!" shrieked the girl of the Red Mill.

"Hold on! I'm coming!"

The voice came to her more strongly than before. She could not see who the person was, but she knew he was alone. She could not imagine how he was to aid them.

Why did he not run to the store and bring other men to help? There! he seemed to have leaped right into the river!

"Oh, dear me! the strongest swimmer could not reach us, let alone help Uncle Jabez ashore," was Ruth's thought.

But up came the figure into sight again. Dripping, of course, now he stood firmly on a peak of rock that was thrust above the tide, and shook back the long black hair from his eyes.

He was a wild looking person. His feet were bare and his ragged trousers were rolled to his knees. He wore neither vest nor coat, and his shirt was open at his throat. To Ruth he seemed very bronzed and rough looking.

But whoever, or whatever, he might be, the girl prayed that he would prove able to rescue Uncle Jabez. She felt that she could save herself, but she was having all she could do to bear up the unconscious miller.

"Hold on!" shouted the rescuer again.

Once more he plunged forward. He disappeared off the rock. Was he swimming again? The half-overturned boat hid him from Ruth's gaze.

Suddenly he shouted close at hand. Up he bobbed on the higher point of rock just beyond the boat.

"What's the matter, Missy?" he demanded. "Is the old man hurt?"

"He hit his head. See! he is unconscious," explained Ruth.

"I'll get him! Look out, now; I've got to push off this old boat, Missy. She ain't no good, anyway."

Ruth saw that he was a big, black-haired, strong looking boy. His complexion was very dark and his eyes sparkling—like cut jet beads. He might have

been seventeen or eighteen years old, but he was fully as tall, and apparently as strong, as an ordinary man.

His long hair curled and was tangled like a wild man's. His beard had begun to grow on his lip and chin. In his ears Ruth saw small gold rings and his wrists and forearms—which were bared—were covered with an intricate pattern of tattooing in red and blue ink.

Altogether, she had never seen so strange a boy in all her life—and certainly none so strong. He leaped into the broken boat, seized Ruth's oar that had not been lost in the overset, and bracing it against the rock, pushed the trembling boat free in a moment.

Ruth could not repress a scream. It looked as though he, too, must be thrown into the river, as the boat was caught by the current and jerked free.

But the wild boy laughed and leaped upon the higher part of the rock. As the miller's old boat drifted down stream, he sprang into the water again and reached the girl and her burden.

"Give him to me!" commanded the boy. "I can bear him up better than you, Missy. We'll get him ashore —and you can't be any wetter than you are now."

"Oh, never mind me!" cried Ruth. "I am not afraid of a ducking. And I can swim."

"You don't want to try swimming in *this* place, Missy," he returned. "You follow right behind me—so."

He turned, carrying the heavy figure of the miller in his arms as though he weighed but a hundred pounds instead of nearer two, and set off toward the shore along the ledge of rock by which he had come.

Ruth saw, now, that beyond where the boat had been wrecked, the rock joined the shore, with only here and there a place where it was deep under water.

She saw, too, that the boat was now sinking. It had not sailed ten yards in the fierce current before its gunwales disappeared. It sank in a deeper channel below—flour and all! Ruth realized that Uncle Jabez would be sorely troubled over the loss of those bags of flour.

Ruth paddled to the shore behind the strong boy, but before they really reached terra firma, she knew that Uncle Jabez was struggling back to consciousness. The boy lowered the miller easily to the ground.

"He's coming 'round, Missy," he said. His smile was broad, and the little gold rings twinkled in his ears.

Ruth, wet and bedrabbled as she was, did not think of her own discomfort. She knelt beside Uncle Jabez and spoke to him. For some seconds he was so dazed that he did not seem to recognize her. Then he stammered:

"Ha—ha——I knowed we couldn't do it. No—no gal kin do a man's work. Ha!"

This seemed rather hard on Ruth, after she had done her best, and it had not been her fault that the boat was wrecked, but she was too excited just then to trouble about the miller's grumbling.

"Oh, Uncle! you're not badly hurt, are you?"

"Ha—hum! I dunno," stuttered the miller, and sat up. He rubbed his forehead and brought his hand, with a little blood upon it, back to the level of his eyes. "I vum!" he ejaculated, with more interest than before. "I must ha' cracked my head some. Why was it I didn't drown?"

"This little missy, here," said the black-eyed youth, quickly. "*She* saved you, Mister. She held your head above water till I come."

"Why—why——Niece Ruth! you did *that*?"

"Oh, it was nothing, Uncle Jabez! I am so glad you are not hurt worse. This boy really saved you. He brought you ashore."

"Who be ye, young man?" asked the miller. "I'm obleeged to ye—if what my niece says is true."

"Oh, I am named Roberto. You need not to thank—no!" exclaimed the stranger, suddenly getting up and looking all about.

"But it was very brave of him," declared Ruth, and she seized the boy's hand. "I—I am so glad you were near."

"Here's Tim and Joe Bascom coming," said Uncle Jabez, who was facing the store.

Instantly Roberto, as he called himself, jerked his hand from Ruth's grasp. He had seen the men coming, too, and without a word he turned and fled back into the woods.

"Why—why——" began Ruth, in utter surprise.

"What's the matter with that feller?" demanded Uncle Jabez, just as the storekeeper and Farmer Bascom arrived.

"I seen the feller, Jabe," said the latter, eagerly. "He's one o' them blamed Gypsies. I run him out o' my orchard only yisterday."

CHAPTER III

EVENING AT THE RED MILL

About this time Uncle Jabez began to wake up to the fact that his boat and the flour were gone.

"It's a dumbed shame, Jabez! an' I needed that flour like tunket," said Timothy Lakeby, the storekeeper.

"Huh!" grunted the miller. "'Tain't nothin' out o' your pocket, Tim."

"But my customers air wantin' it."

"You lemme hev your boat, an' a boy to bring it back, an' we'll go right hum an' load ye up some more flour," groaned the miller. "That dratted Ben will be back by thet time, I fancy. Ef he'd been ter the mill I wouldn't hev been dependent upon my niece ter help row that old boat."

"Too heavy for her—too heavy for her, Jabe," declared Joe Bascom.

"Huh! is thet so?" snapped the miller. He could grumble to Ruth himself, but he would not stand for any other person's criticism of her. "Lemme tell ye, she worked her passage all right. An' I vum! I b'lieve thet 'twas me, myself, thet run the old tub on the rock."

"Aside from the flour, Jabez," said the storekeeper, "'tain't much of a loss. But you an' Ruthie might ha' both been drowned."

"I would, if it hadn't been for her," declared the miller, with more enthusiasm than he usually

showed. "She held my head up when I was knocked out—kinder. Ye see this cut in my head?"

"Ye got out of it lucky arter all, then," said Bascom.

"Ya-as," drawled the miller. "But I ain't feelin' so pert erbout losin' thet boat an' the flour."

"But see how much worse it might have been, Uncle," suggested Ruth, timidly. "If it hadn't been for that boy——"

"What did he say his name was?" interrupted Timothy.

"Roberto."

"Yah!" said Bascom. "Thet's a Gypsy name, all right! I'd like ter got holt on him."

"I wish I could have thanked him," sighed Ruth.

"If you see him ag'in, Joe," said the miller, "don't you bother about a peck o' summer apples. I'll pay for them," he added, with a sudden burst of generosity. "Of course—in trade," he added.

He could move about now, and the gash in his head had ceased bleeding. It was a warm evening, and neither Ruth nor her uncle were likely to take cold from their ducking. But her clothing clung to her in an uncomfortable manner, and the girl was anxious to get back to the mill.

Timothy Lakeby routed out a clerk and sent him with them in the lighter boat that was moored at the store landing. Ruth begged to pull an oar again, and her uncle did not forbid her. Perhaps he still felt a little weak and dazed.

He kept speaking of Roberto, the Gypsy boy. "Strong as an ox, that feller," he said. "Wisht I had a man like him at the mill. Ben ain't wuth his salt."

"Oh, I'm sure, Uncle Jabez, Ben is very faithful and good," urged Ruth.

"Wal, a feller that could carry me like that young man done—he's jest another Sandow, *he* is," said Uncle Jabez.

They easily got across the river in the storekeeper's lighter boat, and Ruth displayed her oarsmanship to better advantage, for the oars were lighter. The miller noted her work and grunted his approval.

"I vum! they *did* teach ye suthin' at thet school 'sides folderrols, didn't they?" he said.

Ruth asked the store clerk if he knew anything about the Gypsies.

"Why, yes, Miss. I hear they are camping 'way up the river—up near the lakes, beyond Minturn's Dam. You know that's a wild country up there."

Ruth remembered. She had been a little way in that direction with her friends, Tom and Helen Cameron, in their auto. Minturn Dam had burst two years before, and done much damage, but was now repaired.

"That is a long way from here," she suggested to the clerk.

"Yes'm. But Romany folks is gret roamers—thet's why they're called 'Romany,' mebbe," was the reply. "And I guess that black-eyed rascal is a wild one."

"Never mind. He got me out o' the river," mumbled Uncle Jabez.

They brought the boat to the mill landing in safety, and Ben appeared, having returned from town and put up the mules. He gazed in blank amazement at the condition of his employer and Ruth.

"For the good land!" exclaimed Ben; but he got no farther. He was not a talkative young man, and it took considerable to wake him up to as exciting an expression as the above.

"You kin talk!" snarled Uncle Jabez. "If you'd been here to help me, I wouldn't ha' lost our boat and the flour."

The miller fairly *ached* when he thought of his losses, and he had to lay the blame on somebody.

"Now you help me git four more sacks over to Tim Lakeby's——"

Ruth would not hear of his going back before he changed his clothing and had something put upon the cut in his head. After a little arguing, it was agreed that Ben and the clerk should ferry the flour across to the store, and then the clerk would bring Ben back.

"Goodness sakes alive!" shrieked Aunt Alvirah, when she saw them come onto the porch, still dripping. "What you been doing to my pretty, Jabez Potter?"

"Huh!" sniffed the miller. "Mebbe it's what she's been doing to *me*?" and he wreathed his thin lips into a wry grin.

Aunt Alvirah and Mercy must hear it all. The lame girl was delighted. She pointed her finger at the old man, who had now gotten into his Sunday suit and had a bandage on his head.

"Now, tell me, Dusty Miller, what do you think about girls being of some use? Isn't Ruth as good as any boy?"

"She sartainly kep' me from drownin' as good as any boy goin'," admitted the old man. "But that was only

chancey, as ye might say. When it comes to bein' of main use in the world——Wal, it ain't gals thet makes the wheels go 'round!'

"And don't you really think, Uncle, that girls are any use in the world?" asked Ruth, quietly. She had come out upon the dimly lit porch (this was after their supper) in season to hear the miller's final observation.

"Ha!" ejaculated Jabez. Perhaps he had not intended Ruth to hear just that. "They're like flowers, I reckon—mighty purty an' ornamental; but they ain't no manner o' re'l use!"

Mercy fairly snorted, but she was too wise to say anything farther. Ruth, however, continued:

"That seems very unfair, Uncle. Many girls are 'worth their salt,' as you call it, to their families. Why can't *I* be of use to you—in time, of course?"

"Ha! everyone to his job," said Uncle Jabez, brusquely. "You kin be of gre't help to your Aunt Alviry, no doubt. But ye can't take a sack of flour on your shoulders an' throw it inter a waggin—like Ben there. Or like that Roberto thet lugged me ashore to-night. An' I'm some weight, I be."

"And is that all the kind of help you think you'll ever need, Uncle?" demanded Ruth, with rising emotion.

"I ain't expectin' ter be helpless an' want nussin' by no gal—not yet awhile," said Uncle Jabez, with a chuckle. "Gals is a gre't expense—a gre't expense."

"Now, Jabez! ye don't mean thet air," exclaimed the little old woman, coming from the kitchen. She lowered herself into the little rocker nearby, with her usual moan of, "Oh, my back! an' oh, my bones! Ye don't mean ter hurt my pretty's feelin's, I know."

"She axed me!" exclaimed the miller, angrily. "I vum! ain't I spendin' a fortun' on her schoolin' at that Briarwood Hall?"

"And didn't she save ye a tidy fortun' when she straightened out that Tintacker Mine trouble for ye, Jabez Potter?" demanded the old woman, vigorously. "An' the good Lord knows she's been a comfort an' help to ye, right an' left, in season an' out, ever since she fust stepped foot inter this Red Mill——What's she done for ye this very day, Jabez, as ye said yourself?"

Aunt Alvirah was one of the very few people who dared to talk plainly to the miller, when he was in one of his tempers. Now he growled out some rough reply, and strode into the house.

"You've driven him away, Auntie!" cried Ruth, under her breath.

"He'd oughter be driv' away," said the old woman, "when he's in thet mind."

"But what he says is true. I *am* a great expense to him. I—I wish I could earn my own way through school."

"Don't ye worry, my pretty. Jabez Potter's bark is wuss than his bite."

"But the bark hurts, just the same."

"He ought to be whipped!" hissed Mercy, in her most unmerciful tone. "I'd like to whip him, till all the dust flew out of his Dusty Miller clothes—so I would!"

"Sh!" commanded Ruth, recovering her self-command again and fighting back the tears. "Just as Aunt Alvirah observes, he doesn't mean half of what he says."

"It hurts just the same—you said it yourself," declared the lame girl, with a snap.

"I want to be independent, anyway," said Ruth, with some excitement. "I want an education so I can *do* something. I'd like to cultivate my voice—the teacher says it has possibilities. Mr. Cameron is going to let Helen go as far as she likes with the violin, and she doesn't *have* to think about making her way in the world."

"Gals ain't content now to sit down after gittin' some schoolin'—I kin see thet," sighed Aunt Alvirah. "It warn't so in my day. I never see the beat of 'em for wantin' ter go out inter the worl' an' make a livin'—jes' like men."

CHAPTER IV

THE AUTO TOUR

"Hi, Ruth!"

"Hey, Ruth!"

"Straw, Ruth!—why don't you say?" cried the owner of the name, running to the porch and smiling out

upon the Cameron twins, who had stopped their automobile at the Red Mill gate on a morning soon following that day on which Uncle Jabez and Ruth had undergone their involuntary ducking in the Lumano.

"Aren't you ready, Ruthie?" cried Helen from the back seat of the car.

"Do hurry up, Ruth—the horses don't want to stand," laughed Tom, who was slim and black haired and black eyed, like his twin. Indeed, the two were so much alike that, dressed in each other's clothing, it is doubtful if they could have been suspected in such disguise.

"But my bag isn't packed yet," cried Ruth. "I didn't know you'd be here so soon."

"Take your toothbrush and powder puff—that's all you girls really need," declared the irrepressible Tom.

"I like that! And on a two days' trip into the hills," said his sister, beating him soundly with an energetic fist.

"Give him one or two good ones for me, Helen," said Ruth, and ran in to finish her preparations for the journey she was to take with her friends.

"Pshaw!" grumbled the impatient Tom, "going to Uncle Ike's isn't like going to a fancy hotel. And we'll stop over to-night with Fred Larkin's folks—the girls there would lend you and Ruth all you need."

"Hold on!" exclaimed his sister. "Just what have you in *your* bag? I know it's heavy. You have all you want ——"

"Sure. Pair of socks, two collars, fishing tackle, some books I borrowed of Fred last year, my bicycle

wrench—you never know when you are going to need it,—a string of wampum I promised to take to Nealy Larkin—she's a Campfire girl, you know—and an Indian tomahawk for Fred——"

"But, clothes! clothes!" gasped Helen. "Where are your shirts?"

"Oh, I'll borrow a shirt, if I need one," declared Master Tom, grinning. "Uncle Ike's Benjy is about my size, you know. What's the use of carting around so much stuff?"

"I notice you have your bag full of trash," sniffed Helen. "It can plainly be seen that Mrs. Murchiston was called away so suddenly that she could not oversee our packing."

"Come on, Ruth!" shouted Tom again, turning toward the farmhouse.

"Now, don't get her in a flurry," admonished Helen. "She hasn't had but two hours' notice to get ready for this two days' trip. It's a wonder Uncle Jabez would let her go with us at all."

"Oh, Uncle Jabe isn't such a bad old fellow after all," said Tom.

"He's been just as cross and cranky as he can be, ever since he lost his boat in the river the other evening—you know that. And they say he would have been drowned, too, if it hadn't been for Ruthie. What a brave girl she is, Tom!"

"Bravest in seven states!" acknowledged Master Tom, promptly. He had always thought there was nobody just like Ruth, and his sister smiled upon him approvingly.

"I guess she is!" she agreed. "There isn't a girl at

Briarwood Hall that will be her match in anything—now that Madge Steele has gotten through. Ruth is going to be head of the senior class before we graduate—you see."

"She'll have to hustle some to beat little Mercy Curtis," grinned Tom. "*There's* a sharp suffragette for you!"

Helen laughed. "That's right. But, unfortunately for Mercy, Mrs. Tellingham considers other work beside our books in grading us. Oh, Tommy! we're going to have a dandy time this coming year at school."

"You have my best wishes," returned her brother, with a slightly clouded face. "Bobbins and Busy Izzy and I expect to be drilled like everything, when we get back to Seven Oaks. Professor Darly is a terror."

Ruth came out with her bag then, and in the doorway behind her appeared the little, stooped figure of Aunt Alvirah. The Camerons waved their hands and shouted greetings to her.

"Take good keer of my pretty, Master Tom," shrilled the old lady, hobbling out into the yard. "Oh, my back! and oh, my bones!"

"We'll handle her as if she were made of glass," declared Tom, laughing. "Hop in, Ruthie!"

"Good-bye, Aunt Alvirah!" cried the girl of the Red Mill, clasping the little old lady around the neck and kissing her. Then she waved her hand to Uncle Jabez, who appeared in the mill doorway, and he nodded grimly, as the car started.

Ben appeared at a window and bashfully nodded to the departing pleasure party. The car quickly passed the end of the Cheslow road and sped up the riverside. These lowlands beyond the Red Mill had

once been covered by a great flood, and the three friends would never forget their race with the freshet from Culm Falls, at the time the Minturn Dam burst.

"But we're bound far, far above the dam this time," said Tom. "Fred Larkin lives farther than that—beyond the gorge between the hills, and at the foot of the first pond. We'll get there long before dark unless something happens to this old mill I'm driving."

"There! Tommy's harping on his pet trouble," laughed Helen. "Father won't let us use the new car to go scooting about the country alone in, and Tommy thinks he is abused."

"Well! that 'six' is just eating its head off in the garage," grumbled the boy.

"Just as though it were a horse!" chuckled Ruth.

"You wait! I bet something happens on this trip, because of this old heap of scrap iron that pa calls a car."

"Goodness me!" exclaimed Helen, with some exasperation. "Don't you dare have a breakdown in the hills, Tom! I should be frightened. It's so wild up there beyond Loon Lake."

"You needn't blame me," returned her twin. "I shall do my best."

"And so will the auto—I have no doubt," added Ruth, laughingly. "Cheer up, Helen, dear——"

"I know the rest of it!" interrupted her chum. "'The worst is yet to come!' I—hope—not!"

Ruth Fielding would allow no worrying or criticism in this event. They were out for a good time, and she at once proceeded to cheer up the twins, and laugh

at their fears, and interest them in other things.

They crossed the river at Culm Falls—a beautiful spot—and it was beyond the bridge, as the car was mounting the first long rise, that the party of adventurers found their first incident of moment.

Here and there were clearings in the forest upon the right side of the road (on the other side the hill fell abruptly to the river), and little farms. As the party came in sight of one of these farms, a great cry arose from the dooryard. The poultry was soundly disturbed—squawking, cackling, shrieking their protests noisily—while the deep baying of a dog rose savagely above the general turmoil.

"Something doing there!" quoth Tom Cameron, slowing down.

"A chicken hawk, perhaps?" suggested Ruth.

A woman was screaming admonition or advice; occasionally the gruffer voice of a man added to the turmoil. But the dog's barking was the loudest sound.

Suddenly, from around the corner of the barn, appeared a figure wildly running. It was neither the farmer, nor his wife—that was sure.

"Tramp!" exclaimed Tom, reaching for the starting lever again.

At that moment Helen shrieked. After the running man appeared a hound. He had broken his leash, and a more savage brute it would be difficult to imagine. He was following the runner with great leaps, and when the fugitive vaulted the roadside fence, the dog crashed through the rails, tearing down a length of them, and scrambling in the dusty road in an endeavor to get on the trail of the man again.

Only, it was not a man; it was a boy! He was big and strong looking, but his face was boyish. Ruth Fielding stood up suddenly in the car and shrieked to him:

"Come here! This way! Roberto!"

"My goodness! is he a friend of yours, Ruthie?" gasped Tom Cameron.

"He's the Gypsy boy that saved Uncle Jabez," returned Ruth, in a breath.

"Take him aboard—*do*!" urged Helen. "That awful dog——"

Roberto had heard and leaped for the running-board of the car. Tom switched on the power. Just as the huge hound leaped, and his fore-paws touched the step, the car darted away and the brute was left sprawling.

The car was a left-hand drive, and Tom motioned the panting youth to get in beside him. The dark-faced fellow did so. At first he was too breathless to speak, but his black eyes snapped like beads, and his lips smiled. He seemed to have enjoyed the race with the savage dog, instead of having been frightened by it.

"You save me, Missy, like I save your old man—eh?" he panted, at last, turning his brilliant smile upon Ruth. "Me! that dog mos' have me, eh?"

"What was the matter? How came you to start all that riot?" demanded Tom, looking at the Gypsy youth askance.

Roberto's grin became expansive. The little gold rings in his ears twinkled as well as his eyes.

"I did them no wrong. I slept in the man's haymow. He found me a little while ago. He say I haf to *pay*

for my sleep—eh? How poor Gypsy pay?" and he opened his hands and shrugged his shoulders to show that his pockets were empty.

"Me, no money have got. Can I work? Of course I work—only the farmers do not trust me. They call all Gypsies thieves. Isn't it so, Missy?" and he flashed a glance at Ruth.

"I know, Mr. Joe Bascom drove you out of his orchard," agreed the girl of the Red Mill. "But you should have come across the river to *us*. Uncle Jabez is really grateful to you."

"Oh, *that*?" and the boy shrugged his shoulders again. "I do not want pay for what I do—no. I want no money. I would not work a day for all my grandmother's wealth—and she is a miser," and Roberto laughed again, showing all his white, strong teeth.

"But these people back here—this man and his woman—they want me to churn. It is a dog's work—no? I see where the dog haf to churn, but that dog die and they get this new, savage one—and it will not. Me, I think this dog very wise!" and Roberto's merriment broke out again, and he shook with it.

"So I tell them I will not do dog's work, and then he, the man, chases me with his pitchfork, and the woman unloose the dog. Oh, yes! I make a great noise in the henyard. That dog chase me hard. So—I got away as you see," he concluded.

"Say! you're a cool one," declared Tom, with growing admiration.

"But you ought not to be loafing about, sleeping anywhere, and without employment," said Helen, primly.

Roberto's black eyes sparkled. "Why does the little missy say I should work?" he demanded. "There is no need. I return to my people, perhaps. There I curry horses and fill the water pails for the women, and go with my uncle to the horse-fairs where he trades, or be under my grandmother's beck and call—the grandmother whom I tell you is a miser. But I never have money with them, and why should I work for it elsewhere?"

"To get good clothes, and good food, and pay your way everywhere," suggested Tom.

Roberto laughed again. He spread out his strong hands. "These keep me from day to day," he said. "But money burns a hole in my pocket. Or, would you have me like my grandmother? She hoards every penny-piece, and then gloats over her money-box, by the firelight, when the rest of the camp is asleep. Oh, I see her!"

CHAPTER V

A PROPHECY FULFILLED

This queer youth interested Ruth Fielding and her

friends, the Cameron twins, very much. Roberto was not naturally talkative, it seemed, for he soon dropped into silence and it was hard to get aught out of him but "Yes" and "No." At first, however, he had been excited, and he told them a great deal of his life with the tribe and along the pleasant country roads.

The cities Roberto could not bear. "There is no breath left in them—it is used up by so many," he explained. He did not eschew work because he was lazy, it seemed; but he saw no use in it.

Clothing? Money? Rich food? Other things that people strive for in the main? They were nothing to Roberto. He could sleep under a haystack, crunch a crust of bread, and wear his garments until they fell off him in rags.

But he knew the woods and fields as nobody but a wild boy could. Every whistle and note of every bird was as familiar to him as his own Tzigane speech; and he could imitate them with exactness.

He delighted his new friends, as the car rumbled along. He soon stopped talking much, as I have said, but he answered their multitude of questions, and did not seem to mind being cross-questioned about the life of the Gypsies.

The auto party stopped soon after noon to lunch. It was Roberto who pointed out the spring of clear, cold water for which they searched. He had been over this road before and, it seemed, once along a trail was enough for the young Gypsy. He never forgot.

He went away down the little stream, and made himself very clean before appearing for his share of the food. To the surprise of Ruth and Helen he ate daintily and showed breeding of a kind. Nor was he

enamored of the cakes and other dainties that Babette, the Camerons' cook, had put into the lunch hamper, but enjoyed, instead, the more simple viands.

Roberto grew restless of riding in the car soon after luncheon. He thanked them for giving him the lift, but explained that there were paths through the woods leading to the present camp of his tribe that he preferred to follow.

"It is a mark of kindness for you to have brought me this way," he said, softly, bending over Ruth's hand, for he insisted upon considering her his hostess. He realized that, had it not been for her, the Camerons would have been chary of taking him aboard.

"If you are ever near the Red Mill again," Ruth told him, "be sure to come and speak with Uncle Jabez. He will not forget you, I am sure."

"Of that—pooh!" exclaimed the Gypsy. "I do not want pay for such an act. Do you?"

And that set Ruth Fielding to thinking a bit. Perhaps she *had* expected payment—of a kind—for her action in helping Uncle Jabez in the river. She had hoped he would more freely respond to her affection than he did. Ah! it is hard to do a good act and not secretly hope for some small return. "Virtue is its own reward" is a moral hard to understand!

After Roberto had left them, the trio of friends were occupied in exchanging views regarding the Gypsy boy, and in discussing their several opinions as to what kind of people his folk really were.

"It must be loads of fun to jog along the roads in those caravans, and camp where you please, and all that," said Helen, reflectively. "I believe I'd like it."

"About twenty miles on a fast day, eh?" chuckled Tom, with scorn. "Not for me! When Gypsies get to riding in autos—and six-cylinder, up-to-date ones, too—I'll join the first tribe that comes along."

"I declare, Tommy!" laughed his sister, "you are getting to be a 'speed fiend.' Ruth and I will be scared to drive with you."

"It's great to go fast," exclaimed Master Tom. "Here's a straight piece of road ahead, girls. Hold on!"

As he spoke, he manipulated the levers and the car leaped ahead. Ruth's startled "Oh!" was left a quarter of a mile behind. The girls clung to the hand-holds, and Tom crouched behind the windshield and "let her out."

It was a straight piece of road, as he had said. But before they reached the first turn there was another house beside the road—a small farmhouse. Beyond it was a field, with a stone wall, and it chanced that just as the Camerons' car roared down the road, clearing at least thirty miles an hour, the leader of a flock of sheep in that pasture, butted through a place in the stone-fence and started to cross the highway.

One sheep would not have made much trouble; it would have been easy to dodge just one object. But here came a string of the woolly creatures—and greater fools than sheep have not been discovered in the animal world!

The old black-faced ram trotted across the road and through a gap in a fence on the river side. After him crowded the ewes and youngsters.

The roaring auto frightened the creatures, but they would not give way before it. They knew no better than to follow that old ram through the gap, one

after the other.

Tom had shut off the engine and applied the brakes, as the girls shrieked. But he had been going too fast to stop short of the place where the sheep were passing. At the end of the flock came a lamb, bleating and trying to keep up with its mother.

"Oh, the lamb!" shrieked Helen.

"Look out, Tom!" added Ruth.

The lamb did not get across the road. The car struck it, and with a pitiful "baa-a-a!" it was knocked a dozen feet.

In a moment the car stopped. It had scarcely run its entire length past the spot where the lamb was struck. The poor creature lay panting, "baa-aing" feebly, beside the road.

Ruth was out of the tonneau and kneeling beside the creature almost before the wheels ceased to roll. The mother ewe had crowded through the fence. Now she put her foolish face out, and called to the lamb to follow.

"He can't!" almost sobbed Ruth. "He has a broken leg. Oh! what a foolish mother you were to lead him right into danger."

Tom was silent and looked pretty solemn, while Helen was scolding him nervously—although she knew that he was not really at fault.

"If you hadn't been speeding, this wouldn't have happened, Tom Cameron!" she said. "I told you so."

"Oh, all right. You're a fine prophetess," grunted her brother. "Keep on rubbing it in."

The lamb had tried to scramble up, but one of its forelegs certainly was broken. It tumbled over on its

side again, and Ruth held it down tenderly and tried to soothe its fear.

"Oh, dear! whatever shall we do?" she murmured. "The poor, poor little thing."

"Guess we'll know pretty soon what we'll do," quoth Master Tom, standing beside the machine and looking back along the road. "Here comes the man that owns him."

"Oh, dear me!" whispered Helen. "Doesn't he look savage?"

"Worse than the old ram there," agreed her brother, for the black-faced leader of the flock was eyeing them through the fence.

CHAPTER VI

A TRANSACTION IN MUTTON

The man who approached was a fierce, red-faced individual, with long legs encased to the knees in cowhide boots, overalls, a checked shirt, and a whisp of yellow whisker under his chin that parted and waved, as he strode toward the auto party.

His pale blue eyes were ablaze, and he had worked himself up into a towering rage. Like many farmers (and sometimes for cause), he had evidently sworn eternal feud against all automobilists!

"What d'ye mean, runnin' inter my sheep?" he bawled. "I'll have the law on ye! I'll make ye pay for ev'ry sheep ye killed! I'll attach yer machine, by glory! I'll put ye all in jail! I'll——"

"You're going to have your hands full with all *that*, Mister," interrupted Tom Cameron. "And you're excited more than is necessary. I'll pay for all the damage I've done—although there would have been none at all, had your sheep remained in their pasture. This is a county road, I take it."

"By glory!" exclaimed the farmer, arriving at the spot at last. "This road was built for folks ter drive over decent. Nobody reckoned on locomotives, an' sich comin' this way, when 'twas built—no, sir-ree!"

"I'm sorry," began Tom, but the man broke in:

"Thet don't pay me none for havin' all my sheep made into mutton b'fore their time. By glory! I got an attic home full o' 'sorries.' Ye can't git out o' it thet way."

"I am not trying to. I'll pay for any sheep I have hurt or killed," Tom said, unable to keep from grinning at the excited farmer.

"And don't ye git sassy none, neither!" commanded the man. "I'm one o' the school trustees in this deestrict, an' the church clerk. I got some influence. I guess if I arrested ye right naow—an' these gals, too —the jestice of the peace would consider I done jest right."

"Oh!" murmured Helen, clinging to Ruth's hand.

"He can't do it," whispered the latter.

"I feel sure, sir," said Tom, politely, "that it will be unnecessary for you to go to such lengths. I will pay satisfactory damages. There is the lamb we struck—and the only beast that is hurt."

The man had given but one glance to the lamb that lay on the grass beside the girls. He did not look to be any too tender-hearted, and the little creature's accident did not touch him at all—save in the region of his pocketbook.

He stepped to the gap in the fence, kicked the bleating ewe out of the way in a most brutal manner, and proceeded to count his flock. He had to do this twice before he was assured that none but the lamb was missing.

"You see," Tom said, quietly, "I have turned only one of your sheep into mutton—for I suppose this lamb must be killed."

"Oh, no, Tom!" cried Ruth, who was bending over the little creature again. "I am sure its leg will mend."

The farmer snorted. "Don't want no crippled critters erbout. Ye'll hafter pay me full price for that lamb, boy—then I'll give it to the dogs. 'Tain't no good the way it is."

Ruth had tied the leg firmly with her own handkerchief—which was of practical size. "If we could put it in splints, and keep the lamb still, it would mend," she declared to Helen.

"What do you consider the thing worth, sir?" asked Tom.

"Four dollars," declared the farmer, promptly. It was not worth two, even at the present price of lamb, for

the creature was neither big nor fat.

"Here you are," said Tom, and thrust four one-dollar notes into his hand.

The man stared at them, and from them to Tom. He really seemed disappointed. Perhaps he wished he had said more, when Tom did not haggle over the price.

"Wal, I'll take it along to the house then," said the farmer. "An' when ye come this road ag'in, young man, ye better go a leetle slow—yaas, a leetle slow!"

"I certainly shall—as long as you have gaps in your sheep pasture fence," returned Tom, promptly.

"Git out'n the way, leetle gal," said the man, brushing Ruth aside. "I'll take him——"

The lamb struggled to get on its feet. The sudden appearance of the man frightened the animal.

"Stop that!" cried Ruth. "You'll hurt the poor thing."

"I'll knock him in the head, when I git to the chopping block," said the farmer, roughly. "Shucks! it's only a lamb."

"Don't you dare!" Ruth cried, standing in front of the quivering creature. "You are cruel."

"Hoity-toity!" cried the farmer. "I guess I kin do as I please with my own."

Helen clung to Ruth's hand and tried to draw her away from the rough man. Even Tom hesitated to arouse the farmer's wrath further. But the girl from the Red Mill stamped her foot and refused to move.

"Don't you dare touch it!" she exclaimed. "It isn't your lamb."

"What's that?" he demanded, and then broke into a

hoarse laugh. "Thet thar's a good one! I raised thet lamb——"

"And we have just bought it—paid you your own price for it," cried Ruth.

"Crickey! that's so, Ruthie," Tom Cameron interposed. "Of course he doesn't own it. If you want the poor thing, we'll take it along to Fred Larkin's place."

"Say!" exclaimed the farmer. "What does this mean? I didn't sell ye the carcass of thet thar lamb; I only got damages——"

"You sold it. You know you did," Ruth declared, firmly. "I dare you to touch the poor little thing. It is ours—and I know its life can be saved."

"Pick it right up, girls, and come on," advised Tom, starting his engine. "We have the rights of it, and if he interferes, we'll just run on to the next town and bring a constable back with us. I guess we can call upon the authorities, too. What's sauce for the goose, ought to be sauce for the gander."

The man was stammering some very impolite words, and Tom was anxious to get his sister and Ruth away. The girls lifted the lamb in upon the back seat and laid it tenderly upon some wraps. Then the boy leaped into the front seat and prepared to start.

"I tell ye what it is!" exclaimed the farmer, coming close to the car. "This ain't no better than highway robbery. I never expected ter have ye take the carcass away, when I told ye sich a low price——"

"I have paid its full value, and you don't own a thread of its wool, Mister," said Tom, feeling the engine throb under him now. "I'm going to start——"

"You wait! I ain't got through with you——"

Just then the car started. The man had been holding to the end of the seat. He foolishly tried to continue his hold.

The car sprang ahead suddenly, the farmer was swung around like a top, and the last they saw of him he was sitting in the middle of the dusty road, shaking both fists after the car, and yelling at the top of his voice. Just what he said, it was perhaps better that they did not hear!

"Wasn't he a mean old thing?" cried Tom, when the car was purring along steadily.

"And wasn't Ruth smart to see that he had no right to this poor little sheep?" said Helen, admiringly.

"What you going to do with it, Ruthie?" demanded Tom, glancing back at the lamb. "Going to sell it to a butcher in Littletop? That's where Fred Larkin's folk live, you know."

"Sell it to a butcher!" exclaimed Ruth, in scorn. "That's what the farmer would have done—butchered it."

"It is the fate of most sheep to be turned into mutton," returned Tom, his eyes twinkling.

"And then the mutton is turned into boys and girls," laughed Ruth. "But if I have my way, this little fellow will never become either a Cameron, or a Fielding."

"Oh! I wouldn't want to eat him—after seeing him hurt," cried Helen. "Isn't he cunning? See! he knows we are going to be good to him."

"I hope he knows it," her chum replied. "After all, it doesn't take much to assure domestic animals of our good intentions toward them."

"Well," said Tom, grinning, "I promise not to eat this

lamb, if you make a point of it, but if I don't get something to eat pretty soon, I assure you he'll be in grave danger!"

They made Littletop and the Larkins' residence before Tom became too ravenous, however; and the younger members of the Larkin family welcomed the adventurers—including the lamb—with enthusiasm.

Fred Larkin had some little aptitude for medicine and surgery—so they all said, at least—and he set the broken leg and put splints upon it. Then they put the little creature in one of the calf pens, fed it liberally, and Fred declared that in ten days it would be well enough to hop around.

The little Larkin folk were delighted with the lamb for a pet, so Ruth knew that she could safely trust her protégé to them.

There was great fun that night, for the neighboring young folk were invited to meet the trio from Cheslow and the Red Mill, and it was midnight before the girls and boys were still. Therefore, there was no early start made for the second day's run.

Breakfast was late, and it was half-past nine before Tom started the car, and they left Littletop amid the cheers and good wishes of their friends.

"We must hustle, if we want to get to Uncle Ike's before dark," Tom declared. "So you will have to stand for some scorching, girls."

"See that you don't kill anything—or even maim it," advised his sister. "You are out four dollars for damages already."

"Never you mind. I reckon you girls won't care to be marooned along some of these wild roads all night."

"Nor to travel over them by night, either," advised Ruth. "My! we haven't seen a house for ten miles."

"It's somewhere up this way that those Gypsy friends of Roberto are encamped—as near as I could make out," Tom remarked.

"My! I wouldn't like to meet them," his sister said.

"They wouldn't hurt us—at least, Roberto didn't," laughed Ruth.

"That's all right. But Gypsies *do* carry off people——"

"And eat them?" scoffed Tom. "How silly, Nell!"

"Well, Mr. Smartie! they might hold us for ransom."

"Like regular brigands, eh?" returned Tom, lightly. "That *would* be an adventure worth chronicling."

"You can laugh——Oh!"

As she was speaking, Helen saw a head thrust out of the bushes not far along the road they traveled.

"What's the matter?" demanded Ruth, seizing her arm.

"Look there!" But the car was past the spot in a moment. "Somebody was watching us, and dodged back," declared Helen, anxiously.

"Oh, nonsense!" laughed her brother.

But before they took the next turn they looked back and saw two men standing in the road, talking. They were rough-looking fellows.

"Gypsies!" cried Helen.

However, they saw nobody else for a few miles. Now they were skirting one of the lakes in the upper chain, some miles above the gorge where the dam was built, and the scenery was both beautiful and

rugged. There were few farms.

On a rising stretch of road, the engine began to miss, and something rattled painfully in the "internal arrangements" of the car. Tom looked serious, stopped several times, and just coaxed her slowly to the summit of the hill.

"Now don't tell us that we're going to have a breakdown!" cried Helen.

"Do you think those are thunder-heads hanging over the mountain?" asked Ruth, seriously.

"Sure of it!" responded Helen.

"You are a regular 'calamity howler'!" exclaimed Tom. "By Jove! this old mill *is* going to kick up rusty."

"There's a house!" cried Ruth, gaily, standing up in the back to look ahead. "Now we're all right if the machine has to be repaired, or a storm bursts upon us."

But when the car limped up and stopped in the sandy road before the sagging gate, the trio saw that their refuge was a windowless and abandoned structure that looked as gaunt and ghostly as a lightning-riven tree!

CHAPTER VII

FELLOW TRAVELERS

"Well! this is a pretty pickle!" groaned Tom, at last as much disturbed as Helen had been. "It's no use, girls. We'll have to stop here till the storm is over. It is coming."

"Well, that will be fun!" cried Ruth, cheerfully. "Of course we ought to be storm-bound in a deserted house. That is according to all romantic precedent."

"Humph! you and your precedent!" grumbled her chum. "I'd rather it was a nice roadside hotel, or tearoom. That would be something like."

"Come on! we'll take in the hamper, and make tea on the deserted hearthstone," said Ruth. "Tom can stay out here and repair his old auto."

"Tom will find a shelter for the machine first, I reckon. There! hear the thunder? We are going to get it, and I must raise the hood of the tonneau, too," proclaimed the lad. "Go on with your hamper and wraps. I see sheds back there, and I'll try to coax the old Juggernaut into that lane and so to the sheds."

He did as he proposed during the next few minutes, while the girls approached the deserted dwelling, with the hamper. The lower front windows were boarded, and the door closed. But the door giving entrance from the side porch was ajar.

"'Leave all hope behind, ye who enter here,'" quoted Helen, peering into the dusky interior. "It looks powerful ghostly, Ruthie."

"There are plenty of windows out, so we'll have light enough," returned the girl of the Red Mill. "Don't be a 'fraid cat,' Helen."

"That's all right," grumbled her chum. "You're only making a bluff yourself."

Ruth laughed. She was not bothered by fears of the supernatural, no matter what the old house was, or had been. Now, a good-sized rat might have made her shriek and run!

Into the house stepped Ruth Fielding, in her very bravest manner. The hall was dark, but the door into a room at the left—toward the back of the house—was open and through this doorway she ventured, the old, rough boards of the floor creaking beneath her feet.

This apartment must have been the dining-room. There was a high, ornate, altogether ugly mantle and open fireplace at one end of the room. At the other, there stood, fastened to the wall, or built into it, a china closet, the doors of which had been removed. These ugly, shallow caverns gaped at them and promised refuge to spiders and mice. On the hearth was a heap of crusted gray ashes.

"What a lonesome, eerie sort of a place," shivered Helen. "Wish the old car had kept running——"

"Through the rain?" suggested Ruth, pointing outside, where the air was already gray with approaching moisture.

Down from the higher hills the storm was sweeping. They could smell it, for the wind leaped in at the broken windows and rustled the shreds of paper still clinging to the walls of the dining-room.

"This isn't a fit place to eat in," grumbled Helen.

"Let's go above stairs. Carry that alcohol stove carefully, dear. We'll have a nice cup of tea, even if it does——"

"Oh!" shrieked Helen, as a long streak of lightning flew across their line of vision.

"Yes. Even in spite of *that*," repeated Ruth, smiling, and raising her voice that she might be heard above the cannonade of thunder.

"I don't like it, I tell you!" declared her chum.

"I can't say that I do myself, but I do not see how we are to help it."

"I wish Tom was inside here, too."

Ruth had glanced through the window and seen that Master Tom had managed to get the auto under a shed at the back. He was industriously putting up the curtains to the car, and making all snug against the rain, before he began to tinker with the machinery.

There was a faint drumming in the air—the sound of rain coming down the mountain side, beating its "charge" upon the leaves as it came. There were no other sounds, for the birds and insects had sought shelter before the wrathful face of the storm.

Yes! there was one other. The girls had not heard it until they began climbing the stairs out of the side entry. Helen clutched Ruth suddenly by the skirt.

"Hear that!" she whispered.

"Say it out loud, dear, do!" exclaimed the girl of the Red Mill. "There is never anything so nerve-shaking as a stage whisper."

"There! you heard it?"

"The wind rustling something," said Ruth, attempting to go on.

"No."

"Something squeaks—mice, I do believe."

"Mice would starve to death here," declared Helen.

"How smart of you! That is right," agreed Ruth. "Come on. Let us see what it is—if it's upstairs."

Helen clung close to her and trembled. There was the rustling, squeaking sound again. Ruth pushed on (secretly feeling rather staggered by the strange noise), and they entered one of the larger upper chambers.

Immediately she saw an open stovepipe hole in the chimney. "The noise comes from that," she declared, setting down the basket and pointing.

"But what is it?" wailed her frightened chum.

"The wind?"

"Never!"

The lightning flashed again, and the thunder rolled nearer. Helen screamed, crouched down upon the floor, and covered her ears, squeezing her eyelids tight shut too.

"Dreadful! dreadful!" she gasped.

Still the silence outside between the reports of thunder; but the rustling in the chimney continued. Ruth looked around, found a piece of broken window-sash on the floor, and approached the open pipe-hole.

"Here's for stirring up Mr. Ghost," she said, in a much braver tone than she secretly felt.

She always felt her responsibility with Helen. The latter was of a nervous, imaginary temperament, and it was never well for her to get herself worked up in this way.

"Oh, Ruth! Don't! Suppose it bites you!" gasped

Helen.

At that Ruth *did* laugh. "Whoever heard of a ghost with teeth?" she demanded, and instantly thrust the stick into the gaping hole.

There was a stir—a flutter—a squeaking—and out flopped a brown object about the size of a mouse. Helen shrieked again, and even Ruth darted back.

"A mouse!" cried Helen.

"Right—*a flittermouse*!" agreed Ruth, suddenly bursting into a laugh. "The chimney's full of them."

"Oh, let's get out!"

"In this rain?" and Ruth pointed to the window, where now the drops were falling, big and fast—the vanguard of the storm.

"But if a bat gets into your hair!" moaned Helen, rocking herself on her knees.

Ruth opened the big hamper, seized a newspaper, and swooped down upon the blind, fluttering brown bat. Seizing it as she would a spider, she ran to the window and flung it out, just as the water burst into the room in a flood.

Then she ran to the pipe-hole and thrust the paper into it, making a "stopper" which would not easily fall out. She dragged Helen to the other side of the room, where the floor was dry and they were out of the draught.

There the two girls cowered for some moments, hugged close together, Helen hiding her eyes from the intermittent lightning against Ruth's jacket. The thunder roared overhead, and the rain dashed down in torrents. For ten minutes it was as hard a storm as the girl of the Red Mill ever remembered seeing.

Such tempests in the hills are not infrequent.

When the thunder began to roll away into the distance, and the lightning was less brilliant, the girls could take some notice of what else went on. The fierce drumming of the rain continued, but there seemed to be a noise in the lower part of the building.

"Tom has come in," said Helen, with satisfaction.

"He must have gotten awfully wet, then, getting here from that shed," Ruth returned. "Hush!"

Somebody sneezed heavily. Helen opened her mouth to cry out, but Ruth put her palm upon her lips, effectually smothing the cry.

"Sh!" the girl of the Red Mill admonished. "Let him find us."

"Oh! that will be fun," agreed Helen.

Ruth did not look at her. She listened intently. There was a heavy, scraping foot upon the floor below. To *her* mind, it did not sound like Tom at all.

She held Helen warningly by the wrist and they continued to strain their ears for some minutes. Then an odor reached them which Ruth was sure did not denote Tom's presence in the room below. It was the smell of strong tobacco smoked in an ancient pipe!

"What's that?" sniffed Helen, whisperingly.

Uncle Jabez smoked a strong pipe and Ruth could not be mistaken as to the nature of this one. She remembered the two men who had hidden in the bushes as the car rolled by, not many miles back on this road.

"Let's shout for Tom and bring him in here," Helen suggested.

"Perhaps get him into trouble? Let's try and find out, first, what sort of people they are," objected Ruth, for they now heard talking and knew that there were at least two visitors below.

Rising quietly, Ruth crept on tiptoe to the head of the stair. The drumming rain helped smother any sound she might have made.

Slowly, stair by stair, Ruth Fielding let herself down until she could see into the open doorway of the dining room. Two men were squatting on the hearth, both smoking assiduously.

They were rough looking, unlovely fellows, and the growl of their voices did not impress Ruth as being of a quality to inspire confidence.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT WAS IT ALL ABOUT?

The two men were mumbling together—Ruth could not catch the words at first. When she did, they meant nothing to her, and she was puzzled.

But suddenly one said in clear, if peculiar, English:

"The old hag bags the best of the loot—always, my Carlo."

The other replied, still gruffly, yet in a musical language that Ruth could not identify; yet somehow she was reminded of Roberto. He, the Gypsy lad, had formed his English sentences much as this ruffian had formed his phrase. Were these two of Roberto's tribesmen?

"I like it not—I like it not!" the other burst out again, in anger. "Why should she govern? It is an iron rod in a trembling hand."

"Psst!" snapped the other. "You respect neither age nor wisdom." He now spoke in English, but later he relapsed into the Tzigane tongue. Helen crept down to Ruth's side and listened, too; but it was little the girls understood.

The angry ruffian—the complaining one—dropped more words in English now and then, like: "We risk all—she nothing." "There were the pearls, my Carlo—ah! beautiful! beautiful! Does she not seize them as her own?" "I put my neck in a noose no longer for any man but myself—surely not for a woman!"

Then it was that the man Carlo burst into a tirade in his native speech, and under cover of his loud talk Ruth motioned her chum to creep back up the stairway, and she followed.

A sudden disquieting thought came to her. The rain was growing less. Suppose Tom should come abruptly into the house? He might get into trouble with these ruffians.

She whispered this thought to Helen, and her friend was panic-stricken again. "We must warn Tom—oh, we *must* warn him somehow!" she gasped.

"Surely we will," declared the girl from the Red Mill. "Now, careful how you step. A creaking board might give us away."

They crept across the upper chamber to the rear of the house. Through another room they went, until they could look out of a broken window upon the sheds. There was Master Tom standing before the shed (the machine was hidden), wiping his hands upon a piece of waste, and looking out upon the falling rain.

He saw the girls almost instantly, and opened his mouth to shout to them, but Ruth clapped her own hand to her lips and motioned with the other for him to be silent. Tom understood.

He looked more than surprised—not a little startled, in fact.

"What will he think?" murmured Helen. "He's so reckless!"

"Leave it to me," declared Ruth, leaning out of the window into the still falling rain.

She caught the boy's eye. He watched her motions. There was built at this end of the house an outside stairway, and although it was in bad repair, she saw that an agile fellow like Tom could mount the steps without any difficulty.

Pointing to this flight, she motioned him to come by that means to their level, still warning him by gesture to make no sound. The boy understood and immediately darted across the intervening space to the house.

Ruth knew there was no dining-room window from which the ruffians downstairs could see him. And they had made no move as far as she had heard.

She left Helen to meet Tom when he came in through the sagging door at the top of the outside flight of stairs, and tiptoed back into that room where they had been frightened by the bat.

It was directly over the dining-room. The same chimney was built into each room. This thought gave Ruth's active mind food for further reflection.

The rumble of the men's voices continued from below. Tom and Helen followed her so softly into the room that Ruth did not hear them until they stood beside her. Tom touched her arm and pointed downward:

"Tramps?" he asked.

"Those Gypsies, I believe," whispered Ruth, in return.

Helen was just as scared as she could be, and clung tightly to Tom's hand. "Wish we could scare them away," suggested the boy, with knitted brow.

"Perhaps we can!" uttered Ruth, suddenly eager, and her brown eyes dancing. "Sh! Wait! Let me try."

She went to the paper-stuffed stovepipe hole, out of which the bat had fallen. Helen would have exclaimed aloud, had not Tom seen her lips open and squeezed her hand warningly.

"What is it?" he hissed.

"Don't! don't!" begged Helen. "You'll let those bats all out here——"

"Bats?" queried Tom, in wonder.

"In the chimney," whispered Ruth. "Listen!"

The stir and squeaking of the bats were audible. Enough rain had come in at the top of the broken chimney to disturb the nocturnal creatures.

"Just the thing!" giggled Tom, seeing what Ruth would do. "Frighten them to pieces!"

The girl of the Red Mill had secured the stick she used before. She pulled aside the "stopper" of newspaper and thrust in the stick. At once the rustling and squeaking increased.

She worked the stick up and down insistently. Scale from the inside of the chimney began to rattle down to the hearth below. The voices ceased. Then the men were heard to scramble up.

The bats were dislodged—perhaps many of them! There was a scuffling and scratching inside the flue.

Below, the men broke out into loud cries. They shouted their alarm in the strange language the girls had heard before. Then their feet stamped over the floor.

Tom ran lightly to the window. He saw a bat wheel out of the window below, and disappear. The rain had almost stopped.

It was evident that many of the creatures were flapping about that deserted dining-room. The two ruffians scrambled to the door, through the entry, and out upon the porch.

The sound of their feet did not hold upon the porch. They leaped down the steps, and Tom beckoned the girls eagerly to join him at the window. The two men were racing down the lane toward the muddy highroad, paying little attention to their steps or to the last of the rainstorm.

"Panic-stricken, sure enough! Smart girl, Ruthie," was Master Tom's comment. "Now tell a fellow all about it."

The girls did so, while Ruth lit the alcohol lamp and made the tea. Tom was ravenous—nothing could spoil that boy's appetite.

"Gyps., sure enough," was his comment. "But what you heard them say wasn't much."

"They'd been robbing somebody—or were going to rob," said Helen, shaking her head. "What frightful men they are!"

"Pooh! they've gone now, and the old machine is fixed. We'll plow on through the mud as soon as you like."

"I shall be glad, when we get to civilization again," said his sister.

"And I'd like very much to understand what those men were talking about," Ruth observed. "Do you suppose Roberto knows about it? Pearls—beautiful pearls, that fellow spoke of."

"I tell you they are thieves!" declared Helen.

"We'll probably never know," Tom said, confidently. "So let's not worry!"

Master Tom did not prove a good prophet on this point, although he had foreseen the breaking down of the automobile before they started from the Red Mill. They went back to the car and started from the old house in a much more cheerful mood, neither of the girls supposing that they were likely to run across the Gypsy men again.

"We must hustle to make Uncle Ike's to-night, sure enough," Tom said, as the car rolled out into the muddy highway.

"Is it very far yet?" asked Ruth.

"More than sixty miles, and a bad road, and it is now

half-past five," replied the boy.

"Oh, my! I hope we'll not be delayed after dark," said his sister.

"I never knew you to be such a 'fraid-cat before, Helen," laughed Ruth.

"Everything's gone wrong to-day. And those awful men scared me. Let's stop at the hotel at Boisé Landing, if it grows dark. Uncle Ike's is a long way beyond the town, Tom."

"Sure—if you say so," agreed her brother, cheerfully. "I can send word up to the folks that we are all right. Of course, they will be expecting us this evening. I telegraphed them this morning that we were on the way."

The car plowed on through the mud. These roads were in very bad shape, and even while it had been dry, the traveling was bad enough. Now the wheels skidded and slipped, and the engine panted as though it were tired.

It missed explosions frequently, too, and Tom sat under the wheel with a very serious face indeed. It was not far to a small settlement called, on the map, Severn Corners. Tom knew he could get gas there, if he needed it, but he was not sure that there was a repair shop at the place. If the old machine played a trick on them again——

And it did! Right at the foot of a hill, and not far from the shore of Long Lake, the engine "died."

"Whatever shall we do?" cried Helen.

"No use wrangling about it," said Ruth, with a laugh. "Will we have to walk?"

"Walk! and carry the ropes and everything else of

value?" demanded Helen.

"We can't leave the machine unprotected," said Tom, seriously. "No knowing what would happen to it. But it's not far to Severn Corners. Only two miles, or so."

"Now, I tell you," said Ruth, briskly. "You walk on, Tom, and get help. Bring back a team to drag the auto into town. Perhaps you'll find a farm before you go far. We'll remain here till you come back."

"That's what you'll have to do, Tommy," agreed his sister, as the boy hesitated. "Of course, I'm only fooling. I won't be afraid."

"I'll do my best, girls," Tom assured them. "I am sure you'll be perfectly safe," and Master Tom started off along the road at a quick trot.

CHAPTER IX

QUEEN ZELAYA

Ruth and her chum were both a little troubled by Tom Cameron's departure, but even Helen had braced up and was determined not to show her fear. The situation of the girls in the auto on this lonely

road was enough to trouble the mind of any person unfamiliar with the wilderness.

The shore of Long Lake (which they could see from their seats in the car) was as wild as any stretch of country through which they had traveled during the two days of the tour.

The stalled auto was on the main-traveled road, however, and there was a chance of somebody coming along. Ruth and Helen hoped that if this happened, it would be somebody who would remain with them until Tom's return.

Both kept this wish a secret, for each tried to cheer the other. Perhaps, had it not been for that adventure at the old house shortly before, neither girl would have felt so nervous.

The outlook from the stalled auto was very attractive, if wild. They could overlook a considerable part of Long Lake, a stretch of its distant southern shore, and several islands.

The edge of the water was perhaps half a mile away, and the ground sloped abruptly from this road toward the lake. Following the very edge of the water was another road, but one which the girls knew nothing about and could scarcely see from the auto.

It was merely a brown ribbon of cart-path through the second-growth timber, and it wound along the hillside, sometimes approaching very close to the main highway. Before the county had built the better road, this path had been the trail to Boisé Landing.

Had the girls been looking that way, they might have seen, through a small break in the trees, some minutes after Tom left them, a string of odd-looking

wagons moving slowly along this lower trail.

First two men walked ahead, smoking their pipes and plowing through the mud and water without regard to where they stepped. Then followed three freshly painted green wagons—vehicles something like old-fashioned omnibuses, but with windows in the sides and front, and a door and steps behind. Through the roof of one a stovepipe was thrust.

Behind followed a troop of horses, with two bare-legged, wild-looking youngsters astride each a barebacked steed, and holding the others with leading-reins. These horses, as well as those drawing the wagons, were sleek and well curried.

A multitude of dogs ran in the mud and water, too, but there were no women and children about, save upon the front seats of each van with the drivers. Sounds from within the green vehicles, however, proclaimed the presence of a number of others.

They were a strange-looking people—all swarthy, dark-haired, red-lipped, men and women alike having their ears pierced. The rings in the lobes of the women's ears were much larger than the ornaments in those of the men.

At a certain opening in the shrubbery, the men ahead, looking upward, beheld the stalled auto and the two girls in it. One man held up his hand and the first wagon stopped. So did the remainder of the caravan.

The two spoke together, and then strode back to the first green van. The window behind the driver's seat was already open and a strange face appeared at it.

The man driving this van was young and rather handsome—in the same wild way that Roberto was

handsome. Beside him sat a comely young woman, buxom of figure, with a child in her lap. Her head was encircled with a yellow silk kerchief, she wore a green, tight-fitting bodice, and her short skirt was of a peculiar purple. She wore black stockings and neat black pumps on her feet.

Between these two on the seat, from the open window, was thrust the wicked, haggard head of a woman who might have been a hundred from the network of wrinkles in her face, and her generally aged appearance. But her eyes—black as sloes—were as sharp as a bird's. Her lips were gray, thin, and drew back when she spoke, displaying several strong, yellow fangs rather than teeth!

When she spoke, it was with a hissing sound. She used the speech of the Gypsy folk, and the others—even the rough men in the road—were very respectful to her. They explained the stoppage of the caravan, and pointed out the auto and the girls above.

It was evident that one of the men had suggested something which pleased the hag, in regard to the strangers in the motor-car. She grinned suddenly, displaying gums and fangs in a most horrible grimace.

Nodding vigorously, she gave them some commands, and then spoke to the comely woman beside the driver. The latter passed the sleeping infant back to the old woman, who disappeared into the interior of the van. The younger woman leaped down into the road, and waiting beside the two rough men, allowed the entire caravan to pass on, leaving them behind.

It was fast growing dark. The sun had disappeared behind the hills in the west, and long shadows were

stretching their gaunt hands out for the girls in the auto. The chill wind which came after the tempest made them shiver, although they were somewhat sheltered by the curtains which Tom had arranged.

"I suppose we *could* snuggle down here with the robes, in the tonneau, and spend the night in some comfort," suggested Ruth Fielding.

"Oh! don't mention it!" exclaimed her friend. "If Tom doesn't come back with a team, or with another auto, I'll never forgive him."

"Of course he will return. But he may be delayed, Helen."

"This auto-touring isn't as much fun as I thought it would be," groaned Helen Cameron. "Oh! what's that?"

She peered out of the automobile. There was a handsome, smiling, dark young woman standing in the road beside the car.

"Young ladies," said the stranger, in a pleasant voice, "are you in trouble? Can I help you at all?"

"My goodness me! do you live near here? Can we go home with you?" cried Helen, in excitement.

"Wait!" breathed Ruth, seizing her chum's arm, but Helen was too anxious to escape from her present situation to listen to Ruth.

"For if you'll take us in till my brother gets back from Severn Corners——"

"We are going to Severn Corners—my husband and I," said the woman, smiling.

"Oh! then you do not live near here?" cried Helen, in disappointment.

"Nobody lives near here, little lady," explained the stranger. "Nobody lives nearer than Severn Corners. But it is lonesome here. We will take you both on in our wagon—nobody shall hurt you. There is only my husband and baby and the old grandmother."

"Where is your wagon?" demanded Ruth, suddenly hopping out into the road and looking all about.

"Down yonder," said the woman, pointing below. "We follow the lower road. Just there. You can see the top of it."

"Oh! A bus! It's like Uncle Noah's," declared Helen, referring to the ancient vehicle much patronized by the girls at Briarwood Hall.

"Who are you?" demanded Ruth, again, with keen suspicion.

"We are pedlars. We are good folks," laughed the woman. She did, indeed, seem very pleasant, and even Ruth's suspicions were allayed. Besides, it was fast growing dark, and there was no sign of Tom on the hilltop ahead.

"Let's go on with them," begged Helen, seizing her chum's hand. "I am afraid to stay here any longer."

"But Tom will not know where we have gone," objected Ruth, feebly.

"I'll write him a note and leave it pinned to the seat."

She proceeded to do this, while Ruth lit the auto lamps so that neither Tom, on his return, or anybody else, would run into the car in the dark. Then they were ready to go with the woman, removing only their personal wraps and bags. They would have to risk having the touring car stripped by thieves before Tom Cameron came back.

"I don't believe there are any thieves around here," whispered Helen. "They would be scared to death in such a lonesome place!" she added, with a giggle.

Ruth felt some doubt about going with the woman. She was so dark and foreign looking. Yet she seemed desirous of doing the girls a service. And even she, Ruth, did not wish to stay longer on the lonely road. Something surely had happened to detain Tom.

In the south, too, "heat lightning" played sharply—and almost continuously. Ruth knew that this meant the tempest was raging at a distance and that it might return to this side of the lake.

The thought of being marooned on this mountain road, at night, in such a storm as that which they had experienced two or three hours before, was more than Ruth Fielding could endure with calmness.

So she agreed to go with the woman. Tom would know where they had gone when he returned, for he could not miss the note his sister had left.

At least, that is what both girls believed. Only, they were scarcely out of sight of the car with the woman, when one of the rough-looking men, who had walked ahead of the Gypsy caravan, appeared from the bushes, stepped into the auto, tore the note from where it had been pinned, and at once slipped back into the shadows, with the crumpled paper in his pocket!

Now the girls and their guide were down on the lower road. There was a twinkling light that showed the green van, horses, and the handsome driver—and the man looked like Roberto.

"They are Gypsies, I believe," whispered Ruth.

"Oh! you have Gypsies on the brain," flung back her

chum. "At least, we shall be dry in that bus, if it rains. And we can find somebody at Severn Corners to put us up, even if there is no hotel."

Ruth sighed, and agreed. The woman had been speaking to the man on the seat. Now she took the lantern and went around to the back of the van.

"This way, little ladies," she said, in her most winning tone. "You may rest in comfort inside here. Nobody but the good old grandmother and my bébé."

"Come on!" said Helen to Ruth, leading the way.

There was a light in the interior and it dazzled the girls' eyes, as they climbed in. The door snapped to behind them, and the horses started along the road before either Ruth or Helen were able to see much of their surroundings.

And strange enough their surroundings were; berths on either side of the strange cart, made up for sleeping and covered with gay quilts. There were chests and boxes, some of them padlocked, and all with cushions on them for seats.

There was a table, and a hanging lamp, and a stove. A child was asleep in one of the bunks; a white-haired poodle lay crouched at the child's feet, and showed its teeth and snarled at the two visitors.

But the appearance that amazed—and really startled—the girls most was the figure that sat facing them, as they entered the van. It was that of an old, old crone, sitting on a stool, bent forward with her sharp chin resting on her clenched fists, and her elbows on her knees, while iron-gray elf-locks hung about her wrinkled, nut-brown face, half screening it.

Her bead-like eyes held the girls entranced from the first. Ruth and Helen looked at each other, startled

and amazed, but they could not speak. Nor could they keep their gaze for long off the strange old woman.

"Who are you, little ladies?" croaked the hag at last.

Ruth became the spokesman. "We are two girls who have been motoring over the hills. Our motor-car broke down, and we were left alone while my friend's brother went for help. We grew fearful when it became dark——"

The gray lips opened again: "You own the motor-car, little ladies?"

"My friend's father owns it," said Ruth.

"Then your parents are wealthy," and the fangs suddenly displayed themselves in a dreadful smile. "It is fine to be rich. The poor Gypsy scarcely knows where to lay her head, but you little ladies have great houses and much money—eh?"

"Gypsy!" gasped Helen, seizing Ruth's hand.

Ruth felt a sinking at her own heart. All the stories she had ever heard of these strange, wandering tribes rushed in upon her mind again. She had not been afraid of Roberto, and the woman who had brought them to the van seemed kind enough. But this old hag——!

"Do not shrink from the old Romany woman," advised the hag, her eyes sparkling again. "She would not hurt the little ladies. She is a queen among her people—what she says is law to them. Do not fear."

"Oh, I see no reason why we should be afraid of you," Ruth said, trying to speak in an unshaken voice. "I think you all mean us kindly, and we are thankful for

this lift to Severn Corners."

Something like a cackle broke from the hag's throat. "Queen Zelaya will let nothing befall you, little ladies," she declared. "Fear not. Her word is law among the Romany folk, poor as she may be. And now tell me, my little birds,—tell me of your riches, and your great houses, and all the wealth your parents have. I love to hear of such things—even I, poor Zelaya, who have nothing after a long, long life of toil."

CHAPTER X

IN THE GYPSY CAMP

Ruth remembered what Roberto had said about his miserly grandmother. She believed these people who had offered her and Helen a ride were of the same tribe as Roberto, and the way Queen Zelaya spoke, caused the girl to believe that this old woman and Roberto's grandmother were one and the same person.

She could say nothing to Helen at the moment. Personally she felt more afraid of this Gypsy Queen

than she had of the two rough men in the abandoned house that afternoon!

"Come!" repeated Zelaya. "Tell me of all the riches and jewels—the gold and silver-plates you eat from, the jewelry you have to wear, the rich silks—all of it! I love to hear of such things," exclaimed the woman, grinning again in her terrible way.

Helen opened her lips to speak, but Ruth pinched her. "Tell her nothing," the girl of the Red Mill whispered. "I am afraid we have said too much already."

"Why?" queried Helen, wonderingly.

"Pshaw! this old woman can't hurt us. Isn't she funny?"

"Speak up, my little ladies!" commanded Queen Zelaya. "My will is law here. Do not forget that."

"I guess your will isn't much law to *us*," replied Helen, laughing and tossing her head. "You see, we do not know you——"

"You shall!" hissed the horrible old creature, suddenly stretching forth one of her claw-like hands. "Come here!"

Ruth seized her friend tightly. Helen was laughing, but suddenly she stopped. The queen's terrible eyes seemed to hold the girl in a spell. Involuntarily Helen's limbs bore her toward the far end of the van.

The girl's face became pale; her own eyes protruded from their sockets; the Gypsy Queen charmed her, just as a snake is said to charm a young bird in its nest.

But Ruth sprang after her, seized Helen's arm again, and shook her.

"You stop that!" she cried, to the old woman. "Don't you mind her, Helen. She has some wicked power in her eyes, my dear!"

Her cry broke the hypnotic spell the woman had cast over Helen Cameron. The latter sank down, trembling and sobbing, with her hands over her face.

"Oh, dear, Ruthie! I wish we hadn't gotten into this wagon," she moaned.

"I am sure I wish so, too," returned her chum, in a low voice, while the old woman rocked herself to and fro in her seat, and cackled her horrid laughter.

"Aren't we ever going to get to that town? Tom said it was only two miles or a little over."

"I wish we could speak to that other woman," muttered Ruth.

"Do you suppose this old thing is crazy?" whispered Helen.

"Worse than that," returned Ruth. "I am afraid of them all. I don't believe they mean us well. Let's get out, Helen."

"Oh! where shall we go?" returned her friend, in a tone quite as soft as Ruth's own.

"We must be somewhere near the town."

"It is pitch dark outside the windows," complained Helen.

"Let's try it. Pitch dark is not as bad as this wicked old creature——"

The hag laughed again, although she was not looking at them. Surely she could not hear the girls' whispers, yet her cackling laugh sent a shiver over both girls. It was just as though Queen Zelaya, as she

called herself, could read what was in their minds.

"Yes, yes!" whispered Helen, with sudden eagerness in her voice. "You are right. We will go."

"We'll slip out without anybody but the old woman seeing us——Then we'll run!"

Ruth jumped up suddenly and stepped to the door at the rear of the van. She turned the knob and tried to open it. *The door was fastened upon the outside!*

Again the old woman broke into her cackling laugh. "Oh, no! oh, no!" she cried. "The pretty, rich little ladies cannot go yet. They must be the guests of the poor old Gypsy a little longer—they must eat of her salt. Then they will be her friends—and maybe they will help to make her rich."

The girls stood close together, panting, afraid. Helen put her lips to Ruth's ear, and whispered:

"Does *that* mean she is going to hold us for ransom? Oh, dear! what did I say this very day? I *knew* Gypsies were like this."

"Hush!" warned Ruth. "Try and not let her see you are so afraid. Perhaps she means only to frighten us."

"But—but when she looks at me, I seem to lose everything—speech, power to move, even power to think," gasped Helen.

Just then the van turned suddenly from the road and came to a halt. They had been traveling much faster than Ruth and Helen had supposed.

Lights flashed outside, and dogs barked, while the voices of men, women and children rose in a chorus of shouts and cries.

"Oh, thank goodness!" exclaimed Helen. "They have gotten into town at last."

Ruth feared this was not so. She tried to peer out of one of the windows. There was a bonfire at one side, and she thought she saw a tent. There were other wagons like the one in which they seemed to be imprisoned.

"Now they'll *have* to let us out," repeated Helen.

"I am afraid not," returned the girl of the Red Mill. "This is the Gypsy camp, I am sure, dear. Do try to be brave! I think they never meant to take us after Tom, at all. We are prisoners, dear."

At once Helen's spirits sank, but she grew angry.

"You'd better not keep us here," she cried, looking again at the old woman. "My father has plenty of money and he will spend it all to get me back—and to punish you."

"We will not take all his money from him, my pretty little lady," returned Zelaya. "Only a part of it. And the poor Gypsy has nothing," and once more she cackled.

The door of the van was unlocked and opened. In the lamplight appeared a rough-looking man, with an evil face and a squint in one eye. He said something to the queen in their own tongue, but he spoke with great respect, and removed his hat and bowed to her, when she replied.

Ruth and Helen started for the door, but the man motioned them back and scowled at them in an evil manner. They could see a crowd of curious faces without, and behind this man were children, women both old and young, and a few men.

Zelaya lifted the child from its bed, and passed her into the arms of the woman who had guided Ruth and Helen to the van. She smiled upon the girls just

as pleasantly as before, but now they knew that she was false and cruel.

Then the queen waved her hand and the door was closed. "You remain with me to-night, little ladies. Oh! Zelaya would let nothing trouble you—no, no!"

Helen burst into wild sobs at this, and threw herself upon the floor of the van. Ruth faced the old woman with wrathful sparks in her brown eyes.

"You are acting very foolishly, indeed, whoever you are. You Gypsies cannot carry things with such a high hand in this State of New York. You'll find out ——"

"I am Zelaya, the Queen," interrupted the old hag, hoarsely. "Have a care! I will put a spell upon you, little lady——"

"Pooh! you can't frighten me that way," declared Ruth Fielding. "I am not afraid of your spells, or your fortune telling, or any of your foolish magic. If you believe in any of it yourself, you have not gained much wisdom all the years you have lived."

"You do not fear the arts of my people?" repeated Zelaya, trying to hold Ruth with her eye as she had Helen.

"No, I do not. I fear your wickedness. And I know you must be very dishonest and cruel. But you have no more supernatural power than I have myself!"

Zelaya's wrinkled face suddenly reddened with passion. She raised her claw-like hand and struck the bold girl sharply upon the cheek.

"Impudence!" she muttered.

"And *that* is nothing supernatural," said Ruth, with continued boldness, although the blow had hurt her

—leaving its mark. "You are breaking the laws of the land, which are far more powerful than any Gypsy law——"

"Wait!" commanded the woman, threateningly. "You will learn yet, bold girl, how strong our laws are."

She went back to her stool, mumbling to herself. Ruth lifted Helen into one of the berths, and sat down beside her. By and by the door of the van opened again and a bold-looking young woman—not the one that had brought them to the van—came in with three wooden bowls of a savory stew. She offered the tray to the visitors at a motion from old Zelaya, so that they had their choice before the queen received her own supper.

"Let's eat it," whispered Ruth to Helen, when she saw that Zelaya plunged her own tin spoon into the stew. "It surely isn't drugged, or *she* wouldn't touch it."

They ate greedily, for both were hungry. It takes more than fear to spoil the healthy appetite of youth!

"Do you suppose," whispered Helen, "that we could climb out of one of these windows after she falls asleep?"

"I am sure I couldn't get through one," returned Ruth. "And I doubt if you could. Besides, there will be guards, and the dogs are awake. We've got to wait for help from outside, my dear."

"Do you suppose Tom will find us?"

"I hope not!" exclaimed Ruth. "Not while he is alone. But he certainly will give the alarm, and the whole countryside will be aroused."

"Oh, dear, me! this old woman seems so sure that she can hold us captive."

"I think she is crazy," Ruth declared. "And the other Gypsies must lack good sense, too, or they would not be governed by her."

The queen gobbled down her supper and then prepared to retire to her own bunk. She told the girls to do the same, and they removed their shoes and outer garments and lay down—one on one side of the wagon, and one on the other.

Ruth's head was toward the door. She could watch the movements of the old Gypsy woman. Zelaya did not go to sleep at all, but seemed to be waiting for the camp to get quiet and for her two visitors to fall into slumber.

She kept raising her head and looking first at Helen, then at Ruth. The latter knew by her chum's breathing that, despite her fears, Helen had fallen asleep almost instantly.

So Ruth began to breathe deeply and regularly, too. She closed her eyes—almost entirely. This was what Zelaya had been waiting for.

Silently the old woman arose and turned up the lampwick a little. She knelt down before one of the padlocked boxes and unlocked it softly. Then she rummaged in the box—seemingly beneath a lot of rubbish that filled it, and drew forth a japanned box —like a cashbox. This was locked, too, and Zelaya wore the key of it on a string about her neck.

Silently, with a glance at the two girls now and then, she unlocked this box and opened it on the top of the chest, before which she knelt.

Ruth could see the old woman's face. It changed very much as she gazed upon what was in the japanned box. Her black eyes glowed, and her gray, thin lips

were wreathed in a smile of delight.

Again Ruth remembered Roberto's account of his grandmother. She was a miser, and he had mentioned that he had seen her at night gloating over her hoarded wealth.

Surely Zelaya had all the signs of a miser. The next moment Ruth saw that the old woman verily possessed something worth gloating over.

She lifted from the interior of the box a string of flashing gems—a broad band, or necklace, of them, in fact—and let them flow through her fingers in a stream of sparkling light. They were beautiful, beautiful pearls—a really wonderful necklace of them!

Ruth held her breath for a moment. The queen turned suddenly and shot a keen, suspicious glance at her. The girl knew enough to cough, turn slightly, and recommence her steady breathing.

The old woman had dropped the pearls in haste. Now she picked them up again, and went on with her silent worship of the gems.

Ruth did not startle her again; but she saw something that made her own heart beat faster and brought the perspiration out upon her limbs.

Above the old woman's head, and behind her, was a window. Pressed close to the pane of the window Ruth saw a face—dark, evil, be-mustached. It was one of the Gypsy men.

She remembered now what she had overheard between the two supposed tramps who had taken shelter in the deserted house during the tempest. Was *this* one of those two ruffians? And was he the one who had railed at the division of some stolen

treasure, and had spoken with covetousness of the beautiful pearls?

The thought made Ruth tremble. His wicked face withdrew, but all the time the Gypsy queen was admiring the necklace, Ruth felt that the evil eyes of the man were also gloating over the pearls.

CHAPTER XI

TOM ON THE TRAIL

In spite of the fact that his sister thought it hard that Tom Cameron had not returned to the stalled auto by dark, the lad was having no easy time.

In the first place, he had not run a mile on the road to Severn Corners when he stepped on a pebble, turned his ankle sharply, and had to hobble the rest of the way at a much slower pace than he had expected.

All the time, too, Tom was troubled about the uncertainty of there being at the Corners any repair shop. He knew it was a small settlement. At most, the repair garage would be very small, and perhaps the mechanic a mere country "jack-of-all-trades," who would fumble the job.

To obtain a car to drag his own into the town was beyond the boy's hopes, and when he came at last to a comfortable looking farmhouse some half a mile that side of the settlement, he determined to see if he could not obtain a pair of horses from the farmer, to get the car to the hamlet.

He approached the back door of the house without

seeing anybody about. It was already growing dark, he had hobbled so slowly on the road. As he stepped upon the porch, Tom heard a sudden furious barking inside the house.

"Welcome to our city!" he muttered. "If nobody's at home but *that* savage beast, I'm likely to fare about as Roberto did at that farmhouse 'way back on the road by Culm Falls."

But he ventured to rap upon the door. It was one of those old-fashioned doors which opens in two parts. The upper half swung outward, but the lower remained bolted.

Lucky for Tom Cameron this was so. A great, shaggy beast, with gleaming fangs and slobbering jaws, appeared over the ledge, scratching with his strong claws to get out at the intruder.

"What do you want?" demanded a shrill voice from somewhere behind the excited brute. "We ain't got nothin' for tramps."

"I should say you most certainly *had* something for tramps, Madam," said Tom, when he could make himself heard. "Any tramp would run from that fellow."

"I don't see *you* running. But you better," advised the woman, who was thin-faced, scant of hair, and had a voice about as pleasant as a whip-saw going through a knot.

"But *I* am not a tramp, I assure you, Madam," said Tom, politely.

"Huh! ye look it," declared the woman, without any politeness at all.

And the boy *did* look rather dilapidated. He had

gotten more than a little wet in the first of the shower, and he had pawed around among the "internal arrangements" of the balky auto to such purpose, that he was disheveled and oil-streaked from head to foot.

"I'm in disguise just now, Ma'am," laughed Tom, cheerfully. "But really, I have not come begging either food or lodging. Is your husband at home?"

"Yes, he is. And he'll be here in a minute and chase ye off the place—ef ye don't scat at once," said the woman, sourly. "*He* wouldn't hold back this dog, now, I tell ye."

"Please believe me, Madam," urged Tom, "that I am better than I appear. Our car broke down on the road yonder, and I have come to see if I can hire a team of horses to drag it into the Corners."

"Car? What kind of a car? Ain't no railroad here," she said, suspiciously.

The dog had barked himself breathless by now and they could talk a little easier. Tom smiled, as he replied:

"Our motor car—automobile."

"Huh! why didn't ye say so?" she demanded. "Tryin' to fool me. It's bad enough ter drive one o' them abominations over people's roads, but tryin' to make out ye air on a train—though, land o' Goshen! some of ye make 'em go as fast as airy express I ever see. Wal! what about your ortermobile?"

"It's broken down," said Tom, feeling that he had struck the wrong house, after all, if he expected help.

"I'm 'tarnal glad of it!" snapped the farmer's wife. "Nuthin' could please me better. Las' time I went to

town one o' them plagued nuisances come hootin' erlong an' made the old mare back us clean inter the ditch—an' I broke a dozen an' a ha'f of aigs right in the lap of my new bombazeen dress. Drat 'em all, I say!"

"I am very sorry, Ma'am, that the accident occurred. But I can assure you I was not the cause of it," Tom said, quietly, and stifling a great desire to laugh. "I wish only to get your husband to help me with his team—and I will pay him well."

"Huh! what d'ye call well?" she demanded. "A boy like you ain't likely to have much money."

Thus brought to a "show down," Tom promptly pulled out his billcase and opened it in the light that streamed out of the doorway. The woman could see that he carried quite a bundle of notes—and that they were not all single dollar bills!

"Land o' Goshen!" she ejaculated. "Where'd you steal all that money, ye young ruffian? I thought there was suthin' mighty bad about you when I fust set eyes on ye."

This was a compliment that Tom Cameron had not been looking for! He was certainly taken aback at the woman's words, and before he could make any response, she raised her voice and began to shout for "Sam!"

"Crickey!" thought the boy, "I hope Sam will have a better opinion of me than she does, or I'm likely to get into trouble."

He began to back off the porch, and had his ankle not pained him so, he certainly would have set off on a run. Perhaps it is well he did not try this, however, for the woman cried:

"You move a step off'n thet platform before Sam Blodgett comes an' I'll open the lower ha'f of this door and let the dawg loose on ye!"

Then she bawled for her husband again, and pretty soon a shouted response came from the direction of the barns. Then a lantern flickered and swung, and Tom knew the man was coming toward the house.

He appeared—a short, heavy-set man, barefooted, and with a pail of milk in one hand and the lantern in the other.

"What's the matter, Sairy?" he demanded.

"Who's this?"

"Thet's what *I* wanter know," snapped the woman. "It 'pears like he's one o' these runaway boys ye read about in the papers—an' he's stole some money."

"I haven't either!" cried Tom, in some exasperation. "I don't have to steal money—or anything else, I hope. I showed her that I had some money, so that she would believe I could pay you for some work I wanted done——"

"What work?" interposed the farmer.

Tom told him about the stalled auto and what he wanted.

"How much'll ye give?" shot in the farmer, right to the point.

"What do you ask to drag the machine to town—to the Corners, I mean?"

"If it's where ye say it is, ten dollars!"

"All right," agreed the boy. "Your wife knows I have the money. I'll pay you when we get to the Corners."

"I know ye got the money," said the woman. "But I

don't know *how* ye got it. And if you've got an ortermobile, too, I bet ye stole *that*!"

"You hesh up, Sairy," advised Mr. Blodgett. "No need of your sp'ilin' a trade. Gimme my supper. I'll hafter eat b'fore I go with ye, young man."

"Oh, all right," sighed Tom, remembering how the girls must be very much frightened by this time.

The man tramped into the house with the milk and the lantern. Neither he nor his wife asked Tom inside —or mentioned supper to him. The woman put it steaming on the table and Tom—like the dog—might stand and look on.

At last the farmer was finished. "Guess the team's eat by now," he remarked, and came out with the lantern hung on his arm. All this time the dog had had "fits and starts" of wanting to get at Tom and eat him up. Now he slipped past his master and ran at the visitor with a savage growl.

The boy had no idea of being made the supper of the brute, no matter how hungry Fido might be. So he kicked out and barely touched him. Instantly the brute set up a terrible "ki-yi-ing!" and shot off the porch and disappeared into the darkness. Evidently the Blodgetts kept the animal for its bark, for it did not have the pluck of a woodchuck!

"Come on," advised Sam, as the woman began to rail again. "She's wound up an' ain't likely to run down again for a week. You sure you wanter pay ten dollars for this job?"

"I'm sure I *will* pay that for it, whether I want to or not," declared Tom, with confidence.

"Aw right. We'll be movin'. Maybe another shower by'm'by, an' I sha'n't wanter be out in it."

"We'll go just as fast as you want to," said Tom, hobbling along to the stables. "I won't keep you back, Mr. Blodgett."

"You're lame, I see," said the man, not unkindly. "You kin straddle one of the hosses if you like."

Tom was glad enough to do this, and in a few minutes they were going back over the dark track Tom had come, the harness jingling from the horses' hames, and Mr. Blodgett trudging sturdily along by the animals' heads.

They came to the top of the ridge from which the stalled car had last been seen by Tom. "There are the lights!" he cried.

He was glad to see them. They shone cheerfully in the dark, and he had no idea that the girls were in any trouble.

But when they got down to the bottom of the hill there was neither sign nor sound of the two girls. Tom shouted at the top of his voice. He searched the car all over for some written word. He saw that the girls had carried off only their own personal belongings and nothing else.

What could it mean? Surely no thieves had come this way, or the car would have been stripped of everything portable, and of value. At least, so it seemed to Master Tom. He was not wise enough to suspect that the goods in the car had been left alone to mislead him. The Gypsies had been after bigger game than a few dollars' worth of auto furnishings.

"Come now!" exclaimed Sam Blodgett. "I can't wait here all night. I only agreed to drag the car ter town."

"But where could those girls have gone? My sister

and Ruth Fielding?"

"Ye ain't payin' me ter be no detectif," drawled the man. "Come! Shell I hitch on?"

"Oh, yes! I don't know what else to do," groaned the boy. "I've got to get the car fixed first of all. Then I will find help and follow the girls."

The farmer was as unsympathetic as a man possibly could be. He started the car and let Tom ride in it. But he had no word of advice to give about the absent girls.

Perhaps, like his wife, he believed that Tom was not honest, that the car was stolen, and that Tom's companions were mythical!

They rolled into Severn Corners at ten o'clock. Of course, in a hamlet of that kind, there was scarcely a light burning. Tom had learned from Blodgett that the local blacksmith sometimes "monkeyed with ortermobiles that come erlong busted."

So he had the farmer draw the car to the door of the blacksmith shop.

"Sim lives right next door, there," said Blodgett, preparing to depart. "Mebbe ye kin wake him up an' convince him he'd oughter mend yer contraption in the middle of the night. But Sim Peck is constable, too, so mebbe ye won't keer ter trouble him," and the farmer drove away with a chuckle.

This news was, however, important to Tom. A constable was just about the man he most wanted to see. It had dawned on the boy's mind that his sister and Ruth had gotten into trouble, and he must find help for them.

The street of the village was dark. This was one of

the nights when the moon was booked to shine, but forgot to! The town fathers evidently lit the street lights only when the almanac said there was to be no moon.

Tom removed one of the headlights and found his way to the door of the cottage next to the smithy. There was neither bell nor knocker, but he thundered at the panel with right good will, until he heard a stir in a chamber above. Finally a blind opened a little way and a sleepy voice inquired what he wanted.

"Are you the blacksmith, sir?" asked Tom.

"Huh? Wal! I should say I was. But I ain't no doctor," snarled the man above, "and I ain't in the habit of answering night calls. Don't ye see I ain't got no night bell? Go away! you're actin' foolish. I don't shoe hosses this time o' night."

"It's not a horse," explained Tom, near laughter despite his serious feelings. "It's a motor-car."

"Naw, I don't shoe no ortermobile, neither!" declared the man, and prepared to close the blind.

"Say, Mister!" shouted Tom. "Do come down. I need you——"

"If I come down thar, I won't come as no blacksmith, nor no mechanic. I'll come as the constable and run ye in—ye plaguey whipper-snapper!"

"All right," cried Tom, fearing he would shut the blind. "Come down as constable. I reckon I need you in that character more than any other."

"I believe ye do!" exclaimed the man, angrily. "If you air there when I git on my pants, you'll take a walk to the callaboose. None o' you young city sports air goin' to disturb the neighborhood like this—not if I

know it!"

Meanwhile, Tom could hear him stirring around, tumbling over the chairs in the dark, and growling at his boots, and otherwise showing his anger. But the boy was desperate, and he stood still until the man appeared—tin star pinned to his vest.

"Wal, by gravey!" exclaimed the blacksmith-constable. "Ain't you a reckless youngster ter face up the majesty of the law in this here way?"

Tom saw that, after all, the constable was grinning, and was not such an ill-natured fellow, now that he was really awake. The boy plunged into his story and told it with brevity, but in detail.

"Why, I see how it is, youngster," said the man. "You're some scart about your sister and that other girl. But mebbe nothing's happened 'em at all."

"But where have they gone?"

"I couldn't tell you. We'll make search. But we've got to have something to travel in, and if it don't take too long to fix your auto, we'll travel in *that*."

Of course, this was good sense, and Tom saw it, impatient as he was. The constable laid aside the vest with the badge of office upon it, and the blacksmith proceeded to open his forge and light a fire and a lantern. Then he listened to Tom's explanation of what had happened to the car, and went to work.

Fortunately the damage was not serious, and the blacksmith was not a bad mechanic. Therefore, in an hour and a half he closed the smithy again, removing his apron, and the constable donned his vest and got into the car beside the troubled Tom.

"Now let her out, son!" advised the official. "You've

got all the law with ye that there is in this section, and ye kin go as fast as ye please."

Tom needed no urging. He shot the repaired car over the road at a pace that would have made his sister and her chum scream indeed!

Once at the bottom of the hill where the car had been stalled, they stopped and got out, each taking a lantern by the constable's advice. Blodgett and his horses had done their best to trample out the girls' footsteps, but there had been no other vehicle along the road, and the searchers managed to find footprints of the girls at one side.

"Sure them's them?" asked Mr. Peck.

"You can see they are not the prints of men's shoes," said Tom, confidently.

"Right ye air! And here's another woman's shoe—only larger. They went away with some woman, that's sure."

"A woman?" muttered Tom, greatly amazed. "Whoever could she be—and where have they gone with her?"

CHAPTER XII

A BREAK FOR LIBERTY

Ruth finally slept in the Gypsy van as sweetly as though she were in her own little bed in the gable room at the Red Mill. She was bodily wearied, and she had lost herself while yet she was watching the Gypsy Queen worshipping the pearl necklace, and fearing that the man with the evil eyes was peering into the interior of the van.

A hundred noises of the Gypsy camp awakened her when the sun was scarcely showing his face. Dogs barked and scampered about; horses neighed and stamped; roosters crowed and hens cackled. The children were crying, or laughing, and the women chattering as they went about the getting of breakfast at the fires.

The fires crackled; the men sat upon the van tongues cleaning harness after the rain and mud of the afternoon before. The boys were polishing the coats of the beautiful horses, till they shone again.

All these activities Ruth Fielding could see through the tiny windows of the queen's van, in which she and Helen Cameron were imprisoned. Her chum roused, too, but was half tempted to cry, when she remembered their circumstances. Queen Zelaya had gone out.

"Come on!" exclaimed Ruth. "We've got to make the best of it. Get on your dress and shoes, and perhaps they will let us out, too."

"Let's run away, Ruthie," whispered Helen.

"The very first chance we get—sure we will!" agreed her chum.

They found the door unlocked, and, as nobody stayed them, the two girls descended the steps to the ground. A cross-looking dog came and smelled of them, but the bold-looking girl who had brought the supper the night before drove him away.

Ruth essayed to speak to her, but she shook her head and laughed. Perhaps she did not understand much English.

Ruth was looking around eagerly for Roberto. Had she seen the Gypsy boy, she would certainly have thrown herself—and Helen—upon him for protection. But although not many of the Gypsies looked unkindly toward the girls, none appeared really friendly.

The woman who had aided in their capture the night before took them down to the water, where they might wash their faces and hands and comb their hair, using the toilet requisites from their bags. Nobody had offered to interfere with them in any manner, or touch their belongings. The woman waited patiently until they were ready, and took them back to the camping ground for breakfast.

But Ruth had seen something. At first she dared not whisper it to her chum. After they had eaten (and a very good breakfast it was that the Gypsies gave them), she managed to get Helen out of earshot of the watchers.

Everybody in the camp watched the prisoners. The girls were not driven back into the van again at once, but Ruth saw that even the children circled about her and Helen, at a little distance, so that the girls were continuously guarded.

They sat down upon an old stump, in an open space, where nobody could creep near enough to hear what

Ruth said to Helen without one or the other of the captives seeing the eavesdropper.

"What is it?" asked Helen, anxiously. "Oh, Ruth! where do you suppose Tom is? What can he think of us?"

"I only hope Tom won't come along here alone and fall into trouble, too," said the girl of the Red Mill, in return. "But I believe there is a chance for us to get away without his help, dear."

"Oh, how?" demanded her chum.

"Did you look along the shore when we were down there to the lake just now?"

"Yes. In both directions. There wasn't a soul in sight but you and myself and that woman," returned Helen, showing that she had been observant to a degree, at least.

"You are right. It is a lonely spot. I saw nobody. But I saw a fishing punt."

"A fishing punt?"

"Yes. Pulled up on the shore a little way. There is a pole in it, too. It can be pushed off into the water easily, and I did not see another boat of any kind in either direction."

"Oh, Ruth! Neither did I. I didn't even see the boat you speak of."

"It is there just the same. We can reach it in one minute from here—by running."

"Let's run, then!" whispered Helen, energetically.

"We'll wait our chance. They are watching too closely now. By and by they must get more careless. Then we'll try it."

"But I don't just see what we can do in that boat," queried Helen, after a moment's thought.

"Push out into the lake, so that they can't reach us. Then risk being seen by Tom or somebody else who will help us escape the Gypsies."

"But these men will follow us," said Helen, with a shudder. "They can swim—some of them—surely."

"And if they try it, we'll beat them off with the push-pole," declared Ruth. "Keep up your pluck, Helen. They will not really dare hurt us—especially if they expect to get money for our release. And I'd like to know," added Ruth, with rather a bitter little laugh, "who will pay *my* ransom?"

"I'll make father pay whatever they ask," whispered Helen. "Oh, dear! won't he be just *mad* when he hears about it?"

Soon the activities of the camp changed. It was plain to the two girls that their captors had no intention of spending the day in this dell by the lake side.

A number of the men and boys had gone off with some of the horses early. Now they returned, and it was evident that the men were angry, if not a little frightened. They talked loudly with Zelaya, and the Queen of the Gypsies seemed to be scolding them soundly.

It was surprising to the visitors at the camp that the old woman should have such influence over these black-browed ruffians. But she *did* possess a power; it was self-evident!

Soon preparations were begun for shifting camp. The tents were struck and all the paraphernalia of the camp was returned to the three vans.

"Something has happened," whispered Ruth to Helen. "Perhaps Tom has raised the hue and cry for us, and they are afraid of being caught here with us in their possession."

"Mean old things!" snapped Helen. "I wish they would all be caught and put into jail."

"The little children, too?"

"The little ones will grow up to be big ones—and they are all bad," declared Helen, with confidence.

"I can't believe that Roberto is bad," said Ruth, thoughtfully. "I wish he was with them now. I believe he would help us get away."

"Maybe these are not his people."

"I think they are," returned Ruth. But she did not say anything then to Helen about the pearl necklace, and the cashbox of Queen Zelaya.

The necklace was never out of Ruth's thought, however, for she was sure it had been stolen. The girl of the Red Mill would know the necklace again; wherever she might see it.

In the first place it was the most beautiful necklace she had ever seen. But there was a peculiar pendant attached to it—in the shape of a fleur-de-lis—of larger pearls, that would distinguish it among any number of such articles of adornment.

Ruth kept in mind the chance she hoped would arise for their escape. Helen was hopeless; but she had agreed to make the attempt, if Ruth did.

The whole camp was busy in preparing for departure. There were not so many eyes now upon the girls. And—therefore—there being no regular guard set over them, the opportunity Ruth hoped for

arose.

In harnessing one of the horses to a van, something happened to call most of the excited crowd together. The horse kicked, and one of the men was hurt.

The moment the shouting over this incident arose, Ruth pinched Helen and they both got up and slipped into the wood. They were out of sight in a moment, and having chosen the side toward the lake, they set off at top speed through the underbrush for the spot where Ruth had seen the fishing punt.

"Suppose it leaks?" gasped Helen, running hard beside her friend.

"Well! we'll know it when we're in deep water," grimly returned Ruth.

At that moment they heard a great hullabaloo at the camp behind them.

"They've discovered we're missing," gasped Helen.

"Come on, then!" cried Ruth. "Let's see if we can outwit them. We've got a chance for liberty, my dear. Don't lose heart."

CHAPTER XIII

RUTH IN THE TOILS

The lake shore was just ahead of the fugitives. Ruth had been but a few yards out of the way in her calculations. She and Helen came out upon the beach almost at the spot where the fishing punt lay.

The boat appeared to be sound, and the pole lying in it was a straight, peeled ash sapling, not too heavy for either of the girls to handle.

"Jump in, Helen!" commanded Ruth. "Take the pole and push off. I'll push here at the bow."

"But you'll get all wet!" quavered her chum.

"As though *that* mattered," returned the other, with a chuckle, as she leaned against the bow of the punt and braced her feet for the grand effort. "Now!"

Helen had scrambled in and seized the pole. She thrust it against the shore, her own weight bearing down the stern, which was in the water, and thus raising the bow a trifle.

"All-to-geth-er!" gasped Ruth, as though they were at "tug-of-war" in the Briarwood gymnasium.

The boat moved. Ruth's feet slipped and she scrambled to get a fresh brace for them.

"Now, again!" she cried.

At that moment a great hound came rushing out of the wood upon their trail, raised his red eyes, saw them, and uttered a mournful bay.

"We're caught!" wailed Helen.

"We're nothing of the kind!" returned her friend. "Push again, Helen!"

One more effort and Ruth was ankle deep in the water. The boat floated free!

But before the brave girl could scramble aboard, the hound leaped for her. Helen screamed. That shriek was enough, without the baying of the hound, to bring their enemies to the water's edge.

Ruth Fielding was terrified—of course! But she gave a final push to the boat as the hound grabbed her. Fortunately the beast seized only her skirt. Perhaps he had been taught not to actually worry his prey.

However, the girl was dragged to her knees, and she could not escape. The punt shot out into the lake, and Ruth shouted to her chum:

"Keep on! keep on! Never mind me! Find Tom and bring help—— Oh!"

The weight of the big dog had cast her into the shallow water. She immediately scrambled to her feet again. The hound held onto the skirt. The material was too strong to easily tear, and she could not get away.

There was a crashing in the brush and out upon the edge of the lake came half a dozen of the Gypsy men and one of the women. She was the one who had befooled Ruth and Helen into entering the green van the night before. When she saw Ruth's plight, standing in the water with the hound holding her, she laughed as though it were a great joke.

But the men did not laugh. He with the squinting eye strode down to the girl and would have slapped her with his hard palm, had not the woman jumped in and put herself between the man and Ruth. She seemed to threaten him in her own language, and the ruffian desisted.

One of the boys threw off his clothing—all his outer garments, at least—and plunged right into the lake after Helen. The boat had swung around, for there was considerable current in Long Lake.

"Don't let him come near you, Helen!" screamed Ruth. "Use your pole!"

Her friend stood very bravely in the stern of the punt and raised the pole threateningly. The Gypsy boy could not easily overtake the boat, which was drifting farther and farther out toward the middle of the lake.

Some of the others began running along the shore as though to keep pace with the boat. But suddenly a long-drawn, eerie cry resounded from the direction of the camp. The men stopped and returned; the boy scrambled ashore and hastily grabbed his clothing. The woman and the squint-eyed man dragged Ruth into the bush.

The cry was a signal of some kind, and one not to be disobeyed. The Gypsies hurried back to the vans, and Ruth did not see Helen again.

All was confusion at the camp. The horses were ready to start, and the movables were packed. The children and women swarmed into two of the vans. Queen Zelaya stood at the door of the other, and the moment she saw that one of the prisoners had not been recovered, she began to harangue her people threateningly.

The squint-eyed man pushed Ruth toward the old woman. Zelaya's claw-like hand seized the girl's shoulder.

She was jerked forward and up the steps into the van. Almost at once the caravan started, and Zelaya

pulled the door to, and darkened the windows.

"Quick, now!" she commanded the girl. "Take off your hat. Gypsies have no use for hats."

She seized it and thrust it into one of her boxes. Then she commanded Ruth to remove her frock, and that followed the hat into the same receptacle. Afterward the girl was forced to take off her shoes and stockings.

"Sit down here!" commanded Zelaya, as the van rolled along. The queen had been mixing some kind of a lotion in a bowl. Now with a sponge she anointed Ruth's face and neck, far below the collar of any gown she would wear; likewise her arms and hands, and her limbs from the knees down. Then Zelaya threw some earth on Ruth's feet and streaked her limbs with the same. She gave her a torn and not over-clean frock to put on instead of her own clothing, and insisted that she don the ugly garment at once.

"Now, Gentile girl," hissed the old woman, "if they come to search for you, speak at your peril. We say you are ours—a wicked, orphan Gypsy, wicked through and through."

She tore down Ruth's hair and rubbed some lotion into it that darkened its color, too. She really looked as wild and uncouth as the bold girl who waited upon the queen of the Gypsies.

"Now let them find you!" cackled the old woman. "You are Belle, my great-granddaughter, and you are touched here—eh?" and she tapped her own wrinkled forehead with her finger.

CHAPTER XIV

ROBERTO AGAIN

Ruth cried a little. But, after all, it was more because she was lonely than for any other reason. What would eventually happen to her in the Gypsy queen's toils she did not know. She had not begun to worry about that as yet.

Helen had gotten clear away. She was confident of that, and was likewise sure that her chum would rouse the authorities and come in search of her. Tom, too, was faithful; he must already be stirring up the whole neighborhood to find his sister and Ruth.

How far the caravan had traveled the night before, after the girls had joined the Gypsies, Ruth could not guess. But she realized that now they were making very good time up the road leading to Boisé Landing, along the edge of Long Lake.

There might be some pursuit already. If Tom had telegraphed his father, Mr. Cameron would come looking for Helen "on the jump"! And had the searchers any idea the Gypsies had captured the two girls, Ruth was sure that the wanderers would get into trouble very quickly.

"Why, even Uncle Jabez would 'start something,' as

Tom would say, if he learned of this. I believe, even if I am not 'as good as a boy,' that Uncle Jabez loves me and would not let a parcel of tramps carry me off like this."

She wiped away the tears, therefore, and in looking into a cloudy little mirror screwed to the wall of the vehicle, she found that the tears did not wash off the walnut stain. She had been dyed with a "fast color," sure enough!

"If Heavy and The Fox, or Belle and Lluella could see me now!" thought Ruth Fielding.

Suddenly the caravan halted. There were shouts and cries, and evidently the other vans were being emptied of their occupants in a hurry. Some of the men seemed to be arguing in English at the head of the queen's van.

Ruth believed that a searching party had overtaken the Gypsies. She feared there would be a fight, and she was anxious to show herself, so that her unknown rescuers might see her.

But she dared not scream. Old Zelaya scowled at her so savagely and threatened her so angrily with her clenched fist, that Ruth dared not speak. Finally the old woman opened the door of the van and flung her down the steps.

The act was so unexpected that Ruth fell into the arms of the crowd waiting for her. It was evidently ready for her appearance. The boys and girls, and some of the women, received her into their midst, and they made so much noise, chattering and shrieking, and dancing about her, that Ruth was both confused and frightened.

Had she herself shrieked aloud, her voice would have

been drowned in the general hullabaloo. This noise was all intentional on the part of the Gypsies, for up at the head of the caravan Ruth caught a glimpse of a big man standing with a stout oak club in his hand and a big shiny star pinned to his vest near the armhole.

A constable! Whether he was there searching for her and Helen, or was merely making inquiries about a robbed hen-roost, the girl from the Red Mill could not guess. There was so much confusion about her, that she could not hear a word the constable said!

She waved her hand to him and tried to attract his attention. The girls and boys laughed at her, and pulled her about, and the bold girl she had seen before almost tore the frock from her shoulders.

Suddenly Ruth realized that, even did the constable look right at her, he would not discover that she was a white girl. She looked just as disreputable in every way as the Gypsy children themselves!

The constable came toward the first van. Zelaya now sat upon the top step, smoking a cheroot, and nodding in the sun as though she were too old and too feeble to realize what was going on. Yet Ruth was sure that the sly old queen had planned this scene and told her tribesmen what to do.

Ruth was whisked away from the steps of the queen's van, and borne off by the shouting, dancing children. She tried to cry out so that the constable would hear her, but the crowd drowned her cries.

She saw the constable search each of the three vans. Of course, he found no girls answering to the descriptions of Ruth and Helen—and it was the girls that he was searching for. He was Sim Peck, the blacksmith-constable from Severn Corners. It was a

pity Tom Cameron had not been with him!

Finally Ruth saw that the man had given up the search, and the Gypsies were going to depart. She determined to make a desperate attempt to attract his attention to herself.

She suddenly sprang through the group of children, knocking the bold girl down in her effort, and started, yelling, for the constable. Instantly one of the men halted her, swung her about, clapped a palm over her mouth, and she saw him staring balefully down into her face.

"You do that ageen—I keel you!" he hissed.

It was the evil-eyed man who had spied upon Queen Zelaya, as she had worshipped the pearl necklace in the van the evening before. Ruth was stricken dumb and motionless. The man looked wicked enough to do just what he said he would.

She saw the constable depart. Then the Gypsies huddled into the wagons, and she was seized by Zelaya and put into the first van. The old witch was grinning broadly.

"Ah, ha!" she chuckled. "What does the Gentile girl think now? That she shall escape so easily Zelaya? Ha! she is already like one of our own kind. Her own parents would not know her—nor shall they see her again until they have paid, and paid in full!"

"You are holding the wrong girl, Zelaya," murmured Ruth. "*My* parents are dead, and there is nobody to pay you a great ransom for me."

"False!" croaked the hag, and struck her again.

The caravan rolled on after that for a long way. It did not stop for dinner, and Ruth grew very hungry,

for she and Helen had been too excited that morning to eat much breakfast.

Through the open door and the forward window Ruth saw considerable of the road. They were seldom out of sight of the lake. By and by they turned right down to the water's edge and she heard the horses' feet splashing through the shallow water.

She could not imagine where they were going. Out of the door she saw that they seemed to be leaving the land and striking right out into the lake. The water grew deeper slowly, rising first over one step and then another, while the shore of the lake receded behind them. The other vans and the boys driving the horses followed in their wake.

Curious, Ruth arose and went to the forward end of the van. She could see out between the driver and his wife, and over the heads of the horses. The latter were almost shoulder deep now, and were advancing very slowly.

Some rods ahead she saw that there was a wooded island. It was of good size and seemed to be densely covered with trees and brush. Yet, there was a patch of sandy shore toward which the horses were being urged.

The lake was so low, that there was a fordable stretch of its bottom between the mainland and this island. These Gypsies seemed to know this bar perfectly, and the driver of the queen's van made no mistake in guiding his span.

In half an hour the horses were trotting through the shallows again. They rolled out upon the white beach, and then Ruth saw that a faint wagon trail led into the interior of the island.

The Gypsies had been there before. There, in the middle of the wooded isle, was a clearing. The moment the vans arrived, all the people jumped out, laughing and talking, and the usual preparations for an encampment were begun. Only, in this case, Queen Zelaya sent the squint-eyed man and the ruffian who had so frightened Ruth to either shore of the island to keep watch.

Tents were set up, fires kindled, a great supper begun, and the poultry was set loose to roam at will. Somewhere the Gypsy children had picked up a kid and a little calf. Both of these were freed, and at once began to butt each other, to the vast delight of the little ones.

All about, under-foot and growling if they were disturbed, were the ugly dogs. Ruth was afraid of them!

Now that they were on the island, the Gypsies gave her slight attention. The children did not come near her, and she was glad of that. Of course, the adults knew she could not escape.

Later she heard one of the men on the shore shout. Nobody was disturbed at the camp, but after a little, there was some loud conversation and then somebody broke through the bushes and appeared suddenly in the little clearing.

Ruth Fielding gasped and sprang to her feet. Nobody noticed her.

The newcomer was Roberto. He strode swiftly across the camp to the queen's van. Zelaya sat upon the steps and when he came before her, he bowed very respectfully.

The old woman showed more emotion at his

appearance than Ruth believed possible. She got up quickly and kissed the boy on both of his cheeks. Her eyes sparkled and she talked with him for some time in the Tzigane tongue.

Once or twice Roberto glanced in Ruth's direction, as though he and the old woman had been speaking of the captive girl. But, to the latter's surprise, she saw no look of recognition in the Gypsy boy's eyes.

Finally, when he parted from the queen, Roberto crossed the encampment directly toward Ruth. The girl, fearful, yet hoping he would see and know her, rose to her feet and took a single step toward him.

Roberto turned upon her fiercely. He struck at her with his arm and pushed Ruth roughly back into her seat. But although the action was so cruel and his look so hateful, the girl heard him whisper:

"Wait! Let the little lady have no fear!"

Then he passed on to greet his friends about the nearest campfire.

CHAPTER XV

HELEN'S ESCAPE

Helen Cameron was so fearful at first of the Gypsies overtaking her, that she had no thought of any peril which might lie ahead of the drifting punt, into which she had scrambled. She realized that Ruth had sacrificed herself in their attempt to escape, but she could render her chum no help now. Indeed, the current which had seized the boat was so strong that she could not have gotten back to the shore, had she tried.

When the Gypsies disappeared into the wood, taking Ruth with them, Helen realized her helplessness and loneliness, and she wept. She sat in the stern of the punt and floated on and on, without regard to where she was going.

She could not have changed the course of the punt, however. She was now in too deep water; the guiding pole was of no use to her, and there were no oars, of course. She was drifting toward the middle of the lake, it seemed, yet the general direction was eastward.

There, at the lower end of the lake, a wide stream carried its waters toward the distant Minturn Dam. But long before the stream came to that place, there was much of what the local guides called "white water."

These swift rapids Helen thought little about at first. She had had no experience to warn her of her peril. At this moment she was fearful only of the wild Gypsy clan that had tried to keep her prisoner and that had, indeed, succeeded in carrying away her dear friend, Ruth Fielding.

As she floated on, she saw nothing more of the Gypsies. She began to believe that they had not turned back to follow her along the edge of the lake.

They were satisfied with their single prisoner!

"But father will see to that!" sobbed Helen. "He won't let them run away with Ruth Fielding—I know he won't! Dear, dear! what would I ever do if Ruth disappeared and we shouldn't meet each other again —or not until we were quite grown up?

"Such things *have* happened! I've read about it in books. And those dreadful Gypsies make the children they capture become Gypsies, too. Suppose, years and years hence, I should meet Ruth and she should ask to tell my fortune as Gypsy women do—and she shouldn't know me——"

Helen began to sob again. She was working herself up into a highly nervous state and her imagination was "running away with her," as Ruth often said.

Just then she almost lost the punt-pole, and this near-accident startled her. She might need that pole yet—especially if the boat drifted into shallow water.

She looked all around. She stood up, so as to see farther. Not a moving object appeared along either shore of the lake. This was a veritable wilderness, and human habitations were far, far away.

She raised her eyes to the chain of hills over which she and her brother and Ruth had ridden the day before. At one point she could see the road itself, and just then there flashed into view an auto, traveling eastward at a fast clip.

"But, of course, they can't see *me* 'way down here," said Helen, shaking her head. "They wouldn't notice such a speck on the lake."

So she did not even try to signal to the motor-car, and it was quickly out of sight.

The current was now stronger, it seemed. The punt drifted straight down the lake toward the broad stream through which Long Lake was drained. Helen hoped the boat would drift in near one shore, or the other, but it entered the stream as near the middle as though it had been aimed for that point!

Here the water gripped the heavy boat and drew it onward, swifter and swifter. At first Helen was not afraid. She saw the banks slipping by on either hand, and was now so far from the Gypsies, that she would have been glad to get ashore. Yet she did not think herself in any increased danger.

Suddenly, however, an eddy gripped the boat. To her amazement the craft swung around swiftly and she was floating down stream, stern foremost!

"Oh, dear me! I wish I had a pair of oars. Then I could manage this thing," she told herself.

Then the boat scraped upon a rock. The blow was a glancing one, but it drove the craft around again. She was glad, however, to see the bow aimed properly.

From moment to moment the boat now moved more swiftly. It seemed that the foam-streaked water tore at its sides as though desiring to swamp it. Helen sat very quietly in the middle seat, and watched the dimpling, eddying stream with increasing anxiety.

Suddenly the punt darted shoreward. It looked just as though it must be cast upon the beach. Helen raised herself stiffly, seized the pole more firmly, and prepared to leap ashore with its aid.

And just as she was about to risk the feat, the bow of the boat whirled outward again, she was almost cast into the water, and once more the boat whirled down the middle current.

She dropped back into her seat with a gasp. This was terrible! She could not possibly control the craft in the rapids, and she was traveling faster and faster.

The boat came to another eddy, and was whirled around and around, so swiftly, that Helen's poor head swam, too! She raised her voice in a cry for help, but it was likewise a cry of despair. She had no idea that there was a soul within the sound of her voice.

Crash! the boat went against an outcropping rock. It spun around again and darted down the current. It was leaking now; the water poured into it between the sprung planks.

The river widened suddenly into a great pool, fringed with trees. At one point a rock was out-thrust into the river and Helen saw—dimly enough at first—a figure spring into view upon this boulder.

"Help! help!" shrieked the girl, as the boat spun about.

"Hi! catch that!"

It was dear old Tom's voice! The shout brought hope to Helen's heart.

"Oh, Tom! Tom!" she cried. "Save me!"

"Bet you I will!" returned the boy. "Just grab this rope——Now!"

She saw the loop come hurtling through the air. Tom had learned how to properly throw a lariat the summer before, while in Montana, and he and his particular chums had practised the art assiduously ever since that time.

Now, at his second trial, he dropped the noose right across the punt. Helen seized upon it.

"Hitch it to the ring in the bow—quick!" commanded her brother, and Helen obeyed.

In five minutes he had her ashore, but the punt sunk in shallow water.

"I don't care! I don't care!" cried Helen, wading through the shallow water. "I really thought I was going to drown, Tommy boy."

"But where's Ruth? Whatever have you girls been doing since last evening? Where did you go to?"

He held her in his arms for a moment and hugged her tightly. Helen sobbed a little, with her face against his shoulder.

"Oh! it's so-o good to have you again, Tommy," she declared.

Then she told him swiftly all that had happened. Tom was mighty glad to get his sister back, but he was vastly worried about her chum.

"That's what I feared. I had a feeling that you girls had fallen into the hands of those Gypsies. Those men in the old house were two of them——"

"I know it. We saw them at the encampment."

"But if Ruth is still with them," Tom said, "Peck will get her. He said he knew how to handle Gyps. He's been used to them all his life. And this tribe often come through this region, he told me."

"Who is Mr. Peck?" asked Helen, puzzled.

Tom told her of his adventures on the previous night. After returning to the spot where the auto had been stalled earlier in the evening, Tom and the constable had searched with the lanterns all about the place, and had followed the footsteps of the girls and the strange woman to the lower road.

"I had no idea then that the wagon you had evidently gotten into was a Gypsy cart," pursued Tom. "We saw you'd gone on toward Severn Corners, however, and we went back. But you come along with me, now, Helen, and we'll return to that very place. I expect Uncle Ike will be waiting for us. I telephoned him before daylight this morning—and it's now ten o'clock. The car is right back here on the road."

"Oh! I am so glad!"

"Yes. Soon after breakfast Peck and I separated! I came this way in the car, hoping to find some trace of you. Peck made inquiries and said he'd follow the Gyps. Ruth will be taken away from them," declared Tom, with conviction. "That big smith isn't afraid of anybody."

"Oh, I hope so," said Helen. "But that horrible old Gypsy—the queen, she calls herself—is very powerful."

"Not much she isn't!" laughed Tom. "Peck fully feels the importance of that star he wears. I think he would tackle a herd of elephants, if they were breaking the law."

So they sped on in the motor-car, feeling considerably better. The twins were very fond of each other, and were never really happy, when they were apart for long.

But when they ran down into Severn Corners, expecting to find Ruth at the constable's house, they were gravely disappointed. The forge was open and Sim Peck was shoeing a horse. He stood up, hammer in hand, when the motor-car stopped before the smithy.

"Hello!" he said to Tom. "Did you get her?"

"I got my sister. She's had an awful time. Those Gypsies ought to be all shut up in jail," said Tom, vigorously.

"Them 'Gyptians?" drawled Peck, in surprise. "What they got ter do with it?"

"Why, they had everything to do with it. Don't you know that they carried off both my sister here and Ruth Fielding?"

"Look here," said the blacksmith-constable, slowly, "let me understand this. Your sister has been with the 'Gyptians?"

"Yes. Didn't you find Ruth with them?"

"Wait a minute. Was she with old Zelaya's tribe?"

"Yes," cried Helen. "That is the name of the Gypsy queen."

"And the other gal?" demanded the man. "Where is she?"

"That's what I ask you," said Tom, anxiously. "My sister escaped from them, but they recaptured the other girl."

"Sure o' that?" he demanded.

"Yes, I am!" cried Helen. "I saw them drag her back through the woods to the encampment."

"When was this?"

"Not far from six o'clock this morning."

"By gravey!" ejaculated the man. "She ain't with 'em now. I been all through them vans, and seen the whole tribe. There ain't a white gal with 'em," said Mr. Peck, with confidence.

CHAPTER XVI

THROUGH THE NIGHT AND THE STORM

Ruth did not really know what to think of Roberto, the Gypsy boy.

His push, as he passed her, had been most rude, but his whispered words seemed a promise of friendship. He did not look at her again, as he went around the encampment. Roberto seemed a privileged character, and it was not hard to guess that he was Queen Zelaya's favorite grandchild.

As for the prisoner, she was scarcely spoken to by anybody. She was not abused, but she felt her position keenly. Particularly was she ashamed of her appearance—barefooted, bareheaded, and stained until she seemed as dark as the Gypsy girls themselves. Ruth thought she looked altogether hateful!

"I really would be ashamed to have Tom Cameron see me now," she thought.

Yet she would have been delighted indeed to see Tom! It was in her chum's twin brother that she hoped, after all, for escape.

For Roberto, the Gypsy, ignored her completely. She

feared that his whispered words to her, when he first entered the camp, had meant nothing after all. Why should she expect him to be different from his tribesmen?

The Gypsies fed her well and allowed her to wander about the camp as she pleased. There were two sentinels set to watch the northern and southern shores of the lake. Nobody could approach the island without being observed and warning given to the camp.

Ruth had lost hope of anybody coming to the encampment in search of her, for the present. The constable had doubtless been sent by Tom Cameron, and he would report that there was nobody but Gypsies in the camp. Nobody but her immediate friends would distinguish Ruth from a Gypsy now.

If Helen had found Tom, the situation could not be changed much for Ruth—and the latter realized that. Mr. Cameron and Uncle Jabez would have to be communicated with, before a general alarm could be sent out and detectives put on the case.

By that time, where would the girl from the Red Mill be?

This question was no easy one to answer. Ruth did not believe the Gypsies would remain on this island for any length of time. Queen Zelaya was doubtless shrewd enough to plan a long jump next time, and so throw off pursuit.

Indeed, all the next day the girl could do little but worry about her own situation, and about Helen's fate. The last she had seen of her chum, she had been drifting out into the middle of this lake. Suppose the punt had sprung a leak, or capsized?

Clouds gathered that day, and the second evening on the island closed with a steady, fine rain falling. The encampment was quiet early. Even the dogs found shelter from the wet, but Ruth had every reason to believe that the Gypsy men took turns in guarding the encampment.

Ruth was made to sleep in Queen Zelaya's van, and as soon as it had become real dark, the old woman made her enter. In her rags of clothing, Ruth was not afraid of a little rain—surely she had on nothing that would be spoiled by the wet; but she had to obey the old hag.

At supper time Roberto brought the bowls of savory stew that usually made up that meal for the Gypsies. There were three bowls on the tray and the boy gave Ruth a sharp side glance and pointed to a certain bowl. She dared not refuse to take it.

When he approached his grandmother at the other end of the van, he removed his own bowl before setting the tray upon the box beside her. Ruth hesitated to eat her own portion; she had been afraid of being drugged from the beginning.

Yet, somehow, she could not help feeling confidence in Roberto. The latter ate his supper with gusto, talking all the while with the old woman. But he went away without a word or look at Ruth after the meal.

Soon Zelaya made her go to bed. Ruth was not sleepy, but she appeared to go to sleep almost at once, as she had before. She lay down in all the clothing she wore, for she was apprehensive of something happening on this night. She saw that the old woman was very drowsy herself.

Appearing to sleep, Ruth waited and watched. The

storm whined in the trees of the island, but there was no other noise.

Zelaya was at the locked box again, and she soon drew forth her treasure-casket. She fondled the collar of pearls as she had on the first night Ruth had slept in the van.

The girl was watching for that evil face at the window again. For a moment she thought she saw it, but then she recognized that it was Roberto's handsome face against the wet pane.

Suddenly Ruth realized that the old woman had fallen asleep over her box of valuables. The girl was confident that there had been a drugged bowl at supper time, but *she* had not eaten of it.

There was a little noise at the door—ever so slight. The handle turned, and Roberto's head was thrust in. He nodded at Ruth as though he were sure she was not asleep, and then creeping up the steps, he gazed at his grandmother.

There could be no doubt that she was sound asleep! He slipped in and closed the door. At first he did not say a word to Ruth.

He went to Zelaya's side and shook her lightly. She did not awake. As though she were a child, the strong youth lifted her and placed her in the bed. Then he locked the small box, put the key again around Zelaya's neck, and lowered the treasure box into the chest. The padlock of this he snapped and then turned cheerfully to the watchful Ruth.

"Come!" he whispered. "Missy not afraid of Roberto? Come!"

No. Ruth was *not* afraid of him. She rose quickly and preceded him, as he directed by a gesture, out of the

door of the van. There was neither light nor sound in the whole camp.

Once they were free, Roberto seized the girl's hand and led her through the darkness and the rain. Ruth's tender feet stumbled painfully over the rough ground, but the boy was not impatient.

He seemed to know his way in the dark by instinct. Certainly, Ruth could scarcely see her hand before her face!

However, it was not long before she realized that they had come out upon the shore of the island. There was a vast, empty-looking place before them, which Ruth knew must be the open lake.

Where the sentinels had gone, she could not guess, unless Roberto had managed to drug *them*, too!

However, there was not a word said, save when Roberto led her down, to the water and she felt it lave her feet. Then he muttered, in a low tone:

"Don't fear, little Missy."

As they waded deeper and deeper into the lake, following as she supposed the track by which the wagons had come to the island, Ruth *was* more than a little frightened. Yet she would not show Roberto it was so.

Once she whispered to him: "I can swim, Roberto."

"Good! But I will carry you," and he suddenly stooped, slung her across his shoulder as though she had been a feather-weight, and marched on through the water.

It was plain that the Gypsy boy knew this ford better than the drivers of the vans, for he found no spot that he could not wade through and carry Ruth, as

well. It was nearly an hour before they reached the land.

The rain beat upon them and the wind soughed in the trees. It seemed to get darker and darker, yet Roberto never hesitated for direction, and setting Ruth down upon her own feet, helped her on till they came to a well-traveled road.

Not far ahead was a light. Ruth knew at once that it was a lamp shining through the windows of some farmhouse kitchen.

"There they will take you in," Roberto said. "They are kind people. I am sorry I could not bring away your own clothes and your bag. But it could not be, Missy."

"Oh! you have been so good to me, Roberto!" she cried, seizing both of his hands. "However can I thank you—or repay you?"

"Don't be too hard on Gypsy—on my old grandmother. She is old and she is a miser. She thought she could make your friends pay her money. But now we will all leave here in the morning and you shall never be troubled by us again."

"I will do nothing to punish her, Roberto," promised Ruth. "But I hope I shall see you at the Red Mill some time."

"Perhaps—who knows?" returned the youth, with a smile that she could see in the dark, his teeth were so white. "Now run to the door and knock. When I see it opened and you go in, I will return."

Ruth Fielding did as she was bidden. She entered the gate, mounted the porch, and rapped upon the kitchen door. The moment she looked into the motherly face of the woman who answered her

knock, the girl knew that her troubles were over.

CHAPTER XVII

OFF FOR SCHOOL AGAIN

There was much bustle about the old Red Mill. The first tang of frost was in the air, and September was lavishly painting the trees and bushes along the banks of the Lumano with crimson and yellow.

A week had elapsed since Ruth and Helen had been prisoners in the Gypsies' encampment, up in the hills. That week had been crowded with excitement and adventure for the chums and Tom Cameron. They would all three have much to talk about regarding the Gypsies and their ways, for weeks to come.

Uncle Ike Cameron had roused up the County Sheriff and all his minions, before Ruth appeared at Severn Corners, driven by the kindly farmer to whose door Roberto had brought her through the darkness and rain.

Constable Peck, having searched the Gypsy camp, believed that Ruth must have escaped from the Romany people at the same time as Helen. Therefore,

it was not until Ruth's complete story was told, that actual pursuit of the Gypsies by the county authorities was begun.

Then Queen Zelaya and her band were not only out of the county, but out of the state, as well. They had hurried across the border, and it was understood that the tribe had gone south—as they usually did in the winter—and would be seen no more in New York State—at least not until the next spring.

The three friends had much to tell wherever they went during this intervening week. They had had a fine time at "Uncle Ike's," but every adventure they had was tame in comparison to those they had experienced on the road overlooking Long Lake.

They wondered what had become of Roberto—if he had returned to his people and risked being accused of letting Ruth escape. Ruth discussed this point with her friends; but one thing she had never mentioned to either Helen, or her brother Tom.

She did not speak to them of the wonderful pearl necklace she had seen in the old Gypsy queen's possession. There was a mystery about that; she believed Zelaya must have stolen it. The man with the wicked face had intimated that it was part of some plunder the Gypsies had secured.

Now, Ruth and Helen—and Tom as well—were ready to start for school again. This was the last morning for some time to come, that Ruth would look out of her little bedroom window at the Red Mill.

She always left the beautiful place with regret. She had come to love old Aunt Alvirah so much, and have such a deep affection and pity for the miserly miller, that the joy of going back to Briarwood was

well tempered with remorse.

The night before, Uncle Jabez had come to Ruth, when she was alone, and thrust a roll of coin in her hand. "Ye'll want some ter fritter away as us'al, Niece Ruth," he had said in his most snarling tone.

When she looked at it, her heart beat high. There were five ten-dollar gold pieces!

It was given in an ungrateful way, yet the girl of the Red Mill believed her uncle meant to be kind after all. The very thought of giving up possession of so much money made him cranky. Perhaps he was determined to give her these fifty dollars on the very day they had been wrecked on the Lumano. No wonder he had been so cross all this time!

It was Uncle Jabez's way. As Aunt Alvirah said, he could not help it. At least, he had never learned to make any effort to cure this unfortunate niggardliness that made him seem so unkind.

"I do wish I had a lot of money," she told Aunt Alvirah, with a sigh. "I would never have to ask him to pay out a cent again. I could refuse to take this that he has given me and then I——"

"Tut, tut, my pretty! don't say that," said the little old woman, soothingly. "It does him good to put his hand in his pocket—it does, indeed. If it is a sad wrench for him ter git it out ag'in—all the better!" and she chuckled a little as she lowered herself into her rocker. "Oh, my back! and oh, my bones!"

"Ye don't understand yer uncle's nater like I do, Ruthie. You bein' his charge has been the salvation of him—yes, it has! Don't worry when he gives ye money; it's all thet keeps his old heart from freezin' right up solid."

Now the Cameron automobile was at the gate, and Helen and Tom were calling to Ruth to hurry. Ben had taken her trunk to the Cheslow station the day before. Ruth appeared with her new handbag (the Gypsies had the old one), flung her arms about Aunt Alvirah's neck as she sat on the porch, and then ran swiftly to the door of the mill.

"Uncle! I'm going!" she called into the brown dusk of the place.

He came slowly to the door. His gray, grim face was unlighted by even an attempt at a smile, as he shook hands with her.

"I know ye'll be a good gal," he said, sourly. "Ye allus be. But be savin' with—with all thet money I gave ye. It's enough to be the ruination of a young gal to hev so much."

He repented of his gift, she knew. Yet she remembered what Aunt Alvirah had said, and refrained from handing it back to him. She determined, however, if she could, to never touch the five gold pieces, and some time, when she was self-supporting, she would hand the very same coins back to him!

This was in her thought as she moved away. So, on this occasion, Ruth Fielding did not leave the Red Mill with a very happy feeling at her heart.

The automobile sped away along the shady road into Cheslow. At the station Mercy Curtis, the lame girl, was awaiting them, although it was still some time before the train was due that would bear them away to Lake Osago.

When it *did* steam into view and come to a slow stop beside the platform, there was Heavy Stone and The

Fox with their hands out of the windows, shouting to them. They had secured two seats facing each other, and Ruth and Mercy joined them, while Tom and Helen took the seat behind.

Such a chattering as there was! The fleshy girl and Mary Cox had not seen Ruth and Helen and Mercy since they had all returned from the Steeles' summer home at Sunrise Farm, and you may believe there was plenty to talk about.

"Who else is here?" demanded Ruth, standing up to search the length of the car for familiar faces.

"Look out, Miss!" cried Heavy, producing her first joke of the fall term. "Remember Lot's wife!"

"Why so?" asked Helen.

"Goodness me! how ignorant you are—and you took chemistry last year, too," declared Jennie Stone.

"I—don't—just—see," admitted Helen.

"You mean to say you don't know what two-fold chemical change Lot's wife underwent?"

"Give it up!"

"Why," giggled Heavy, "first she turned to rubber, and then she turned to salt!"

When the crowd had shown their appreciation, The Fox said:

"We're going to pick up an Infant at Maxwell. Heard about her?"

"No. Who is she?" asked Helen. "Not that Infants interest me much now. We can let the juniors take them in hand. Remember, girls, we are full-fledged seniors this year."

"You'll have an interest in this new girl," said Miss

Cox, with assurance.

"Why?"

"She is Nettie Parsons. You know her father is the big sugar man. He has oodles of money!"

"Lot's of sugar, eh?" chuckled Heavy. "Hope she'll bring some to school with her. I have a sweet tooth, I hope you know."

"A tooth! a whole set of sweet teeth, you mean!" cried Ruth.

"I only hope she is nice. I don't care how much money she has," said Helen, smiling. "We won't hold her wealth up against her, if she's the right sort."

"Oh, I'm not fooling," said The Fox, rather sharply, for she had a short temper, "to match her red hair," as Heavy said. "She'll probably bring trunks full of nice dresses to school and loads of jewelry——"

"Won't that be silly? For Mrs. Tellingham won't let her wear them."

"Only on state and date occasions," put in Mercy.

"At any rate, her folks have splendid things. Why! don't you remember about her aunt losing that be-a-utiful necklace last spring?"

"Necklace?" repeated Ruth. "What sort of a necklace?"

"One of the finest pearl collars in the world, they say. Worth maybe fifty thousand dollars. Wonderful!"

"A pearl necklace?" queried the girl from the Red Mill, her interest growing.

"Yes, indeed."

"How careless of her!" said Heavy, with a yawn.

"Silly!" exclaimed The Fox. "It was stolen, of course."

"By whom?" demanded Ruth.

"Why, if the police knew that, they'd get back the necklace, wouldn't they?" demanded Mary Cox, with scorn.

"But I didn't know—they might suspect?" suggested Ruth, meekly.

"They do. Gypsies."

"Gypsies!" cried Ruth and Helen together. And then the latter began: "Oh, girls! listen to what happened to Ruth and me only a week ago!"

"Wait a bit, dear," broke in Ruth. "Let us know a little more about the lost necklace. Why do they think the Gypsies took it?"

"I'll tell you," said The Fox. "You see, this aunt of Nettie's is very, very rich. She comes from California, and she was on to visit the Parsons last spring.

"There was a tribe of Gypsies camping near the Parsons estate. They all went over to have their fortunes told—just for a lark, you know. It was after dinner one evening, and there was company. Nettie's Aunt Rachel had dressed her best, and she wore the necklace to the Gypsy camp.

"That very night the Parsons' house was robbed. Not much was taken except the aunt's jewel-box and some money she had in her desk. The robbers were frightened away before they could go to any of the other suites.

"The next day the Gypsies had left their encampment, too. Of course, there was nothing to connect the robbery with the Gyps., save circumstantial evidence. The police didn't find either

the Gypsies or the necklace. But Aunt Rachel offered five thousand dollars' reward for the return of the pearls."

"Just think of that!" gasped Helen. "Five thousand dollars. My, Ruthie! wouldn't you like to win *that*?"

"Indeed I would," returned her chum, with longing.

"But I guess the Gypsies *we* were mixed up with never owned a pearl necklace like that. They didn't look as though they had anything but the gaily colored rags they stood in—and their horses."

"What do you know about Gypsies?" asked The Fox.

"A whole lot," cried Helen. "Let me tell you," and she proceeded to repeat the story of their adventure with Queen Zelaya and her tribe. Ruth said nothing during the story; her mind was busy with the mystery of the missing necklace.

CHAPTER XVIII

GETTING INTO HARNESS

Nettie Parsons proved to be a very sweet, quiet girl, when she came aboard the train at Maxwell. She was

rather older than the majority of girls who entered Briarwood Hall as "Infants." It seemed that she had suffered considerable illness and that had made her backward in her books.

"Never mind! She'll be company for Ann Hicks," said Helen. "Won't that be fine? Neither of them will feel so badly, then, because they are in the lower classes."

"We'll get the Sweetbriars to make her feel at home," said Ruth, to her chum. "No hazing this term, girlie! Let's welcome the newcomers like friends and sisters."

"Sure, my dear," agreed Helen. "We haven't forgotten what they did to *us*, when we first landed at Briarwood Hall."

When the train ran down to the dock where they were to take the steamboat *Lanawaxa* for the other side of the lake, there was a crowd of a dozen or more girls in waiting. A welcoming shout greeted Ruth as she headed the party from the vestibule coach:

"S. B.—Ah-h h!
S. B.—Ah-h-h!
Sound our battle-cry
Near and far!
S. B.—All!
Briarwood Hall!
Sweetbriars, do or die—
This be our battle-cry—
Briarwood Hall!
That's All!"

Every girl present belonged to the now famous school society, and Nettie Parsons was interested right away. She wished to know all about it, and how to join, and of course she was referred to Ruth.

In this way the girl of the Red Mill and the new pupil became better acquainted, and Ruth found opportunity very soon to ask Nettie about the pearl necklace that her Aunt Rachel had lost some months before.

Meanwhile, the girls, with their hand luggage, trooped down the long dock to the *Lanawaxa's* boarding-plank. Heavy Stone turned suddenly in the hot sunshine (for it was a glowing noon) to find two of the smaller girls mincing along in her very footsteps.

"I say! what are you two Infants following me so closely for?" she demanded.

"Please, Miss," giggled one of them, "mother told me to take Sadie for a nice long walk, but to be sure and keep her in the shade!"

This delighted the other girls immensely, for it was not often that anybody got ahead of the plump girl. She was too good-natured to take offense, however, and only grinned at them.

They all crowded aboard and sought seats on the upper deck of the steamer. Tom had met some of his friends who attended the Seven Oaks Military Academy, among them big Bob Steele and little Isadore Phelps.

Of course the boys joined the girls, and necessary introductions were made. Before the *Lanawaxa* pulled out of the dock, they were all having great fun.

"But how we will miss Madge!" was the general cry of the older girls, for Bobbins' sister no longer attended Briarwood Hall, and her absence would be felt indeed.

Not being under the immediate eye of his sharp-tongued sister, Bobbins showed his preference for Mercy Curtis, and spent a good deal of time at the lame girl's side. He was so big and she was so slight and delicate, that they made rather an odd-looking pair.

However, Bobbins enjoyed her sharp tongue and withstood her raillery. She called him "Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum" and made believe that she was very much afraid of him; yet it was noticeable that there was no venom in the sharp speeches the lame girl addressed to her big cavalier—and Mercy Curtis could be most unmerciful if she so desired!

Soon they were on the train again, and a short run to the Seven Oaks station, where the red brick barracks of the Military School frowned down upon the railroad from the heights above.

"I wouldn't go to school in such an ugly place," declared the girls.

Here is where they separated from their boy friends. A great, ramshackle bus, and another vehicle, were waiting at the end of the platform. An old man in a long duster stood beside the bus to help the girls in and see to their baggage. This was "Uncle Noah" Dolliver.

At once The Fox formed the girls into line, and keeping step to the march, they tramped the length of the platform, singing:

"Uncle Noah, he built an ark—
One wide river to cross!
And in it we have many a lark—
One wide river to cross!
One wide river!
One wide river of Jordan!

One wide river!
One wide river to cross!

"The Sweetbriars get in, one by one—
One wide river to cross!
The last in line is Heavy Stone—
One wide river to cross!"

And the plump girl *was* the last one to pop into the ancient equipage, filling the very last seat—*tight*!

"Lucky you brought along another wagon, Uncle Noah," said The Fox, as the remainder of the girls ran to the second vehicle.

Both of the wagons soon started. It was a hot and dusty afternoon and the girls were really crowded.

"I'm squeezed in so tight I can't think," moaned Helen.

"Ouch!" cried Belle Tingley. "That's my funny-bone you hit, Lluella, with your handbag. Oh! how funny it feels."

"Did you ever know why they call that thing in your elbow the funny bone?" asked Heavy, mighty serious.

"No," said Belle, rubbing the elbow vigorously.

"Why, it's what makes folks 'laugh in their sleeves,'" chuckled the plump girl.

"Oh, dear me! isn't she smart?" groaned Lluella.

"Almost as smart as my Cousin Bill," said The Fox, breaking into the conversation. "He won't be called 'Willie' and he'll answer only to 'Bill,' or 'William.'

"'William,' said the teacher one day to him in school, 'spell "ibex."'

"Bill jumps up and begins: 'I-b——'

"'Stop! stop, William!' cries the teacher. 'Where did you learn such grammar? Always say, "I am."'

"And do you know," chuckled Mary, "Bill sat down and gave up spelling the word—and he doesn't know how to spell 'ibex' yet!"

The sun had set, when they got out at the end of the Cedar Walk. Ruth, who had sat beside Nettie Parsons, went with her to the principal's office and introduced her to Mrs. Grace Tellingham.

Later Ruth joined her chums in the old West Dormitory. There were two quartette rooms side by side, in which were hatched most of the fun and good times that happened at Briarwood Hall. In one were Ruth, Helen, Mercy, and Ann Hicks, the girl from the west. The other had long been the room of The Fox, Heavy, Belle Tingley, and Lluella Fairfax.

Ann Hicks, right from Silver Ranch, was on hand to greet Ruth and the others, she having arrived at Briarwood the day before. She brought greetings from her Uncle Bill, Bashful Ike and his Sally.

The crowd quieted down at last. The last guilty shadows stole from room to room, and finally every girl sought her own bed. Ruth and Helen shared one of the big beds in their room, but they did not go to sleep at once. They could hear the quiet breathing of Mercy and Ann, but the chum's eyes were still wide open.

"That Nettie Parsons is a much nicer girl than I expected," whispered Helen.

"That is something I want to talk with you about," said Ruth, quickly.

"What?"

"Nettie Parsons. At least, something about her Aunt Rachel."

"Oh! the necklace," laughed Helen. "Are you really interested in it, Ruth?"

"She offered five thousand dollars' reward for it," continued Ruth, breathlessly. "She really did. And the reward still stands."

"Why, Ruthie!" exclaimed Helen, astonished. "Do you mean to say——"

"This is what I mean to say," said Ruth, with energy. "I mean that I'd love to win that reward. I believe I know what has become of the pearl necklace. In fact, Helen, I am very sure that I have seen the necklace."

CHAPTER XIX

CAN IT BE POSSIBLE?

Ruth was thinking a great deal—it must be confessed!—about money during the first days of this new term at Briarwood Hall, and yet she was not naturally of a mercenary nature. Nor was she alone in this, for the advent of Nettie Parsons into the

school quite turned the heads of many.

Nettie Parsons was the first multi-millionaire's daughter who had ever come to Briarwood Hall. Most of the girls' parents were well-to-do; otherwise they could not have afforded to pay the tuition fees, for Mrs. Grace Tellingham's institution was of considerable importance on the roster of boarding schools.

Many of the girls' parents, like Helen Cameron's father, were really wealthy. But Mr. Parsons was way above that! And with a certain class the mere fact of money *as* money, is cause enough for them to kneel down and worship!

After a time these "toadies" were disappointed in the daughter of the "sugar king." Nettie Parsons was a very commonplace, kindly girl, not at all brilliant, and dressed more plainly than the majority of the girls at Briarwood Hall.

Ruth's thoughts about money were not in the same lines as the thoughts of those girls so much interested in Nettie Parsons' riches. She neither envied the wealthy girl her possessions, nor desired to be like her.

What Ruth Fielding desired so keenly was independence. She wanted to control her own destiny, instead of being so beholden to Uncle Jabez Potter for everything. The sting of being an object of charity had gotten deeply into Ruth's heart. The old miller had an unfortunate way with him, which made the proud girl feel keenly her situation.

There was really no reason at all why the miller should take care of, and educate, his niece's child. He was not legally bound to do it. The kinship was not close enough for people to really expect Uncle Jabez

to do all that he had for Ruth Fielding!

There had been times when the girl, through several fortunate circumstances, had been of real help to the miller. She had once helped recover some money he had lost when the freshet wrecked a part of the Red Mill. Again, it was through her that an investment in a mine in Montana had proved productive of gain for Uncle Jabez, instead of loss.

And now, only this summer, she had actually saved the miller's life.

Grudgingly, Uncle Jabez had paid these debts by keeping her at this expensive school and furnishing her with clothes and spending money. It was plain he had never approved of her being away from the mill during vacations, too.

Uncle Jabez saw no reason for young people "junketing about" and spending so much time in pleasure, as Ruth's friends did. Boys and girls learned to work, in his day, between short terms at school. It was all so different now, that the old man could not be blamed for misunderstanding.

For a girl to look forward to making a name for herself in the world—to have a career—to really be somebody—was something of which Uncle Jabez (and Aunt Alvirah as well) could not fail to disapprove.

Ruth desired to prepare for college, and in time enter a higher institution of learning. She wished, too, to cultivate her voice, and to use it in supporting herself later. She knew she could sing; she loved it, and the instructors at Briarwood encouraged her in the belief that she had a more than ordinarily fine contralto voice.

Uncle Jabez did not believe in such things. He would never be willing to invest money in making a singer of his niece. Useless to think of it!

Uncle Jabez had said that girls were of little use in the world, anyway—unless they settled down to housekeeping. The times Ruth had been of aid to him were, as he said, "just chancey."

It was of the reward for the return of the missing pearl necklace to Nettie Parsons' Aunt Rachel, that the girl of the Red Mill was thinking so continually, while the first days of this term at Briarwood slipped by. But five thousand dollars would grant Ruth Fielding the independence she craved!

Ruth and Helen Cameron had discussed the mystery of the pearl necklace in all its bearings—over and over again. All the "pros" and "cons" in the case had "been before the house," as Helen said, and it all came to the same answer: Could it be possible that Queen Zelaya, Roberto's grandmother, now had in her possession the necklace rightfully the property of Nettie Parsons' Aunt Rachel?

"That is, she had it," said Ruth, believing fully it was so, "if that awful man I saw spying on her, has not robbed the old woman and gotten away with the necklace. You know how he talked that day in the deserted house to the other Gypsy?"

"I guess I do!" exclaimed Helen. "Could I ever forget a single detail of that awful time?"

"And where are the Gypsies now?" said Ruth, feelingly. "Ah! *that* is the question."

"Uncle Ike wrote father that they had been traced some distance toward the south," Helen returned, doubtfully.

"The south is a big section of the country," and Ruth wagged her head.

"Father was very angry," said Helen, "that the police did not find them, so that the whole tribe could be punished for what they did to us, I never saw father so angry before. He declared that the Gypsies should be taught a lesson, and that their escape was most inexcusable."

Ruth said nothing, but shook her head.

"You know the excuse the sheriff and that Constable Peck, at Severn Corners, gave?"

"Yes," nodded Ruth.

"If you had come right up to the village that night, when Roberto brought you to the farmhouse, and told where the camp was, they'd have nabbed the whole crowd, before they could have gotten over the state line."

"I know," murmured Ruth.

She was remembering Roberto's words as he left her that stormy night in sight of her refuge. He had asked not to be too hard on the Gypsies; therefore, she had not hurried to lodge information against Queen Zelaya and her tribe.

But if she had only known about this pearl necklace! Nettie Parsons had described the jewel so clearly that the girl of the Red Mill could not for a moment doubt that the necklace in Zelaya's possession was the one for which the reward was offered.

"I tell you what I'll do, if you say the word," Helen said at last, seeing that her friend was really so much troubled about the affair.

"What's that, dear?"

"I'll write to father. Let me tell him all about you seeing the old woman handling the pearls, and then about this necklace that was lost by Nettie's aunt. He can advise you, at any rate."

So it was agreed. Helen wrote that very day. Inside of a week an answer came, and it quite excited Helen.

"What do you think?" she demanded of her chum. "Father has business that calls him to Lumberton in a few days. He will come here to see us. And he says for me to tell you to be sure and say nothing to anybody else about the missing necklace until he sees you."

"Of course I won't speak of it," replied Ruth. "I am not likely to. Oh, dear, Helen! if I could only win the reward that woman offers for the return of her necklace!"

It was not many days before Helen received the telegram announcing her father's coming to Lumberton, which was the nearest town to Briarwood Hall. She showed it to Mrs. Tellingham, and asked that she and Ruth be excused from lessons, when Mr. Cameron came, as he wished to drive the girls over to see Tom at Seven Oaks.

This was, of course, arranged. Mr. Cameron was a very busy man, and he could not spend much time in this visit. But he desired to speak to Ruth regarding the mystery of the pearl necklace.

He had hired a pair of spirited horses at Lumberton, and he quite had his hands full, as they bowled over the hilly road toward the military academy. But he could talk to the girls.

He had Ruth give him every particular of what she

had seen at night in the Gypsy van, and when she had done so, he said:

"I have taken the pains to get from the police the description of Mrs. Rachel Parsons' missing necklace. It fits your tale exactly, Ruth. Now, I tell you what I shall do.

"I will set a detective agency at work. For my own part, I wish to overtake this Queen Zelaya, as she calls herself, and punish her for what she did to you two girls. If such people go free, it encourages them to do worse next time.

"Now, if she has the necklace, and we can secure it, all the better. I would be glad to see you get that reward, Ruthie. And Helen says you are very anxious to win it."

"Who wouldn't be?" gasped Ruth. "Just think of five thousand dollars!"

They were driving through a fine piece of chestnut wood as she said this. The blight had not struck these beautiful trees and they hung full of the prickly burrs. The frost of the previous night had opened many of these, and the brown nuts smiled at once through the openings.

"There's a boy knocking them down!" cried Helen. "Let's stop and get some, Father. See them rain down!"

At that moment a shower of chestnuts fell and a prickly burr landed on the back of one of the team. The beast rose on his hind legs and pawed the air, snorting.

"Look out!" exclaimed the boy in the tree.

Mr. Cameron was a good horseman and he had the

animals well in hand. The boy, however, was so anxious to see what went on below, that he strained forward too far. With a scream, and the snap of broken boughs, he plunged forward, shot through the leafy-canopy, and landed with a sickening thud upon the ground!

Mr. Cameron had halted the horses dead. Ruth was out of the carriage like a flash and dropped on her knees by the boy's side. She was horror-stricken and speechless; yet she had made a great discovery as the boy fell.

He was Roberto, the Gypsy!

CHAPTER XX

HE CANNOT TALK

"Is he badly hurt?" cried Mr. Cameron, who dared not get down and leave the horses just then.

"Don't tell us he is killed, Ruthie!" wailed Helen, clasping her hands and unable to leave the carriage.

The Gypsy boy lay very still. One arm was bent under him in such a queer position that the girl of

the Red Mill knew it must be broken. His olive face was pallid, and there was a little blood on his lips.

She dared not move him. She bent down and put her ear to his chest. His heart was beating—he breathed!

"He's alive!" she said, turning to her friends in the carriage. "But I am afraid he is badly hurt. At least, one arm——"

The youth groaned. Ruth turned toward him with a tender little cry. She thought his eyelids quivered, but they were not opened.

"What will we do with him? He ought to be taken to a hospital. Where's the nearest doctor?" asked Mr. Cameron.

"Lumberton," said Ruth, promptly. "And that is the only place where there is a hospital around here."

"Back we must go, then," declared Mr. Cameron, promptly. "We sha'n't see Master Tom to-day, that's sure. You get out, Helen, and I'll turn around."

Helen ran to her friend who still hovered over the boy. At once she recognized him.

"My goodness me! Roberto! isn't that strange? Then he did not go south with the other Gypsies."

"It seems not—poor fellow," returned Ruth.

"Do you suppose he knows all about the necklace—how his grandmother became possessed of it, and all?"

"I don't know. I am sure Roberto is quite honest himself," returned Ruth. "He is not a thief like those wicked men who were talking that day in the old house, and who seem to have so much influence in the Gypsy camp."

"I don't care!" exclaimed Helen, warmly. "I am sorry for Roberto. But I hope father *does* send detectives after the Gyps., and that they catch and punish that horrid old woman. How mean she was to us!"

"Sh!" warned Ruth.

Roberto gave no sign of returning consciousness now. That puzzled the girl of the Red Mill, for she had thought he was just about to come to.

Mr. Cameron turned the carriage and halted it beside the spot where the boy lay. "Of course you two girls can't lift him?" he said.

"Of course we can!" returned his daughter, promptly. "Oh! Ruth and I haven't been doing gym. work for two years for nothing. Just watch us."

"Easy!" murmured Ruth, warningly, as Helen seized the youth's legs. "Perhaps he has more than a broken arm."

"But he must be lifted," said Helen. "Come on, now! He isn't conscious, and perhaps we can get him into the carriage before he wakes up."

And they did. Roberto did not seem to be conscious, and yet, to Ruth's surprise, the color came and went in the boy's cheeks, and his black brows knitted a little. It was just as though he *were* conscious and was endeavoring to endure the pain he felt without moaning.

They got him into the carriage in as comfortable a position as possible. Ruth sat beside him, while Helen joined her father on the front seat. Then the gentleman let the spirited team go, and they dashed off over the road toward Lumberton.

At once Helen told her father who the injured youth

was. Having heard all the details of his young folks' adventures on the road to Boisé Landing, Mr. Cameron knew just who Roberto was, and he saw the importance of learning from him, if possible, where his clan had gone.

"We want to know especially what has become of the old woman—the queen," Mr. Cameron said. "I can't help it, if she *is* the boy's grandmother, she is a wicked woman. Besides, we want to get back that necklace for Mrs. Parsons."

Unfortunately, it would be impossible for the dry goods merchant to remain in Lumberton to watch the case. He had to return that very evening, and could not spare the time now to see Tom.

He arranged at the hospital for Roberto to be given every care, and left some money with Helen and Ruth for them to purchase little luxuries for the boy when he should become convalescent.

He waited until after the doctors had made their examination and learned that Roberto not only suffered from a broken arm, but had two ribs broken and his right leg badly wrenched.

Mr. Cameron wrote a note to Mrs. Tellingham, asking that Helen and Ruth might visit the hospital every day or two to see how the patient fared.

"Besides," said Ruth, eagerly, "I may get him to talk. Perhaps he has deserted his tribe for good, and he may help us learn about the necklace."

"You want to be very careful in trying to pump the lad," said Mr. Cameron, with a smile.

He need not have feared on this point, however, as it turned out. The very next afternoon Ruth and Helen hurried in to Lumberton to make inquiries at the

hospital. They saw the head physician and he was frankly puzzled about Roberto.

"I thought I had had every kind of a case in my experience," said the surgeon, "but there's something about this one that puzzles me."

"Is he more hurt than you thought?" cried Ruth, anxiously.

"I don't know. It seems that we have found all his injuries that are apparent. But there is one we cannot reach. Something is the matter with his speech."

"His speech?" gasped Helen.

"You have heard him speak?"

"Of course!"

"Then he is not naturally dumb——"

"Dumb?" repeated Helen, in wonderment. "You don't mean that he is dumb?"

"I mean just that. It appears that since his fall yesterday, he cannot talk at all," said the doctor.

CHAPTER XXI

RUTH INTERCEDES

The two girls did not see Roberto that day, nor for several days following. The hospital authorities did not think it best to allow him to be excited even in a mild way.

They sent in such delicacies as the nurse said he could have, and Tony Foyle was bribed by Helen to get a report from the hospital every day about the young Gypsy.

The girls kept very quiet about the patient in the hospital. Their mates knew only that Helen and Ruth had been driving with Mr. Cameron when the boy fell out of the tree. They did not dream that the victim of the accident had any possible connection with the pearl necklace that Nettie Parsons' aunt had lost!

Helen kept her father informed of the progress of Roberto's case, and in return he wrote Helen that the detectives were confident of reaching old Queen Zelaya and her tribe.

"But if we could only get Roberto to talk!" sighed Ruth.

"Why, Ruth Fielding! if the poor fellow has been made speechless by that fall, how *can* he talk?"

"I know, but——"

"Don't you believe it is *so*?"

"Why—yes," admitted Ruth. "Of course, he would have no reason for refusing to speak. And they say he has a hard time making them understand what he wants, for he doesn't know how to write. Poor fellow! I suppose he never realized before, that the art of writing was of any use to *him*."

In a week or so the girls were allowed to go to the

ward where Roberto lay. Helen carried an armful of good things for the Gypsy lad to eat, but Ruth remembered that he had not cared much for delicacies, and she carried picture papers and a great armful of brilliant fall flowers—some picked by herself in the woods, and the others begged from Tony Foyle.

"Taking flowers to a boy—pshaw!" scoffed Helen. "Why, that shows you have no brother, Ruthie. Tom wouldn't look at flowers when he's sick."

Ruth believed she had made no mistake. When they approached the bed in which Roberto lay, he looked very pale indeed, and the expression of weariness on his face as he stared out of the distant window, made Ruth's heart ache for the captive wild-boy.

"Here are visitors for you, Robert," said the kindly nurse.

The big, black eyes of the Gypsy boy rolled toward the two girls. Then his face lit up and his eyes sparkled. They were fixed eagerly on the mass of brilliant blossoms Ruth carried. She scattered the flowers over the coverlet, and Roberto seized some of them, fairly pressing them to his lips. He nodded and smiled at the display of Helen's offerings, too, but he could not keep his eyes away from the flowers. He had been homesick for his beloved woodlands.

He was still in plaster and could not move much. He did his best to make the girls understand how welcome they were, but not a sound came from his lips.

"A very strange case, indeed," said the doctor in charge, when the girls came down from the ward. "There seems to be absolutely no reason why he does not speak. Apparently no paralysis of the vocal cords.

But speechless he is. And as he cannot read or write, it is a nuisance."

"It isn't possible that for some reason he doesn't *wish* to speak?" queried Ruth, doubtfully.

"Why, Ruth! there you go again!" exclaimed Helen. "I never knew you to be so suspicious."

The doctor laughed. "I think not," he said. "Of course, he might, but he must be a wonderfully good actor. The next time you come, we shall try him."

So on a subsequent call of the two girls at the hospital, the doctor entered the ward at the same time they did and likewise approached Roberto's bed, only on the opposite side. Ruth had brought more flowers, and the boy was evidently delighted.

"Are you sure you can't speak to me, Roberto?" asked Ruth, softly, as he nodded and smiled and clasped the flowers to his breast with his one good hand.

Roberto shook his head sadly, and his black eyes showed every indication of sorrow. But of a sudden he jumped, and a spasm of pain crossed his face. The doctor straightened up and Roberto scowled at him wrathfully. The boy had not uttered a sound.

"I jabbed him with this needle," said the doctor, with disgust. "You see, either he has perfect control over himself; or he absolutely cannot speak. While I was setting his arm and fixing up his smashed ribs, he only moaned a little."

"Oh!" Helen had gasped, looking at the medical man in some wrath.

"Don't do it again—not for *me*," urged Ruth. "I am sorry I said anything about it."

"Oh, he isn't seriously injured by *that*," said the

surgeon, holding up the needle. "But I do not think he is 'playing possum.'"

"It isn't possible!" exclaimed Helen, confidently.

"And how long must he lie here?" Ruth asked.

"Oh, in a fortnight he'll be as fine as a fiddle. Of course, he won't be able to use his arm much for several weeks. But the ribs will knit all right. Maybe he can find some light job——"

"We'll see about *that*," Helen interrupted.

"I can see you young ladies are much interested in him," chuckled the doctor. "And not entirely because he is a handsome, black-eyed rascal, eh?"

Ruth knew that old Tony Foyle, the gardener at Briarwood Hall, was interested in the lad. He had gone up to the ward to see Roberto several times, and came away enthusiastic in the Gypsy's praise.

"Sure," said Tony, to Ruth, "he's jist the bye after me hear-r-t. Herself would like him, he's that doomb!"

"Herself" was Tony's wife, who was the cook at Briarwood Hall.

"And the way that boy do be lovin' flowers! Sure, his bed in the horspital is jest covered wid 'em. He'd be a handy lad to have here ter give me aid, so he would. An' I been tellin' Mis' Tellingham that I need another helper."

"We'll get him the job, Tony!" cried Ruth, in delight. "I believe he would like to help around your hothouse and the beds. I'll see."

She interceded with the principal for Roberto, and obtained her promise that the Gypsy boy should have the job. Then she sounded Roberto himself, and by the way his eyes lit up and he smiled and nodded,

Ruth knew he would be delighted to be Tony Foyle's assistant.

"At least," thought Ruth, "I can keep in sight of him for a time. Perhaps he couldn't tell us, anyway, where Queen Zelaya has hidden herself. But I believe he knows, and I haven't much faith in the results those detectives get."

Roberto mended rapidly. He was soon up and about the ward, when the girls called. He was less restless than Ruth expected him to be, and he still signified his intention of coming to help the little old Irish gardener at Briarwood Hall.

"When he recovers his powers of speech," said the doctor, "it will be as suddenly as he lost them. No doubt of that. But it is a most puzzling case. I am glad he is not going far from Lumberton. I want to watch the progress of the affair."

The next day Roberto came to Briarwood.

CHAPTER XXII

A GREAT TEMPTATION

About this time Ruth suffered a great temptation. She was so little given to covetousness or envy, that other girls of her class might have dresses, jewelry, and many other things dear to girlish hearts, without Ruth's being at all disturbed.

Her one great, overmastering passion was for Independence! She envied none of her mates anything but *that*.

Now she fell under temptation, and this was the way of it: Ruth belonged to the picked class that the physical instructor had chosen for exhibition gymnasium work at the mid-winter entertainment. This year there were to be important visitors at the school, and Mrs. Tellingham wished to make the occasion a more than ordinarily successful entertainment.

The class of twenty girls, selected from the best of the seniors and juniors, was to drill, dance, and go through other gymnastic exercises. And it was agreed among them that each girl should have a brand new costume, although this was no suggestion of either the teacher or Mrs. Tellingham.

The class invented this idea itself. It was agreed—nineteen in favor, at least—to appear at the entertainment in a brand new outfit. And how could Ruth say "No?"

Every girl in the class but herself had only to write home for money and order the uniform. As it chanced, Ruth had plenty of money to pay for a costume. Helen, who was one of the number, knew Ruth had that fifty dollars in gold that Uncle Jabez had given the girl of the Red Mill the day she left home.

This was the temptation: Ruth had promised herself

never to use that money. She had a small sum left from her vacation money, and she was making that do for incidentals, until she could earn more in some way. She was already tutoring both Nettie Parsons and Ann Hicks in their more advanced textbooks, and they were paying her small sums for this help.

But she could not earn enough in this way—nor in any other—to buy the new gymnasium costume. And there were the five ten-dollar gold pieces lying in a little jeweler's box in the bottom of her trunk.

She went with Helen to the dressmaker in Lumberton, when Helen ordered *her* new costume. "Why don't you let her fit you now, too, Ruth?" demanded Miss Cameron.

"Oh, there is plenty of time. Let us see first how well she makes yours," Ruth returned, with a forced laugh.

She knew she could not wear her usual costume with the picked class without looking odd. The girls had decided on crimson trimming on the blue skirt and blouse, instead of the regulation white. Nineteen girls with crimson bands and one with white—and that soiled!—would look odd enough.

It would fairly spoil the picture, Ruth knew. She was worried because of this, for she did not want to make her mates look ridiculous. Never had Ruth Fielding been so uncertain about any question since she had been old enough to decide for herself.

She was really so troubled that her recitation marks were not as high as they should have been. The teachers began to question her, for Ruth Fielding's course at Briarwood had been a triumphant one from the start!

"You are not ill, Miss Fielding?" asked Miss Gould. "I am surprised to find that you are going below your past averages. What is the matter?"

"I am sure I do not know, Miss Gould," declared Ruth. Yet she feared that the reply was not strictly truthful. She *did* know; night and day she was worrying about the new gymnasium costume.

Should she order one, or should she not? Could she buy a little of the crimson ribbon and put it on her old uniform and thus pass muster? What would the girls say, if she did that?

And what would they say if she appeared at the exhibition in her old costume? Was she purely selfish in trying to get out of buying the new dress? Was her reason for not wishing to break into that roll of coin a bad one, after all?

Those questions kept coming to Ruth Fielding, and got between her and her books. Mrs. Tellingham called her into the office early in October and pointed out to her that, unless her averages increased, her standing in her class would be greatly changed.

"You are doing no outside work, Miss Fielding?" inquired the principal.

"No, Ma'am."

"I hear you are helping two of the other girls—in a perfectly legitimate way, of course. It is not taking too much out of you?"

"Oh, no, dear Mrs. Tellingham!" cried Ruth, fearful that her tutoring would be forbidden.

"You are not working too hard in the gym.?"

"I do not think so," stammered Ruth.

"And *this* is ridiculous," said Mrs. Tellingham, with a smile. "I do not think there is a more robust looking girl in my school. But, there must be something."

"I suppose so," murmured Ruth.

"But you do not know what it is? If you do, tell me."

"I study just as hard, Mrs. Tellingham," said Ruth, non-committally. "I spend quite as much thought over my books. Really, I think I shall do better again."

"I hope so. I do not want to see any bright girl like you fall behind. There is always some reason for such changes, but sometimes we teachers have hard work to get at it. I want all my girls to have confidence in me and to tell me if anything goes wrong with them."

"Yes, Ma'am," said Ruth, guiltily.

But she could not take the principal of Briarwood Hall into her confidence—she positively could *not* do it! How ridiculous it would seem to the dignified Mrs. Grace Tellingham that she did not dip into the money her uncle had given her to buy that costume!

And she was losing her standing, and worrying everybody who cared, because of this temptation. She knew she was doing wrong in falling behind in her studies.

Surely *that* was not the way to give Uncle Jabez the best return possible for his investment. If she fell back in her books this year, Ruth knew she would never be able to make it up. She must either be prepared for college half a year later, or skip some work that would be found wanting at a later time—would be a thorn in her flesh, indeed, for the remainder of her school life.

One hour Ruth told herself that she would be decisive—she would be brave—she would not move in her determination to keep the fifty dollars intact. And then, the next hour, her heart would sink, as she looked forward to what would be said and thought by her companions when the exhibition day came around and she appeared in her old suit.

She thought seriously of trying to withdraw in season from the exhibition class. But unfortunately she could not easily do that. The instructor had selected the twenty girls herself, and what excuse—what honest excuse—could Ruth give for demanding her release?

"Oh, dear me!" she thought, tossing on her pillow at night, "if I could only be the means of returning that necklace to Mrs. Parsons! My troubles would all be over for sure.

"Mr. Cameron's detectives will *never* find that old Queen Zelaya, but I bet Roberto knows just where she has gone for the winter."

With this in mind she tried again and again to get some information out of Tony Foyle's new helper. Roberto always had a smile for her, and seemed willing enough to try to make signs about anything and everything but his tribe and his grandmother.

And so smart was he that his gestures were very understandable indeed, when he wished to give information about the new work that he loved, and about the fall flowers and bulbs which were being taken up for storage in the conservatory against the cold of winter.

It seemed strange—indeed, it made Ruth suspicious—that Roberto could convey his meaning so easily by gesture when the subject was not one regarding

the missing Gypsies!

Again and again the thought came to the girl that the Gypsy boy was actually "playing possum." Knowing, perhaps, that he would be questioned about his grandmother, and not wishing to give information about her or her tribe, he had decided to become dumb.

Yet, if this was so, how wonderfully well he did it! Even the doctor at the hospital could not understand the case.

Roberto's condition certainly was puzzling. And Ruth believed that he held the clew to the whereabouts of Queen Zelaya and the pearl necklace. That being the case, he stood between Ruth and that great reward which the girl of the Red Mill was so anxious to win.

CHAPTER XXIII

NETTIE PARSONS' FEAST

Incidentally there was as much fun going on at Briarwood Hall as usual this fall, but Ruth Fielding did not entirely enjoy any of the frolics in which she necessarily had a part.

The work of the Sweetbriar organization was all that really interested her in this line. Several new girls who entered the school in September who were old enough, joined the association, besides others who were advanced from the lower classes.

It was an honor—and was so considered by all—to be invited to become a Sweetbriar. Within the association was much innocent entertainment. Picnics, musicals, evening parties approved by the school faculty—even little feasts after curfew—were hatched within the membership.

Nettie Parsons, the daughter of the "sugar king," was destined never to be very popular in the school. Those girls who hoped to benefit by Nettie's wealth soon found that money meant as little to Nettie as to any girl at Briarwood.

On the other hand, she was no brilliant scholar, and she made friends slowly. Ruth and Helen determined to help the "poor little rich girl," as they called her, and they egged her on to give a midnight reception in the room Nettie occupied with three other girls in the West Dormitory.

"There's no way so sure to the hearts of these girls than through their stomachs," Mercy said, when she heard of the plan. "Let poor Net stuff them full of indigestible 'goodies,' and they will remember her for life!"

"Why put it that way, Mercy?" drawled Heavy. "You know, you are fond of a bit of candy, or a pickle, yourself. The 'goodies' which we do not get at the school table are 'gifts of the gods.' They are unexpected pleasures. And when eaten after hours, with a blanket for a tablecloth and candles for lights, they become 'forbidden fruit,' which is known to be

the sweetest of all!"

"Listen to Jen going into rhapsodies over eatables!" sniffed The Fox. "Give her her way, and every composition she handed in to Miss Gould would be a menu."

"Bah!" scoffed Heavy. "You eat your share when you get a chance, I notice."

"When Heavy is free from the scholastic yoke, and bosses her father's house for good," said Helen, "every dinner will make old Luculus turn in his grave and groan with envy——"

"Or with indigestion," snapped Mercy. "The girl will positively *burst* some day!"

"I don't care," mourned Heavy, shaking her head. "It isn't what I get to eat at Briarwood that makes me fat —that's sure."

"No," chuckled Ruth. "You grow plump on the remembrance of what you have already eaten, dear. Who was it ate three plates of floating island last night for supper?"

"Well!" cried Heavy, with wide open eyes, "you wouldn't want me to leave them and let them go to waste, would you? Both you and Helen left your shares, and the cook would have been hurt, if the pudding had come back untouched."

"Kind-hearted girl!" said The Fox, with a sniff.

After-hour parties were frowned upon by Mrs. Tellingham and the teachers, of course; not for the mild breaking of the school rules entailed, but because the girls' stomachs were apt to suffer.

In the West Dormitory, too, Miss Picolet was known to be very sharp-eyed and sharp-eared for such

occasions. It took some wit to circumvent Miss Picolet; perhaps that is why the girls on Ruth's corridor so delighted in holding orgies unbeknown to the little French teacher.

Miss Scrimp, the matron, was a heavy sleeper. The girls did not worry about her.

Nettie Parsons' room was at the very end of the cross-corridor, and farthest from the stairway. The stairway went up through the middle of the big brick dormitory building, and perhaps *that* was not the best arrangement in case of fire; but there were plenty of fire escapes on the outside.

The question which at once arose, when the sixteen girls Nettie chose had been invited to the feast, was who should stand guard?

This was always a matter for discussion—sometimes for heart burnings, too. It was no pleasant task to sit out upon the cold stairway and watch for the opening of Miss Picolet's door below.

Sometimes they decided by casting lots. Sometimes some girl who was very good-natured was inveigled into taking her plate of goodies out there in the dimly lit corridor. And sometimes one had to be bribed to stand watch for the others.

Miss Picolet was always known to light her candle when she was disturbed by any sound, or suspicion; then she would come to her door and listen. She never moved about her room without a light, that was one good thing! The girl on watch had warning the instant the French teacher opened her door.

But of the sixteen girls Nettie Parsons had chosen, not one wanted to play sentinel. Some of them said they would rather not attend the jamboree at all!

The season was far enough advanced for the nights to be cold, and the corridors were not warm after the steam went down. The party was called for ten o'clock. By that time frost would most likely be gathering on the window panes.

"Catch *me* bundling up in a fur coat and mittens and stopping out there in that draughty place!" cried The Fox, "while the rest of you are stuffing yourself to repletion in a nice warm room."

"Thought you didn't care for the goodies?" demanded Heavy, slily.

"I don't care for catching my death of cold, Miss!" snapped Mary Cox.

Neither Lluella, nor Belle, would "be the goat." Of course, it was understood that Heavy herself could never be out of reach of the cake plates! Nettie would not hear of Ruth being on watch.

"I have it!" said Ruth, at last. "Leave it to me. I'll find a new guard, and I know he will not fail us."

"Who is that?" demanded her chum.

"Roberto."

"Goodness me!" exclaimed Nettie. "Not that boy who helps Foyle?"

"That's the one. And he'll do anything for Ruth," declared Helen, promptly.

"Anything but talk!" thought Ruth, to herself, but she did not say it aloud.

"I don't see how *he* can help us," Ann Hicks said. "He can't come into the dormitory."

"I—guess—not!" cried Helen.

"But he won't mind watching outside," Ruth

explained. "At least, I'll ask him——"

"But what good will *that* do?" demanded Heavy. "If Miss Picolet gets up out of her warm nest, *he* won't know it."

"Yes, he will," said Ruth, nodding.

The Fox began to laugh. "Don't let *her* hear you say that, Fielding. Picolet is an awful old maid. She would be horrified, if she thought a male person even imagined her in bed!"

"But how will he know?" demanded Ann.

"That's easy," laughed Ruth. "He will stand where he can watch her window. If he sees her candle lit, he will give the alarm."

"How?" asked Nettie.

"We'll rig a 'tick-tack'—you know what I mean?"

"Oh, don't I!" giggled Heavy.

"Roberto can pull the string below, and that will make a tick-tack rap on Nettie's window."

"Splendid!" cried the giver of the feast. "You just see if he will do it, Miss Fielding. And I'll give him a dollar—or more, if he wants it."

"A dollar will be a lot of money for Roberto," laughed Helen. "But he won't do it for that."

"No?"

"Of course not. He'll only do it because Ruth asks him."

Which was really the fact. Roberto understood well enough what was desired of him. Ruth pointed out the French teacher's window, and the windows of Nettie Parsons' quartette room. From one of them

would hang a weighted string on that night. Everything was agreed, and the feast planned.

It was a starlight night, when it arrived, but Roberto could find a place to hide in the shrubbery, where he could watch both windows, as agreed. He slept in a little back room of Tony Foyle's suite in the basement of the main building, and could get out and in without disturbing Mr. and Mrs. Foyle.

If he were caught out of his room after hours, Ruth knew that Tony would be angry, but she had great influence with the little Irishman and promised Roberto that she would "make it all right" for him, if he were caught.

The hour of the party came. The West Dormitory had apparently been "in the arms of Morpheus" for half an hour, at least.

"But Mr. Murphy didn't get a strangle hold on us to-night," giggled Heavy, as she led the procession from her room.

The girls were all in their kimonas, and many brought plates, knives and forks, cups, and other paraphernalia for the feast. There was to be hot chocolate and there were two alcohol lamps and two pots.

The Fox presided over one lamp and Heavy bossed the other one. There was something wrong with the plump girl's lamp; either it had been filled too full, or it leaked. From the start it kept flaring and frightening the girls.

"I really wish you would not use that old contraption!" exclaimed Ann Hicks. "It's just as uncertain as a pinto pony."

"Never you mind," snapped Heavy. "I guess I know

——"

Pouf!

The flames flared suddenly. Heavy leaped back, stumbled over another girl, and went sprawling. The flames did not touch her, but they *did* ignite the curtain at the window.

There was a great squealing as the girls ran. Nobody dared tear down the blazing curtain, and the flames leaped higher and higher each instant.

Then one of the most frightened of the company jerked open the door, put her head out into the corridor, and shrieked "Fire!"

CHAPTER XXIV

ROBERTO FINDS HIS VOICE

That settled it! There was a full-fledged panic in that quartette room in an instant. It bade fair, too, to spread to the whole building.

Ruth, who had been busy distributing cakes before the accident, sprang to the open door, seized the girl who had yelled, and literally "yanked" her back into the room. Then she banged the door to and placed her back against it.

"Stop!" she cried, yet in a low voice. "Don't be foolish. It's only a little fire. We can put it out. Don't rouse the whole house and frighten everybody."

"Oh, Ruth! I can't reach it!" wailed Helen, who was really trying to pull down the curtain.

Ann ran with a bowl of water and tried to splash it over the burning curtain. But the bowl tipped backwards and part of the water went over Heavy, who was just trying to struggle to her feet.

"Oh! oh! wow!" gasped the plump girl. "I'm drowning! Do you think I'm afire, Ann Hicks?"

Some of the others were sane enough to laugh, but

the more nervous girls were already in tears, and the fire *was* spreading from one curtain to the other. There was a smell of scorching varnish, too. The window frame was catching!

In the very midst of the confusion, when it seemed positive that the whole school must be aroused, there came a commanding rap upon the window pane. It was not the gentle signal of the tick-tack—no, indeed!

"Will you hear *that*?" gasped Belle Tingley. "Miss Picolet's up."

"No!" cried Ruth, from the other end of the room. "Open that window, Ann! It's Roberto. He's climbed the fire-escape."

"My goodness me!" gasped The Fox. "I never was so glad to see a boy in all my life! Let him in—do!"

No sooner said than done. The girl from Silver Ranch had her wits about her. She snapped open the catch and raised the sash.

Into the room bounded the Gypsy lad. He had seen the flames from the ground and he immediately knew what to do when he got inside.

He seized a chair, leaped up into it, and with his long arms was enabled to tear down the blazing hangings. These he thrust into the bowl of water.

"Oh, Roberto! your hands are burned!" cried Ruth, darting to his side, as the fire was quenched.

"Never you mind, little Missy——"

He halted, staring at her. Then his face flushed like fire and his eyes dropped before her accusing gaze.

"You *can* speak!" exclaimed the girl from the Red Mill. "You *can*!"

"He's gotten back his tongue!" cried Helen, in surprise. "Isn't that wonderful?"

But Ruth was sure, by the Gypsy boy's shamefaced look, that there was nothing wonderful about it at all. Roberto had been able to speak all the time, but he did not wish to. Now, in his excitement, he had betrayed the fact.

There was too much confusion just then for the matter to be discussed or explained. The girls, seeing that the fire was out, scattered at once to their rooms. Roberto left instantly by the window, and Ruth helped Nettie and her roommates repair the damage as well as possible.

"I'll buy new curtains for the windows," said the "sugar king's" daughter. "And I'm only glad nothing worse happened."

"The worst hasn't happened yet," giggled one of her roommates.

"What do you mean?"

"I saw Jennie Stone take a bag of pickles, some seed cakes, a citron bun, and about half a pound of candy with her, when she flew. If she absorbs all that to-night, she will be sick to-morrow, that's all!"

"Well," Ruth advised, "the best we can do won't hide the damage. Miss Scrimp will find out about the fire, anyway. The best thing to do is to make a clean breast of it, Nettie. I'm sorry the feast was a failure, but we all know you did your best."

"I'm thankful it was no worse," returned the new girl. "And how brave that Gypsy boy was, Ruth! I must thank him to-morrow."

"You leave him to me," said the girl of the Red Mill,

grimly. "I want to talk to Roberto myself."

When she got back to her excited roommates, she said little about the wonderful recovery of the Gypsy boy's power of speech, until Mercy and Ann were asleep. Then she said to Helen Cameron:

"I am going to telegraph to your father the first thing in the morning. Roberto has been fooling us all. You can't tell me! I know he's been able to talk all the time."

"You don't really think so, dear?" asked Helen.

"I do. He must have been conscious when we picked him up that time and carried him to the carriage. And we mentioned his grandmother then and the necklace. He's just as sharp as a knife, you know; he's been dumb for a purpose. He did not want to be questioned about Zelaya and the missing pearl necklace."

"My goodness me! Father will be *so* angry," cried Helen.

"Roberto will have to tell. I like him, and he was very brave to-night. But I do not believe the boy is a thief himself, and he would be better if he entirely left his thieving relatives."

"Maybe he'll run away," suggested Helen.

But Roberto would have been obliged to start very early that next morning to have run away. Ruth Fielding was the first person up in the school, and she was standing outside Tony's door, when the little Irishman first appeared.

"Helen Cameron wants you to take this telegram down to the office at once, Tony," she said. "Mrs. Tellingham knows about it. We are in a dreadful

hurry. Is Roberto inside?"

"Sure he is, Miss——"

"You take the message; don't let Roberto see it, and you keep your eye on that boy to-day, until Mr. Cameron arrives. He'll want to see him."

"Now, don't be tellin' me th' bye has been inter mischief?" cried the warm-hearted Irishman.

"Not much. Only he's suddenly recovered the use of his tongue, Tony, and Mr. Cameron wants to talk with him."

"Gracious powers!" murmured Tony. "Recovered his spache, has he? The saints be praised!"

He obeyed Ruth, however, in each particular. If Roberto had it in his mind to run away, he had no chance to do so that day. Tony watched him sharply, and in the evening Mr. Cameron arrived at Briarwood Hall.

The gentleman greeted his daughter and Ruth in Mrs. Tellingham's parlor, but when he interviewed Roberto, it was downstairs in Tony Foyle's rooms.

The girls saw Mr. Cameron only for a moment after that. He was just starting for the train, and Roberto was going with him.

"The young rascal has admitted just what Ruth suspected," said Mr. Cameron, chuckling a little. "He fooled us all—including the doctor. Though the Doc., I reckon, suspected strongly that the boy could talk, if he desired to.

"Roberto did not want to be questioned. Now he has told me that his grandmother did not go south at all. He says she often spends the winter in New York City as do other Gypsies. She is really a great character

among her people, and with the information I have gathered, I believe the New York police will be able to locate her.

"I shall hang on to Master Roberto until the matter is closed up. He will say nothing about the necklace. He'll not even own up that he ever saw it. But he tells me that his grandmother is a miser and hoards up valuables just like a magpie."

Helen's father and the Gypsy boy went away then, and the chums had to possess their souls with patience, and attend strictly to their school work, until they could hear how the matter turned out.

CHAPTER XXV

FIVE THOUSAND DOLLARS

It was not likely that Ruth found it any easier, after this, to attend strictly to her school duties, but after her conversation with Mrs. Tellingham she *had* put forth a greater effort to recover her standing in her class.

Whether Mrs. Parsons' necklace was found, or not; whether Ruth obtained a portion of the reward in

pay for the information she had lodged, the girl realized that she had no right to neglect her studies.

She had come to one conclusion at least: whether or no, she would not break into that fifty dollars Uncle Jabez had given her so unwillingly. And she would use no more of his money for vacation jaunts, or for luxuries.

"I must accept his help in gaining my education," she told herself. "But beyond that, I need not go. I have gone about, and had good times, and bought many things just as though I really had a right to expect Uncle Jabez to supply every need.

"No more of that, Ruth Fielding! You prate of wishing to be independent: be so in any event!"

She was young to come to such a determination; yet Ruth's experiences since her parents had died were such as would naturally make her self-assertive. She knew what she wanted, *and she went after it*!

As for the matter of the new gymnasium suit—why! that Ruth gave up entirely. She decided that she had no business to use Uncle Jabez's money for it, and of course she could not go into debt for a new costume.

No matter what the other girls thought, or what they did, *she* would have to be content with her old uniform when it came to the exhibition games.

She did not have the courage yet to tell even Helen of this decision; nevertheless she was determined to stick to it. At once she had begun to pick up in recitation marks, and Miss Gould no longer scowled over Ruth's reports.

The strain of mind had been considerable, however; Ruth had much to make up in her studies; she wasted no time and began to forge ahead again.

She would not even think of Roberto and Mr. Cameron's search for Queen Zelaya. Helen was full of the topic, and often tried to discuss it with Ruth, but the latter put it aside.

She had done all she could (or so she thought) to help restore the missing pearl necklace to Nettie's aunt. Worrying about it any more was not going to help a bit.

It seemed too ridiculous to think of *her* ever obtaining five thousand dollars—or any part of that generous reward!

So the busy days passed. Helen heard from her father several times, but although she knew he was in New York, ostensibly buying goods, and that he had Roberto with him, the gentleman said very little about the other Gypsies and the missing necklace.

Then one day Mrs. Tellingham sent for Ruth. To be sent for by the principal never frightened the girl of the Red Mill—much. She stood well on the principal's books, she knew.

But the lady had called her to discuss nothing about the school work. She had a letter and a railroad ticket in her hand.

"Tony has telephoned for Dolliver to come for you, Ruth," said Mrs. Tellingham. "You must go away——"

"Nothing has happened at home? Uncle Jabez—Aunt Alvirah——?"

"Nothing is wrong with them at all, my dear," declared the lady, kindly. "It is Mr. Cameron. He wants you to come to New York at once. Here is transportation for you. He will meet your train at the Grand Central Station."

"Mrs. Parsons' necklace!" gasped Ruth.

"He says something about that—yes," said Mrs. Tellingham. "It is important for you to come and identify somebody, I believe. You must tell him that, at this time in the term, you can be spared only a short time."

All was bustle and confusion for Ruth during the next two hours. Then she found herself on the train bound for New York. She had a section of the sleeper to herself, and arrived in the city the next morning at an early hour.

She was making her toilette, as the electric engine whisked the long train through the upper reaches of the city, and she marveled at the awakening Bronx and Harlem streets.

When she came out through the gateway of the trainshed, she saw a youth standing by, watching the on-coming passengers sharply. But she was almost upon him, and he had stepped forward, lifting his hat and putting out a hand to take her bag, before she recognized Roberto, the Gypsy boy.

But how changed in appearance! Of course, he was still dark of skin, and his black eyes flashed. But he had removed the gold rings from his ears, his hair had been trimmed to a proper length, he was dressed smartly in a gray suit, and wore a nice hat and shoes.

Altogether Roberto was a very handsome youth indeed—more so now than when he had been a wild boy!

"You do not know me, Miss Fielding?" he said, his eyes twinkling and a warm blush rising in his cheeks.

"You—you are so changed!" gasped Ruth.

"Yes. Mr. Cameron is a fine man," said the boy, nodding. "I like him. He do all this for me," and he made a gesture that included his new outfit, and flashed her another brilliant smile.

"Oh! how it does improve you, Roberto!" she cried.

"*Robert*, if you please," he said, laughing. "*I* am going to be American boy—yes. I have left the Gypsy boy forever behind—eh?"

Ruth fairly clapped her hands. "Do you mean all that, Robert?" she cried.

"Sure!" he said proudly. "I like America. Yes! I have been here now ten years, and it suit me. And Mr. Cameron say I can go to school and learn to be American business man. That is better than trading horses—eh?"

"Oh, isn't that fine!" cried the girl of the Red Mill. "Now, where are you going to take me?"

"To the hotel. Mr. Cameron will wait breakfast for us," declared the lad, and in ten minutes Ruth was greeting her chum's father across the restaurant table.

"And I suppose you are just about eaten up with curiosity as to why I sent for you?" Mr. Cameron asked her, smiling, when Robert had gone out on an errand.

"Just about, sir," admitted the girl.

"Why, I want to tell you, my dear, that you are likely to be a very lucky girl indeed. The five thousand dollars reward——"

"You haven't found the necklace?"

"Yes, indeed. That has been found and identified. What I want you for is so you can identify that old

Gypsy, Queen Zelaya. I did not want to force her grandson to appear against her before the authorities. But you can do so with a clear conscience.

"Queen Zelaya will be sent back to Bohemia. She has a bad record, and entered the country secretly some years ago. Your evidence will enable the Federal authorities to clinch their case, and return the old woman to the country of her birth.

"It is not believed that she actually stole the pearl necklace, but it is plain she shared in the proceeds of all the Gypsies' plundering, and in this case she took the giant's portion.

"We could not prove robbery upon her, but she can be transported, and she shall be," concluded Mr. Cameron, firmly.

This was what finally happened to Queen Zelaya. Her clan was broken up, and not one of them was ever seen in the neighborhood of the Red Mill—or elsewhere in that county—again.

Robert Mazell, as is the Gypsy boy's Americanized name, promises to be all that he told Ruth he hoped to be—in time. He must begin at the bottom of the educational ladder, but he is so quick to learn that his patron, Mr. Cameron, tells Tom, laughingly, that *he*, Tom, will have to look to his laurels, or the boy from Bohemia will outstrip him.

Having carried out the trailing of the Gypsy Queen at his own expense, and recovered the necklace privately, Mr. Cameron did not have to divide the reward offered by Mrs. Rachel Parsons with anybody.

The entire five thousand dollars was deposited in

Ruth's name in the Cheslow Savings Bank. And this happened in time so that Ruth could draw enough of her fortune to get a new gymnasium costume for the mid-winter exhibition!

She did not have to use the money Uncle Jabez grudgingly gave her. Her tuition fees were paid in advance for this year at Briarwood Hall, but she determined thereafter to pay all her own expenses, at school and elsewhere.

At last she felt herself to be independent. By going to Mr. Cameron, she could get money when she wished, without annoying the miller, and for this situation she was very very thankful.

Her life stretched before her over a much pleasanter path than ever before. There were kind friends whom she could help in the future, as they needed help—and that delighted Ruth Fielding.

Her own future seemed secure. She could prepare herself for college and could gain the education she craved. It seemed that nothing could balk her ambition in that direction. And so—this seems to be a very good place indeed in which to bid good-bye for a time to Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill.

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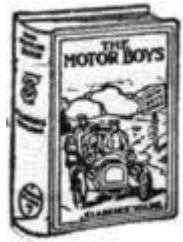
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