

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Katherine Stokes

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----------|
| <u>The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine</u> | 1 |
| <u>Katherine Stokes</u> | 1 |
| <u>CHAPTER I. TO THE SUNNY SOUTH</u> | 1 |
| <u>CHAPTER II. MAKING NEW ACQUAINTANCES</u> | 5 |
| <u>CHAPTER III. TIMOTHY'S DROWNING</u> | 10 |
| <u>CHAPTER IV. A RACE AND WHAT CAME OF IT</u> | 14 |
| <u>CHAPTER V. THE TWO EDWARDS</u> | 18 |
| <u>CHAPTER VI. THE GRAY MOTOR CAR</u> | 22 |
| <u>CHAPTER VII. THE COWARD</u> | 27 |
| <u>CHAPTER VIII. MR. DUFFY GIVES A PARTY</u> | 32 |
| <u>CHAPTER IX. THE BULLFROG AND THE POLLYWOG</u> | 37 |
| <u>CHAPTER X. THE SONG OF THE MOTOR</u> | 41 |
| <u>CHAPTER XI. THE ORANGE GROVE</u> | 44 |
| <u>CHAPTER XII. AN UNWISHED WISH</u> | 48 |
| <u>CHAPTER XIII. IN THE DEEP WOODS</u> | 51 |
| <u>CHAPTER XIV. THE MOCKING BIRD</u> | 55 |
| <u>CHAPTER XV. OUT OF THE WILDERNESS</u> | 58 |
| <u>CHAPTER XVI. MRS. L'ESTRANGE</u> | 62 |
| <u>CHAPTER XVII. A MORNING CALL</u> | 65 |
| <u>CHAPTER XVIII. IT'S AN ILL WIND</u> | 69 |
| <u>CHAPTER XIX. A PASSAGE AT ARMS</u> | 73 |
| <u>CHAPTER XX. THE HAND OF DESTINY</u> | 76 |
| <u>CHAPTER XXI. PICNICKING UNDER THE PINES</u> | 80 |
| <u>CHAPTER XXII. THE LAST OF THE HOUSE OF TROUBLES</u> | 82 |
| <u>CHAPTER XXIII. EXPLANATIONS</u> | 86 |
| <u>CHAPTER XXIV. SO ENDETH THE SECOND LESSON</u> | 87 |

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Katherine Stokes

This page copyright © 2002 Blackmask Online.

<http://www.blackmask.com>

- CHAPTER I. TO THE SUNNY SOUTH.
- CHAPTER II. MAKING NEW ACQUAINTANCES.
- CHAPTER III. TIMOTHY'S DROWNING.
- CHAPTER IV. A RACE AND WHAT CAME OF IT.
- CHAPTER V. THE TWO EDWARDS.
- CHAPTER VI. THE GRAY MOTOR CAR.
- CHAPTER VII. THE COWARD.
- CHAPTER VIII. MR. DUFFY GIVES A PARTY.
- CHAPTER IX. THE BULLFROG AND THE POLLYWOG.
- CHAPTER X. THE SONG OF THE MOTOR.
- CHAPTER XI. THE ORANGE GROVE.
- CHAPTER XII. AN UNWISHED WISH.
- CHAPTER XIII. IN THE DEEP WOODS.
- CHAPTER XIV. THE MOCKING BIRD.
- CHAPTER XV. OUT OF THE WILDERNESS.
- CHAPTER XVI. MRS. L'ESTRANGE.
- CHAPTER XVII. A MORNING CALL.
- CHAPTER XVIII. IT'S AN ILL WIND.
- CHAPTER XIX. A PASSAGE AT ARMS.
- CHAPTER XX. THE HAND OF DESTINY.
- CHAPTER XXI. PICNICKING UNDER THE PINES.
- CHAPTER XXII. THE LAST OF THE HOUSE OF TROUBLES.
- CHAPTER XXIII. EXPLANATIONS.
- CHAPTER XXIV. SO ENDETH THE SECOND LESSON.

CHAPTER I. TO THE SUNNY SOUTH.

The Atlantic Ocean and the breadth of Europe including half of Russia lay between Mr. Duncan Campbell and his daughter, Wilhelmina. But that did not prevent Mr. Campbell from thinking of numerous delightful surprises for Billie and her three friends in West Haven.

Sometimes it was a mere scrawl of a note hastily written at some small way station, saying: "Here's a check for my Billie-girl. Treat your friends to ice-cream sodas and take 'em to the theater. Don't forget your old Dad."

Sometimes the surprise took the form of queer foreign-looking packages addressed to "the Misses Campbell, Butler, Brown and Price," containing strange articles made by the peasants in the far-away land. He sent them each a Cossack costume with high red boots and red sashes. But some three weeks before the Easter holidays came the best surprise of all.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"I believe the Comet needs a change of air," wrote Mr. Campbell. "A fine automobile must have as careful handling as a thoroughbred horse, or, for that matter, a thoroughbred young lady. What does my Billie—girl say to an Easter trip to Florida with Cousin Helen as guardian angel and Nan and Nell and Moll for company and the Comet for just his own sweet self?"

Mr. Campbell, who received long, intimate letters from his daughter once a week, felt that he knew the girls almost as well as she did, and he would call them by abbreviated, pet names in spite of Billie's remonstrances.

"It so happens," the letter continued, "that my old friend, Ignatius Donahue, who holds the small, unimportant, poorly—paid position of vice—president of an insignificant railroad, not knowing that I was digging trenches in Russia, has offered me the use of his private car, including kitchen stove, chef and other necessities. I have answered that I accept the invitation, not for self, but for daughter and friends and Comet; which latter must have free transportation on first—class fast—going freight, or he is no friend of mine. You will be hearing from Ignatius now pretty soon. Your old dad will be answerable for all other expenses, including hotel and—so—forth and if the and—so—forth is bigger than the hotel bill, he'll never even chirp. Life is short and time is fleeting and young girls must go South in the winter when they have a chance."

So, that is how the Motor Maids happened to be the four busiest young women in West Haven what with those abominable High School examinations which always came about this time, and the getting together of a Palm Beach wardrobe.

And that is also how, one cold wet day at the end of March, they found themselves lolling in big comfortable chairs in Mr. Donahue's private car while the train whizzed southward.

It had been a bustle and a rush at the last moment and they were glad to leave West Haven, which was a dreary, misty little place at that time of the year.

Miss Campbell leaned back in her wicker chair and regarded her four charges proudly. How neat they looked in their pretty traveling suits and new spring hats!

"I am so glad they are young girls and not young ladies," she was thinking, when her meditations were interrupted by Sam, the colored chef and porter combined, whose arms were laden with packages.

"Why, what are you bringing us, Sam?" asked the little lady with some curiosity.

"With Mr. Donahue's compliments, ma'am, and he hopes the ladies won't git hungry and bored on the journey," replied Sam, depositing the packages on a chair and drawing it up within Miss Campbell's reach.

"Dear me, children," she exclaimed excitedly, "look what this nice man has sent us. I feel like a girl again myself. A beautiful bunch of violets apiece "

"And a big box of candy," exclaimed Nancy Brown.

"And all the latest magazines," added Billie Campbell, laughing.

"What a dear he is," finished Elinor Butler, fastening on her violets with a long lavender pin; while Mary Price gave her own violets a passionate little squeeze.

"I hopes," went on Sam, shifting from one foot to the other, "I hopes the ladies ain't goin' to eat so much candy they won't have no appetite for they dinner. We g'wine have spring chicken to—night, an' fresh green peas an' new asparagress, an' strawbe'ies. I'd be mighty sorry if de ladies don' leave no space for my dinner. Marse Donahue he

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

don' kill de fatted ca'f fo' dis here 'casion."

"Sam, we'll close the candy box this minute," said Miss Campbell. "And you needn't bring us any tea this afternoon. You need feel no uneasiness about your spring chickens and your new peas. I shall write to Mr. Donahue myself as soon as I get to Palm Beach and thank him for his kindness."

"He's a very nice gemman, he is that," observed Sam.

"Is he a young man, Sam?" asked Nancy, with young girl curiosity.

"He ain't to say young or old, Missy. He don' took his stan' on the dividin' line an' thar he stan'."

"How long has he been standing there, Sam?" put in Elinor.

"I knowed the gemman twenty years an' he ain't never stepped off yit."

The private car rang with their cheerful laughter.

"He must be a wonderful man," said Miss Campbell. "I wish he would teach me his secret."

"His secret is, ma'am, he ain't never got married and had no fambly troubles to age his countenance," answered Sam.

"But," cried Miss Campbell, "I've never been married either, and I'm white-haired and infirm."

"You infirm, ma'am! You de youngest one in de lot," answered the colored man, turning his frankly admiring gaze on the pretty little lady as he backed down the car, grinning, and disappeared in his own quarters.

"You see, Cousin," said Billie, patting Miss Campbell's cheek, "you must never try to make people believe again that you are old. You are a pretty young lady gone gray before her time."

It was plain that Mr. Ignatius Donahue was very much pleased with the arrangements he had made with his old friend, Duncan Campbell. All along the journey he had fresh surprises for his five guests. At one place came a big basket of fruit; at another station a colored woman climbed on the train and presented each of them with a splendid magnolia in full bloom, that filled the car with its fragrance.

"With Mr. Donahue's compliments, ma'am; an' he says he hopes the ladies is enjoyin' they selves," she added as she gave Miss Campbell the largest blossom in the bunch.

"Dear, dear," cried Miss Campbell. "One would think Mr. Donahue were taking this journey with us. He is so attentive. Is he anywhere around here?"

"No, ma'am," interrupted Sam, with a warning look at the colored woman. "Marse Donahue, he jes' give orders and specs 'em to be kerried out like he says."

"I feel as if Mr. Donahue were a sort of spirit always hovering near us," said Billie, when the two colored people had disappeared, "a kind of guardian angel. I wish papa had told us something about him."

"A very substantial spirit," observed Miss Campbell, "showering upon us all these gifts of fruits and flowers and candy."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"What does Mr. Donahue look like, Sam," Nancy asked the colored man later. "Is he tall and thin?"

"No, ma'am; he ain't what you might call tall. An' he ain't short neither.

"Medium, then?"

"Not jes' exactly mejum, neither, ma'am."

"Go way, Sam. You don't know what he is. I don't believe you ever saw Mr. Donahue."

"Ain't I don' tol' you I knowed Marse Donahue twenty years? But I couldn't paint no picture of him, Missy.

"What color is his hair, Sam?" asked Mary.

"It ain't white an' it ain't black, neither, Missy."

Miss Campbell herself joined in the laughter which Sam's reply raised and they asked no more questions about Mr. Donahue's appearance. But the magnolias were not the last token from their mysterious host, who seemed to have arranged everything with the greatest care and forethought. When the train stopped at the Palm Beach station, there was the Comet waiting for them like a faithful steed. The red motor had been shipped nearly a week before, and the sight of his cheerful face was like meeting an old friend.

"Sam, you just give Mr. Donahue my compliments," exclaimed Billie, patting the Comet affectionately, "and tell him that next to my father he's the nicest man I ever knew, or rather didn't know, because I haven't met him yet."

Sam bowed and scraped and grinned in the familiar manner of his race as he helped the ladies into the car. A young chauffeur was at the wheel, and Billie and Nancy crowded into the front seat beside him while the others sat in the back as usual. For a long time the train had been passing through a flat country, monotonous with palm trees and undergrowth, and now they seemed to have broken into fairyland.

[Two pages missing...]

and placed them in a pile, and Miss Campbell had extended her hand with the usual tip, when a muscular-looking man with smooth face and burnsides, touched the chauffeur respectfully on the shoulder.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Edward," he said in a low voice, "your grandmother is waiting to see you."

"My grandmother waiting to see me?" repeated the chauffeur with amazement.

The English servant, for that was evidently what he was, gave him a long and searching look and stepped backward with a puzzled expression on his face.

"You've made a mistake, I reckon," said the boy, smiling gently.

"Beg pardon, sir," replied the man and moved quickly away.

Miss Campbell, who liked the looks of Edward, as he by a curious coincidence happened also to be named, and was taken with his quiet, respectful manners, engaged him on the spot to be their chauffeur and guide, since they were unfamiliar with the roads.

"I can run a motor-boat, too, ma'am," he said.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

And that was another reason for taking him into their service; for they had planned to take many a sail on the placid waters of Lake Worth and to picnic along those verdant shores.

CHAPTER II. MAKING NEW ACQUAINTANCES.

"Mr. Ignatius Donahue's compliments, and will the ladies take a ride in his motor-boat this afternoon? Mr. Donahue is sorry he cannot go too, but a business engagement prevents his being at Palm Beach."

This was the message brought to Miss Campbell the morning after their arrival at Palm Beach. The bearer of the message was Edward, the young chauffeur, who stood at a respectful distance while she read the note.

"But if Mr. Donahue isn't here, how did the note come?" asked Miss Campbell, much mystified.

"I can't say, ma'am," replied Edward, turning his face away so that they could not see the smile which twitched the corners of his mouth.

"Perhaps he telegraphed it," observed Billie.

"But it's written on note paper," replied Miss Campbell, rather irritably. "Would you like to go, girls?"

"Oh, yes," chorused the four voices.

"Very well, Edward, there seems no one to tell it to but you. We shall accept the invitation with pleasure. It would be absurd, I suppose, to telegraph this important communication to Mr. Donahue at Kamschatka or Boston or wherever he is, but he is very kind to offer us his boat and you may expect us on the pier this afternoon at four. Is that a good time for sailing?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied Edward, withdrawing down the corridor just as the door of an adjoining room opened and an angry voice cried:

"How dare you meddle with anything in this room? Leave it instantly."

Some one replied in a low musical voice,

"I am very sorry. I was only looking at a picture. I noticed a likeness "

"You are here to clean up and not to notice. You are a servant and not a visitor. Another time and you will be reported. You may go."

At this point a girl was thrust out into the hall so roughly that she fell on her knees. It was only a chambermaid, and perhaps she was accustomed to being spoken to harshly, although she did not appear to be, for she covered her face with her hands and crouched against the wall.

"How could any one be so brutal?" exclaimed Billie indignantly as she ran to the trembling little figure and helped her to her feet. "Won't you come into our room until you calm down? It was cruel to have spoken to you so roughly."

The door opened again and an old woman stood on the threshold, leaning on a cane. There was something rather regal in her appearance, in spite of her plain black dress and grotesque-looking old garden hat with its flapping brim which half concealed her face.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Don't interfere, young woman," said the formidable-looking personage. "Young American girls are far too impertinent."

Billie, who all her life had been the champion of the oppressed, was not frightened by the glare from the old woman's steely blue eyes. She made no reply, however. Her father had taught her never to engage in a battle of words if she could possibly avoid it, especially with an older person.

Putting her arm around the little chambermaid's waist, she drew her into Miss Campbell's room and closed the door. The other girls who had been silent witnesses of the scene gathered around them.

"What a dreadful old person," Billie burst out at last, giving vent to her indignant feelings, when the girl staggered and almost fell on the floor.

"Oh, the poor dear is fainting," cried Miss Campbell, hurrying to the dressing-table for her smelling salts, while the others quickly lifted the little maid to the bed. They opened her dress at the throat and moistened her lips with water and performed the numberless little services a woman, with any kindly sympathy in her nature, will never withhold from another woman who needs her help.

"She is much too young and pretty to be a servant," observed Miss Campbell, looking down with pity into the white, tired face of the chambermaid, who appeared hardly older than her own girls, although her fluffy blond hair was drawn up into a knot on top of her head. Presently the color came back to her face, and she opened her eyes which were large and very deep blue.

"Are you better now?" asked Billie, waving a palm-leaf fan gently over her head.

The girl sat up and looked about her in bewilderment.

"Where am I?" she asked. Then her eyes caught Billie's kind gray ones and memory came back to her. "It was so good of you to take my part and so stupid of me to faint! I was frightened, I suppose, and a little tired. I must be going, now," she looked toward the door uneasily. "It would be dreadful to lose my place on the first day I began to work."

"But you are not going back to work when you are ill, child?" exclaimed Miss Campbell.

"I'm afraid I must. It will be only a few hours more. I am off at twelve. My work isn't hard. I only sort and distribute the fresh linen," she added with a note of apology in her voice, which was soft and beautiful. The girls were struck also with her lady-like manner. They could see that she was not accustomed to being a maid because she never said, "Yes, Miss," and "No, Miss," like the usual chambermaid. But they were too polite to ask any questions, and presently she withdrew without their knowing much more about her than they had at first.

But they soon forgot the chambermaid and her troubles in the joys of Palm Beach. Probably nobody in the world can have a better time than four intimate young friends on a pleasure trip, and many admiring glances were turned in the direction of the Motor Maids as they sat in a row on the hotel veranda after breakfast, while Miss Campbell composed a letter in the writing-room. They were entirely unconscious of the attention they attracted, however, so interested were they in watching the rippling waters of Lake Worth already dotted with white sails.

Groups of people, dressed in white, strolled about the hotel grounds or sat on garden seats under the palm trees. It was that delicious lazy time in the morning when one is on a holiday and there is only pleasure to anticipate.

"Billie," whispered Nancy, "there is that brutal old woman who was so rude to the chambermaid this morning. I honestly believe she would have struck you with her stick if you had answered a word."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"If she had," replied Billie, laughing, "and I had cabled it to Papa, he would have taken a flying leap across the Atlantic Ocean and got here before midnight. But I really don't think she would have dared go that far."

"Be careful, here she is upon us," warned Elinor, and the four girls, without intending to be rude, turned their eyes toward the approaching figure.

The old woman still wore her flapping garden hat tied under the chin with brown silk strings. She leaned on her cane heavily as she walked, and noticed no one until she saw the four pairs of eyes regarding her with evident curiosity.

She paused in front of the group and brandished her stick in their faces.

"Well, what do you think you are looking at," she cried, "a chimpanzee or an elephant or one of your own native wild people?"

"Oh, grandmamma," cried a tall, slender girl walking at her side. "How can you talk in that way? You mortify me terribly." And she led the old woman into the hall.

"What a fierce old party," exclaimed a young man in white flannels, who was sitting so low in a deep chair that he appeared all legs and arms. " 'Native wild people,' " he repeated, laughing gaily. "We look like native wild people in this civilized place, don't we?"

"Now, Timothy," said a girl sitting next to him, "she meant you, I am sure. You resemble a native wild person more than any one here, with your absurd bristling red hair."

The young man laughed good-naturedly, and the girls could not resist joining in, for Timothy might have been taken for a human porcupine any day. And that was how the Motor Maids came to make friends with Timothy Peppercorn, whose ridiculous name and funny appearance never failed to set them laughing.

"But who is this old lady?" asked the girl who had spoken to Timothy, and whom they came to know later as Miss Genevieve Martin of Kentucky.

"I don't know," answered Billie, smiling. "I've only seen her once before, and the meeting wasn't very friendly then."

"Did she beat you with her stick?" asked Timothy Peppercorn.

"If I had said anything, she would have tapped me on the head with the gold knob, I believe, but I kept very still."

"What happened?" asked Miss Martin, turning to Elinor who was nearest her.

Elinor related the story of the poor little chambermaid or "linen sorter," as she was careful to call her.

"What a brutal old wretch!" exclaimed the other indignantly. "Does she expect to teach manners to Americans by treating them like this?"

"Timothy, run quick and look at the hotel register and see who she is."

Timothy gathered his loose frame together and rose to his feet. He was really not so tall as he appeared when sitting, but he seemed all arms and legs like a grand-daddy-long-legs.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"After I come back, will you have that swim?" he demanded.

The girl nodded her head gaily.

"No one can ever resist that funny red-headed boy," she exclaimed to the others. "I don't know quite what it is about him. He is really one of the best natured creatures alive, and he has had a great deal to make him unhappy, too, but he is always in a good humor."

"What has happened to him?" asked Nancy, who had a childish curiosity and was still young enough to ask questions.

"His mother and his brother and sister have all died of consumption. Timothy would be delicate, too, but he is determined not to be, and when he finishes college he is going to be an engineer and live out of doors."

"We are engineers," put in Billie, "Papa and I and it's the nicest work in the world."

Miss Martin laughed. She had taken a tremendous fancy to these four nice young girls who seemed so unaffected and natural. But Timothy returned before she could reply.

"The military lady in the flap-brimmed hat," he announced, "is registered as Mrs. Paxton-Steele. The meek young person at her side is Miss Georgiana Paxton, and there appear to be also in the family Edward Paxton and Clarence Paxton, all of England."

"Steele is a good name for such a stern old personage," said Genevieve.

"Well, 'her is naught to we, nor we to she,' " added Timothy, "so let's go in bathing and forget all about her."

"Are you sure you feel strong enough, Timothy?" asked his friend, looking at him critically.

"Of course I do, Genie," answered the boy, flushing as red as his ruddy upstanding hair.

"But I don't want to lose my new friends just as I have made them," continued the charming girl, changing the subject quickly and smiling into Billie's face. "Perhaps you will go with us?"

"Oh, may we?" cried Billie and Nancy in one voice.

Mary and Elinor were no swimmers.

"Where are your mammas, then, so that I may ask permission first?" demanded Miss Martin.

"We haven't but one with us and she's a cousin, but here she is," replied Billie.

Miss Martin had the easy gracious manners of the South and she never permitted any one in her company to feel awkward or strange for long. She introduced herself and her friend, Timothy Peppercorn, to Miss Campbell simply and gracefully, and after a moment's pleasant chat she had learned Miss Campbell's name and the names of the four girls, and the swimming party was arranged.

"How quickly things do happen once they begin," thought Billie, as she ran lightly into the surf where they chose to bathe instead of going to the pool which most people preferred. "If old Mrs. Paxton-Steele, of England, hadn't been so quarrelsome with the chambermaid this morning, we should never have stared at her on the piazza. She would probably have passed us by without noticing us at all. Then, we should not have made friends with Miss

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Martin and that funny Timothy–boy, and no one would have suggested this glorious morning swim."

She plunged under the foamy crest of a cool green wave, rose breast high on another, shook herself like a young water spaniel and made for the raft with long overhand strokes.

Swimming was a real accomplishment with Billie, although her father, who had brought her up very much as he would have reared a son, had not taught her this particularly boyish pastime. She had learned to swim at the age of five from an old peasant woman in a village on the coast of Brittany, where they had spent a summer. These old fisherwomen were the only swimming masters on that sequestered beach. Billie could still remember with something of a shiver the ancient, gnarled creature with her skirts tucked up about her wrinkled limbs, who, standing waist–high in the water, had taught her the first strokes. Hard as it had seemed at the time, she had never ceased to be thankful for those early lessons.

"My, but you're a corker," exclaimed Timothy Peppercorn, breathlessly. "I thought Genevieve was pretty good, but you're the best I have ever seen."

"Thank you," answered Billie, as she swung herself on the raft.

Many other swimmers dotted the surf that morning and groups of people in light clothes sat about on the shining strand. Splendid palm trees and poincianas made a cool green background to the lovely shore, and Billie half closed her eyes as she lay on the raft, so as to make a picture she might carry in her mind always. She had not noticed that Timothy was too winded to hoist himself on the raft.

Her attention was presently attracted by a frolicking group of swimmers coming toward the raft. In the midst of them, puffing and snorting like a Triton, was a jolly big fat man whom they called Duffy. Mr. Duffy had a red rubber ball not much redder or rounder indeed than his own face which he was tossing ahead of them on the water while the others raced to get it.

"Let's get in the game," called Timothy as the ball skipped toward them over the waves.

Billie dived off the raft and came up just where she had seen the ball strike, but some one seized it and tossed it a score of yards away. There is always a swimmer in a water party who does reckless and dangerous things. This time it was the individual who had seized the ball before Billie could get it. One by one the other swimmers left off chasing and made for shore. Mr. Duffy, turning his immense frame over, floated away on his back in happy oblivion. But the stranger, pitching the ball again as far as he could send it, challenged Timothy to race for it.

It was in vain that Genevieve, who had at that moment reached the raft, protested and looked coldly at the man whose back was turned. Timothy darted off in the water while the two girls watched his red head uneasily as it rose and fell on the white–tipped waves.

Both swimmers reached the ball at the same moment, struggled over it, and then that reckless, inhuman stranger tossed it further out to sea.

"Idiots!" cried Genevieve, beating her hands helplessly together as she sat on the side of the raft.

All the other swimmers had gone ashore now and were making for the bath houses, while loiterers on the beach were scattering to the tennis courts and golf links or the morning concert in Cocoanut Grove.

Suddenly Billie saw the strange man throw up both hands with a loud cry, which sounded very much like "Sharks!" and start to shore as fast as he could go.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Oh! Oh!" cried Genevieve, covering her face with her hands.

Some twenty yards beyond Timothy they could just make out the ugly square nose and upstanding fin of a big fish sticking above the water.

"Hurry, Timothy, hurry," called the girl in an agony of anxiety.

"I'm all right," he answered faintly, but each movement seemed to be weaker than the last and suddenly he sank beneath the waves.

While Genevieve was calling for help toward the now almost empty beach, Billie made a running dive off the raft, and with long, clean strokes, swam for the red head which appeared on the surface once more.

CHAPTER III. TIMOTHY'S DROWNING.

When one is swimming in a great hurry minutes change to hours and yards to miles, and to a small human speck in the ocean the sky overhead appears like an immense arc. As the eyes of the human speck follow the horizon line, many things seem to be happening in the circular zone which girdles the whole world.

It was only an instant that Billie had turned her eyes away from Timothy's head, and yet in that moment she saw first the shark, more frightened than they were, making for the open sea; then a seagull swooping down on the water. Then she saw Genevieve standing irresolutely on the raft; next a line of sea, and finally the reckless stranger who had enticed Timothy to race for the ball and left him to his fate. He was still swimming desperately, as if a whole army of sharks was at his heels.

"Coward," thought Billie, as she cut through the waves as neatly and swiftly as the prow of a little ship. She was swimming on one side, far down, making a wide circular motion with her right arm.

As she neared the struggling boy, she called out cheerfully:

"All right, Timothy. Keep up a minute. I'm almost there."

He tried to smile, and beat the water feebly in a last effort to save himself. But when she was almost at arm's-length distance, he sank again. Billie dived under, caught him by his stiff red hair and pulled him to the surface.

Loungers on a beach are not apt to notice what is really going on among the bathers. A man has been drowned in sight of a hundred spectators and no one knew that anything had happened. So it was with the group of people lying on the sand. They had not even looked seaward for ten minutes, and were as oblivious to the fact that a struggle for life was taking place in the water, as if they had been sitting in an inland meadow.

Once again, Genevieve called weakly: "Help, help!" but her voice was lost in the sound of the surf as it broke on the shore. Then, at last, seeing she could not attract anybody's attention, she jumped into the water and began swimming slowly out toward Timothy and Billie. But she was frightened, and fright in deep water takes the form of a creeping, all-pervading exhaustion. Once she turned and tried to go back to the raft, but the strong current carried her along faster than she could swim. It was all she could do now to keep her own head above water, and she forgot Billie and Timothy and everything in the world but her determination to stay on top.

In the meantime, Billie, with Timothy in tow, was also in the grip of the current.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Take your own time, Billie," she heard her own voice saying, and she half smiled when she remembered how often she had heard her father use those very words in the early days of her swimming. "I can't keep this up forever," her thoughts continued, as her arm began to feel numb and the pressure became almost unbearable.

It had not come into her head that she could let Timothy go and save herself. Her father had had his own peculiar ideas in bringing up his little daughter, and it was a very courageous heart that now thumped and thumped in her athletic young frame. One hand still gripped Timothy's hair while with the other she paddled gently and let herself drift along. Hours seemed to pass. It was really only a few minutes. Billie closed her eyes.

"I'm so tired, Papa," she whispered. "Don't think I'm a coward if I "

Bump! Straight they drifted into something large and soft and yielding.

It was Mr. Duffy whose enormous frame was floating on the water like an empty cask.

"Br-r-r!" he spluttered, as his head went under and came up again. It was impossible to sink that vast bulk of human frame.

Billie had just sense enough to call out as he struggled to see what had collided with him:

"Keep on floating we're almost drowning."

"Hey, hey! Little girl, tired out, are you? Hold on tight. Why, you've got a boy there."

"Yes," gurgled Billie. "He's about all in don't move I must rest."

Timothy opened his eyes.

"Did I faint?" he asked in a weak, shaky voice.

"Something like it," called Mr. Duffy. "Hold on, boy, and don't talk."

At last Billie's arm was relieved of the weight which had grown so heavy that she thought every moment it would break. But she had kept Timothy's nose above the water line, and she breathed a sigh of satisfaction.

"What's that! What's that on my foot?" demanded Mr. Duffy, not daring to move and unable to see over the hemisphere of his portly frame.

Billie looked up mechanically. In her relief and weariness, she had really forgotten that Genevieve existed in the world, and there was her new friend clinging desperately to the fat man's foot and breathing hard.

Billy could hardly keep from laughing! What a funny picture they must make to the people on shore: a big whale surrounded by small fry; or an ocean liner being pushed seaward by three little tugs.

"It's just another tired swimmer," she answered at last.

Mr. Duffy's round, good-natured face wrinkled into a delightful smile.

"I seem to be a sort of general life-preserver," he exclaimed. "Do the people on land think we are playing a game? Why doesn't somebody come out and help this poor boy before we float on out to sea?"

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"I'm awfully sorry, but we're too tired to call for help," said Billie, apologetically.

"Of course you are, little girl. But you've done a brave thing, so don't reproach yourself and don't be frightened any of you. I'm going to send out one of my chest notes."

With that, Mr. Duffy roared out "Help, help!" in such deep bass tones that the ocean fairly rocked with the sound. Just as he called, Billie noticed a girl run up to the group of people on the beach and point toward the sea. It was Georgiana Paxton, she was almost certain. Two men in white flannels, taking off their coats as they ran, dashed into the surf. As they swam, they appeared like two great white fish leaping out of the water. Presently they came alongside the human flotilla and swimming to the other side of Mr. Duffy's huge frame, paused for breath.

"What's the matter?" asked one.

"Matter?" cried Mr. Duffy with half-comic irritation. "Let go of me. Do you think I'm the strong Turk who lifts a dozen people at once? There's a poor boy would have drowned if it hadn't been for this brave young lady, and there's another young lady about to go under, and you sitting on the beach playing mumbly-peg when human life is at stake! If I hadn't been an animated cork there'd have been three drownings this morning. Get busy and look alive."

"I'm all right," said Billie, as one of the young men swam toward her. "Look after the others please."

It was Genevieve and Timothy who were towed ashore while Billie and Mr. Duffy slowly followed the rescuing party, swimming side by side and chatting as if they had been old friends.

"I'm glad there's a happy ending to this little story," gurgled the fat man, moving easily along in the water like a man walking on shore.

"I am, too," answered Billie, pillowing her cheek on a green wave and propelling herself gently toward shore. She felt as if she could swim forever now; so much has the state of mind to do with swimming.

"You are a brave girl," went on Mr. Duffy. "How far had you towed the boy?"

"I don't know. Not as far as it seemed, I suppose. The current kept us going. All I had to do was to hold his head above water?"

"Wasn't he the boy who raced for the rubber ball?"

"Yes."

"What became of the other fellow, the one who threw the ball," demanded Mr. Duffy, looking out seaward as if he expected to see him also struggling in the waves.

"He was frightened at a shark and swam in. I suppose he thought Timothy was coming, too. But he needn't have made such a fuss. The shark was one of the scary kind."

"The low contemptible coward! Did he leave you to look after that drowning boy?"

"He didn't know Timothy was drowning, you see," said Billie, trying to be just.

But they had reached the shore now and there was no time to argue about it. A crowd of people had surrounded Timothy, who was still weak and exhausted. Billie and Mr. Duffy hurried up the beach to the bath houses.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Would you know that cowardly fellow again if you were to see him?" he asked, when they had reached the pavilion.

"No," she answered, "I never saw anything but the back of his head when he swam ashore."

Nancy appeared at the bath-house door. She had been dressing during the last fifteen minutes and had missed "Timothy's drowning," as the girls always called it afterwards.

"Oh, Billie," she cried to her friend who was hastening toward her, "I have just had such a fright!"

"I hoped you had missed it, Nancy," interrupted Billie.

"Then you saw it, too?"

"Saw it? I was in it."

"In the fight?" demanded Nancy.

"We are talking about different things, Nancy. What is it you saw?"

"I saw that terrible old English lady, what's-her-name, Mrs. Paxton-Steele, beat a boy with her stick! She took him by the arm and beat him well across the back, and called him 'Low, dastardly coward,' and he howled like a whipped dog, and when I said 'Oh, don't,' she turned on me and I thought she was going to hit me with her stick, too."

"That must have been the boy who threw the ball," cried Billie, "I'm glad some one punished him. What did he look like?"

"How could I tell? He was all dripping wet in a bathing-suit, and his face was turned away."

In a few words and with very modest allusions concerning her connection with the saving of Timothy Peppercorn, Billie described the accident to Nancy.

"That is the reason why I asked you what the boy looked like, Nancy. I just wanted to see which of all the men in this hotel he was," Billie added, after she had finished the story.

"Oh, Billie," cried her friend, putting her arms around Billie's neck, "you are the bravest, finest girl in the whole world."

"But it was that nice fat Mr. Duffy who saved us all, child. Go hug him."

"Don't belittle your brave deeds," said Nancy, "and don't try to excuse that cowardly man who called out 'sharks!' "

As the two girls disappeared into the pavilion, a young man about seventeen emerged from one of the alleys. He was tall and well built with handsome, regular features and brown hair, but there was an angry flush on his face and a snarl on his weak, rather effeminate mouth. He did not leave the pavilion, but waited until Nancy and Billie came out of the bath house, and as they walked arm in arm down the corridor, he took a long look at their two faces and followed slowly after them, his hands in his pockets.

"Little cats!" he ejaculated, as he turned toward the hotel, "I'll get even with them yet."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Miss Campbell and the other girls were sitting in big wicker chairs on the piazza. They, too, had heard nothing of Timothy's drowning, and were laughing and chatting together while they absorbed iced fruit drinks through long straws. "My dear children," cried Miss Campbell, "how long you have been. Here are some delicious lemonades especially ordered for us by that mysterious individual, Mr. Ignatius Donahue. I really wish he would come forth from his hiding-place. He reminds me of an attentive ghost."

CHAPTER IV. A RACE AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

"I feel rather badly about leaving the poor old Comet in his stable all day," observed Billie, who had taken a long rest after her adventure in the water that morning and was enjoying a trip in the Firefly, Mr. Donahue's motor-boat.

"He will be wondering why you brought him down if you use his rival the very first afternoon," said Elinor.

They were skimming over the blue water of Lake Worth, which was dotted with every kind of pleasure craft imaginable. The shores of Palm Beach shimmered gold in the afternoon sunshine and across the lake came the faint sound of music from the band in the Grove.

"Any kind of machine is glad to take a rest, my dear, human or otherwise," put in Miss Campbell. "No doubt the Comet is well pleased to stop whirring and whirling for awhile and stay quietly in the garage."

"You see how real our motor car is to us," said Billie to Edward, who was running the boat. "We feel toward him just as we should toward any faithful animal, a horse or a dog "

"Or a cat," put in Mary, who loved cats to the exclusion of all other dumb creatures.

"I could never love a cat the same as a horse or a dog or a motor car," cried Billie with enthusiasm.

"Now, I've planted my affections on a canary bird," said Elinor, "and I wouldn't exchange him for the finest cat in seven kingdoms. He is always in a good humor. He sings and carols all day long and his little heart palpitates with joy when I let him hop out and perch on my finger." Edward's face lighted up. He had been listening silently to the chatter of the young girls while he guided the boat somewhat nearer the beautiful tropical shores which bordered the lake, and slowed down so that they could have a passing glimpse of this fairyland.

"We have a bird," he said presently. "I'd feel mighty bad if anything should ever happen to him. He's the finest little fellow you ever saw."

"What kind is he?" asked Elinor with polite interest.

"A mocking bird."

"A mocking bird?" repeated Billie. "How I should love to hear one sing! What is he like?"

"He's a beautiful brown," returned Edward, warming to the subject. "His tail and wings are tipped with white and he has a white breast. His little eyes are so bright and black, they see everything that happens. He knows he can sing, too. He's just as proud of it as we are. He's a wonder, I can tell you, and he is as fond of us as we are of him. I found him when he was little. His wing was broken and he had fallen out of the nest. His name is Dick and he's just like a member of the family."

"What a dear little fellow!" cried Billie. "I would like to have him hop on my finger and look at me with his shiny

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

little black eyes. Do you live near Palm Beach, Edward? Couldn't we motor over and see him some time?"

There was a whirring noise behind them. The boy turned quickly without answering and looked back. Another motor boat was coming toward them at a clipping rate.

"Would you like a little race?" he asked, rather wistfully. "I know that boat, and ours can beat it, if that's the same fellow who ran it the other day."

"Wouldn't it be dangerous?" asked Miss Campbell, smiling indulgently in spite of her objections.

The Motor Maids exchanged amused glances. They had long had a secret conviction that there was nothing the little lady enjoyed more than to sit on the back seat of the Comet and close her eyes, while they took a breathlessly swift run up the Cliff Road at West Haven.

"I don't think it would be dangerous, ma'am," replied Edward. "This is a dandy little boat if it is handled properly."

"And you're sure you know how to handle it, Edward?"

"Certainly, ma'am. I've raced in it before and raced this other boat, too."

"Did you win the race, Edward?"

"Yes, ma'am," replied the boy earnestly.

"I have no objections to trying it again, then, Edward," said Miss Campbell, "only don't upset us in the water, whatever you do."

The girls laughed happily. Who could be solemn in this magical place where everything was beautiful? The sky, the water, the land, even the faces of the most ordinary human beings were glorified by the bewitching atmosphere.

"You are a precious little sport, cousin," cried Billie, kissing her relative on her peach-blossom cheek, "with all your baby-blue eyes and your laces and frills, you enjoy a race as much as any of us."

"And why not, my child? I'm not a stock or a stone always to stay planted in one spot and never to have any good times."

The other boat had come alongside of them now.

"Want to race?" called out the young man at the engine, who by the way was the same person who had called Nancy and Billie "cats" that very morning in the bathing pavilion.

"All right," answered Edward. "We'll start now if your friend will give the signal, and race to the little house on the shore."

There were two other people in the boat, one a boy who sat in the stern. He wore smoked glasses and his hat was pulled well down over his face. The other was a girl.

"Why, it's the same girl who was walking this morning with the terrible old English lady," whispered Nancy. "Her name is Georgiana Paxton."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

But no one replied, for the boy with the smoked glasses had called out: "One two three off you go," and the two boats had shot out over the water.

It was glorious fun skimming along the lake in the pretty little craft. Shores flew past and sail boats and canoes were left far behind. The other boat kept well ahead of them for awhile. Over the noise of its chugging engine they could hear the scornful laugh of the young man who was running it.

"What an impolite person," observed Miss Campbell. "There is nothing ridiculous about any of us, I hope."

"He's laughing because he thinks he's going to beat us," said Edward over his shoulder. "But wait and see what happens when we beat him. We are almost at the goal now."

Gradually the Firefly began to get up speed, and chug and work as the other boat would, it could not keep abreast of the graceful swift-moving craft which shot ahead and presently slowed up just opposite the knock-kneed, rickety little boat-house on the shore.

The girls were standing up, and Miss Campbell was waving her handkerchief in her enjoyment and excitement.

"It was thrilling," she cried. "I have never actually been in a race before, and how beautiful to be the winner. If I had known there was going to be a race I should have offered a prize for us to win, ourselves. The young man should never have laughed. It is unlucky to laugh before a race is decided."

At that moment the other boat came up.

"The race was not a fair one," exclaimed the young man, whose name we will presently find is Clarence Paxton. He was frowning and biting his lips angrily.

"What was wrong about it, I'd like to know?" demanded Edward.

"You had the start of at least half a minute."

Edward's blue eyes took on a steely look.

"You are mistaken," he said quietly.

"I tell you I am not mistaken," began the other, when Miss Campbell interfered.

"Edward," she said, in her gentlest and most charming manner, "this would be a good place to land and have our tea. Perhaps these young people will join us."

The girl in the other boat turned toward her gratefully.

"Oh, thank you," she said, "we should love to."

"That will be very nice," answered Miss Campbell. "An excellent way to celebrate a well-fought battle," she added, blinking her blue eyes a little mischievously.

"It will be impossible, Georgiana," said Clarence, "I have an engagement at the hotel at five o'clock."

"An engagement!" she exclaimed. "Why you don't know anyone to make an engagement with."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Is it any of your business one way or the other?" he replied angrily.

"If this young man is anxious to get back," put in Miss Campbell, "don't detain him, please. We shall be delighted to take you home later in our boat, if you care to come ashore, and your friend, too."

Georgiana flushed with pleasure. She was a pale thin girl with a rather plain face and sad dark eyes.

"I should love to come," she said, looking wistfully at the Motor Maids. "I have no friends here."

"Will you come, too?" asked Miss Campbell hospitably of the boy who wore glasses.

"Do come, Edward," cried Georgiana, and the other Edward started at hearing his name called out.

The boy took off his slouch hat diffidently.

"Are you sure there will be room in the boat?" he asked.

"Plenty," said the other Edward.

"I believe I will come," he said with a shy eagerness that the girls noticed at once.

"Take your friends ashore," commanded Miss Campbell sternly to Clarence, "and then you need not trouble about them further. They will be our guests."

Clarence obeyed sheepishly, and as the two boats pointed toward the beach, Miss Campbell remarked:

"The only way to avoid a quarrel with that singular young man was to ask them all to tea. But I'm sure if it gives them any pleasure it is well worth the trouble."

Presently they found themselves on a smooth beach, just back of which in a little hollow was a lovely grove of palm trees.

"What a perfect place for a picnic," cried Elinor. "Do the fairies dance here by moonlight, I wonder?"

"Isn't it sweet?" cried Mary, clasping her hands rapturously.

The prow of the other boat then grounded on the beach and the boy and girl jumped out so eagerly, that it was plain to be seen they were glad to get rid of the ill-natured Clarence.

"I can't tell you how much pleasure this will give us," said Georgiana to Miss Campbell, a slight tremble in her voice.

"It gives me a great deal of pleasure, too, I'm sure," replied the other cordially. "Your name is "

"Georgiana Paxton, and this is my brother, Edward Paxton."

Miss Campbell introduced them to her charges, and nobody took any more notice of Clarence, who busied himself with his engine and occasionally cast a surly glance at the others.

Edward and Elinor had carried the tea basket and a package of sandwiches into the little hollow, and the rest now followed.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"What a beautiful spot, what an ideal place," they cried, as they grouped themselves about the little dell, while Elinor opened her tea basket and laid out the dainty crockery and the kettle.

There was a spring bubbling in the dell, and the ground all about was carpeted with a thick bed of moss. The yellow jasmine grew in abundance there and violets were thickly strewn in the shady corners.

"What an enchanting place " Miss Campbell was saying, when suddenly Edward, the chauffeur, said "Sh-h-h," and pointed to the upper branches of an immense old pine at the edge of the grove.

"Listen," he whispered.

Hidden among the thick green foliage, a bird was singing the most lovely, trilling song imaginable. The liquid notes poured from his little, quivering throat like so much pure gold. It was such a joyous song and they were so afraid he might stop that they hardly dared breathe. Elinor clasped her hands rapturously and tears came into her eyes.

"It's a mocking bird," whispered Edward, proudly.

So much absorbed and enchanted were they with the music that they did not notice what was taking place on the beach. Two steps up and they would have seen something which would have caused them a far different emotion. Clarence, who had no business whatever in the Firefly, leaped into it for a moment, then back again into his own boat, and presently the chug-chug of his engine broke the spell of the mocking bird's song.

CHAPTER V. THE TWO EDWARDS.

" 'Knowest thou the land of the citron bloom,' " sang Elinor as she busied herself with the tea things.

There were not quite enough cups to go around and the two boys waited until two of the girls had finished; but it was only one more excuse for lingering in that lovely spot; pulling the yellow jasmine and the sweet violets and dipping their hands in the cool waters of a little brook which had hidden itself in a corner of the dell.

Georgians showed a kind of awkward, shy joy in being with the four young girls. So absorbed was she in her new happiness that she had not noticed, and indeed, no one had observed, a very curious coincidence.

It was not until Elinor had poured out two fresh cups of tea and was saying: "Sugar or lemon, Mr. Paxton or I mean Edward I mean why, which Edward are you?" that they waked up.

Edward Paxton had removed his black glasses and slouch hat and stood revealed as Edward, the chauffeur, or his living image. The others formed an interested circle around the two boys, who were certainly very much alike. They had the same blue eyes and black hair; the same handsome, regular features. They were indeed the same height.

"It is only when they are together that I could tell them apart," cried Nancy, with Irish obscurity.

"Why, they are as alike as two peas in a pod," ejaculated Miss Campbell.

The two boys stood face to face and regarded each other curiously.

"I feel as if I were looking in a mirror," said Edward Paxton gravely.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"And they are both named Edward," put in Georgiana. "Isn't it strange?"

"What is your last name?" asked Edward Paxton.

"My name is Edward l'Estrange," he said. Then he looked anxiously at the others, but no one gave any sign of having heard the name before and he appeared to breathe a sigh of relief.

"There is this difference between them," announced Billie, who, when she had observed a person's face, usually finished by looking at their chests and shoulders exactly as her father would have done, "Edward Paxton is not as broad as Edward l'Estrange, and he is much paler."

"It's because Edward's always ill," said his sister, in a half-accusing tone. "He has headaches and pains and side aches. Grandmamma says he is determined to be delicate."

Edward Paxton flushed painfully.

"Is that why you wear those smoked glasses?" demanded Billie.

"Yes, the glare on the water gives me a headache."

"How dark and hideous everything must look," went on Billie. "The sky must always be cloudy and the water gray and the woods a dusty green. I should be very unhappy, I'm sure, if I had to wear them. One could never see anything as it really was."

"He doesn't," cried his sister. "He's always sad and sorrowful and quiet and and moody, too, Edward, you know you are."

"I'm not," exclaimed her brother. "Or rather if I am, I suppose I have enough to make me so. Grandmamma " he began, and then paused and bit his lips.

There was an awkward silence. The others recalled the terrible grandmamma who wielded her gold-headed cane with almost as much freedom as an ancient warrior did his battle-axe. Miss Campbell felt sorry for the boy and girl. No doubt the fierce old lady led them a wretched life.

"Well, well," she said, patting Edward Paxton on the arm. "No one can judge for any one else, because no one knows how much another has to bear. You will grow strong and well down here, I'm sure, my dear, and I hope you and your sister will spend a great deal of time with my girls. They are so merry and bright, you can't help catching the fever when you are with them. They have made a new creature of me, I assure you."

"It's you who started all the happiness a-going, dearest cousin," said Billie, giving her relative a little squeeze.

"And speaking of going," went on Miss Campbell, "we must be tearing ourselves away from this charming place. But you will bring us here again, will you not?" she added, turning to the other Edward, who had been silently assisting Elinor to gather up the tea things and store them in the basket.

"Certainly, ma'am," he replied, "if you wish it."

Miss Campbell could not help feeling that this quiet, rather masterful boy was really the host of the beautiful afternoon party, and not merely the engineer of the boat. But he knew his duties as engineer, and his place, too, evidently, for he rarely spoke except to answer questions. With the basket under one arm and a cushion under the other he hurried over and jumped into the boat.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"He is really much the more manly of the two," thought Billie, as she watched his self-reliant movements, "but I suppose that old grandmamma would be enough to cow any one's spirit."

Presently they were seated in the Firefly and their youthful engineer shoved off from shore. They were drifting lazily along over a miniature ripple of waves which the movement of the boat had set in motion, when Edward l'Estrange gave an exclamation of surprise and annoyance. As he bent over the machinery, they waited for the whirl of the motor, but the engine was silent and the little boat bobbed up and down like a piece of driftwood that had shifted all responsibility in life. Motor boats are much like delicate people who are subject to sudden and unexpected attacks. The girls, therefore, were not surprised that the engine was indisposed, and they began chatting and laughing gaily with their new friends, while Edward l'Estrange got out his box of tools and set stoically to work.

"Why don't you help him, Edward?" asked Georgiana. "I always thought you knew so much about motor boats."

Edward Paxton rose languidly and joined his counterpart. The girls thought they had never seen such a spiritless boy, and secretly they preferred the Edward who was their own first discovery.

"There is nothing to do," said Edward l'Estrange, "because there is nothing the matter with the engine, as far as I can see."

"Why, the gasoline tank is empty," exclaimed the other.

"What?" cried the young engineer. "Just filled it this morning. By Jove," he added, with a steely light in his eye that looked dangerous, "well of all the " his voice died away and the two boys exchanged a long and meaning look.

The girls could not help laughing. They were like the two Dromios, these two young men. The resemblance was even more striking when Edward Paxton had waked into life.

"But what is it?" demanded Miss Campbell. It was so difficult to have anything but agreeable sensations in this pleasant land.

"All the gasoline's gone," said the engineer. "There's not a drop of it left in the tank and we started with plenty. There has been foul play somewhere," he added in a lower voice.

"Are you sure you started with plenty?" asked Billie, who was accustomed to the appetite of a gasoline motor engine.

"Perfectly," answered the self-reliant young man. "I cleaned and overhauled the machinery and filled the tank this morning."

"There's lots of gasoline here," observed Mary Price, "only it's all outside."

Suddenly they became aware that there was a strong odor of gasoline in the air and that the waters about them were covered with a bluish gray film.

"Ho ho," cried Edward Paxton, with some excitement. "I've found the leak. A hole has been bored straight through the side of the boat, tank and all." He was leaning far over the boat. "It's just above the water line," he added.

"But who could have played such a trick as that?" exclaimed Miss Campbell.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

The English brother and sister looked uncomfortable. There was no doubt in the minds of the company regarding the author of that practical joke, but no one cared to accuse Clarence Paxton since his cousins were their guests.

"What are we going to do, boy?" asked Miss Campbell helplessly. "How are we going to get back? I don't suppose you can find any more gasoline in this wilderness, even if you could mend the boat."

"No, the hotel is the nearest place," replied Edward l'Estrange.

He knitted his brows and sat thinking for a moment, while the others waited in respectful silence. Surely this Edward must have been well accustomed to taking charge of things.

"There is nothing to be done," he said at last, "but for me to go back to the hotel and get the motor car."

"But how will you get there?" demanded Billie, "It must be at least ten miles."

"Oh, I'll manage," he answered evasively.

"And must we wait here?" asked Miss Campbell.

Edward hesitated for some time before he replied.

"I live not far from here. If you don't mind walking a little, you could wait at my home until I come back with the motor."

"And then we could see the mocking bird," put in Elinor.

The boy's face lit up.

"Yes."

"It would be very, very kind of your of you to take such a crowd of us in, Edward," said Miss Campbell. "We should appreciate your hospitality. I don't seem to fancy stopping in this lonely spot all that long time, especially after dark."

Once more they landed and formed a silent procession along an old wagon road from the beach through a great grove of trees. It was a gloomy place in the late afternoon. The branches draped in gray Spanish moss made a mournful picture.

"We look like a troop of spirits," whispered Mary to Billie.

The two girls had lingered a little behind the others.

"What spirit was it, do you think, that sprung a leak in our boat?" whispered Billie.

"It was the spirit of mischief. And it might have been very serious mischief, too, if it had not been for our wise little engineer."

"We should have had to sleep in the dell. Cousin Helen could have taken the launch and perhaps Georgiana, because she is so frightened and nervous. I am so sorry for her, Mary, and for all of them, even that wretch of a Clarence. They are all orphans, you know, and wards of their fierce old grandmother. Georgiana and Edward lived in Canada until a few years ago. That is why they speak with so little accent, I suppose."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Presently the wagon road emptied itself, like a tributary into the main stream, into what had once been a broad carriage road, a splendid avenue bordered with giant pine trees.

"Why, this must lead to a mansion," exclaimed Billie as they turned into the avenue. "I suppose Edward works for the family who live here; but, somehow, I never can imagine his working for any one. He seems so so different from chauffeurs and people like that in general."

They walked along silently for a few minutes. There was only the last twittering of the birds to break the hushed stillness of the place.

"I feel as if I were approaching an enchanted palace," whispered Elinor, who had dropped back with her two friends.

"It was on just such an evening as this, I fancy, and along just such a road that the prince came to waken the sleeping beauty," exclaimed Mary.

"Oh, look," cried several voices at once, and suddenly right in front of them loomed an immense house.

Four classic Doric columns supported the two galleries on the first and second floors, and at one side rambled a huge wing which must at one time have been the servants' quarters, in this fine old mansion.

"Is this where you work, Edward?" asked Miss Campbell, without intending to be patronizing.

"Yes," he replied. "It is my home," he added, as he led them to the first gallery and banged the knocker loudly.

Presently footsteps sounded in the empty hall, and an old colored woman carrying a lighted candle opened the door and peered at them curiously.

"Mammy, will you look after these ladies, please? They will wait here until I can get a motor car from the hotel. Our boat was wrecked a while ago."

"Come right in, ladies," said the old colored woman, leading the way into a large almost empty room at one side of the hall.

A grand piano stood at the end. On the walls a few old portraits were half visible in the flickering candlelight. At one side was a long mahogany sofa covered with faded tapestry, and the only other piece of furniture in the immense apartment was a small supper table set for one.

"I'll jes' go up and fetch little Missy, Marse Edward," whispered Mammy, while the others strolled about looking at the portraits and Elinor touched a soft chord on the piano.

CHAPTER VI. THE GRAY MOTOR CAR.

It was not long before the door opened and a young girl bearing a lighted candle in each hand entered the room.

"This is my sister, Virginia," said Edward l'Estrange, introducing her to Miss Campbell.

Billie could hardly conceal her surprise, and Nancy, who always forgot not to speak out, was about to exclaim: "Why, it's the little chambermaid," when a reminding nudge from Elinor stopped her.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

It was indeed the little chambermaid, although the fluffy pale gold hair was no longer tucked in a knot under the maid's cap, but hung in a shining mass down her back and was caught at the neck with a pink ribbon. Virginia was like a charming woman of the world. Her manners were so gracious and easy that they began to feel at home at once in the ghostly old place.

"These Southern girls," Miss Campbell was thinking, "how graceful and well-bred they are!"

"I'm so glad my brother brought you here," said the girl in the soft musical voice that had attracted them in the morning. "It would have been lonely for you on the beach and he may be some hours in getting back."

"Before you go, Edward," put in Elinor, "may we not see the mocking bird? Or has he gone to bed?"

"Oh, Dick? He'll wake soon enough if he knows there is company," said Virginia. "Do get him, Edward."

But Edward had already left the room and presently returned with a large covered cage which he placed on the table.

"Won't all these people and lights frighten him?" asked Billie.

"Not Dick," replied Edward. "He's a gentleman, first and foremost, and loves the ladies. And he's a very obliging rascal. Watch him open one eye when I take off the cover."

When the brown linen cover was removed, the graceful little fellow was disclosed, standing on one foot, the other drawn up under his body, which gave him a ministerial appearance, as if he were about to deliver a speech.

"Why, what an elegant little gentleman he is," cried Elinor delightedly. "Look at his neat brown coat and his white waistcoat. He might have just dressed to go to church."

Dick cocked his head on the side and opened one of his intelligent little black eyes as much as to say:

"Of course I'm a gentleman. I belong to the Mocking Bird family."

But he was well pleased with the attentions of these young people, for he hopped gravely out and stood on Edward's finger looking at them critically.

"Darling little Dicky," exclaimed Virginia. "He's the very life of this house. I'm sorry you're not to hear him sing. He makes it a rule never to sing after dark. The dawn is his favorite time."

Dick gave an apologetic little chirp. He regretted evidently that it was impossible to display his musical powers at this time.

Edward regarded him with the yearning gaze of a father toward his first born.

"You are very fond of him, aren't you?" asked Billie, noticing the look of pride and affection in the boy's eyes.

"He adores him," put in his sister, laughing. "But you had better go now, Edward. Uncle Peter said he would be around with Alexander in a few minutes."

"Oh, that reminds me, how are you going to get back to Palm Beach?" demanded Miss Campbell.

Edward blushed and looked at his sister, who, although she was the younger, was not so shy.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"He's going to ride," she said.

Just then the old colored woman the boy and girl so lovingly addressed as "Mammy," entered the room and walking straight over to Edward Paxton, said:

"Marse Edward, Alexander is at de do'."

The other Edward laughed.

"You didn't know I had a twin, did you, Mammy?"

The woman held up her hands in amazement.

"Fo' de Lord," she said, "I thought 'twas my young Massa."

Virginia, too, was amazed at the strong resemblance between the two boys.

"But I must be hurrying away," said Edward l'Estrange.

They followed him to the front door. Georgiana Paxton wanted to send word to her grandmother that they were safe. Miss Campbell had another errand for him, and Edward Paxton whispered something gravely in his ear. The two boys looked at each other. Already, they had established a sympathetic understanding. Then the American boy mounted an old bony mule and rode off down the avenue.

Billie now understood why Edward l'Estrange did not want to explain how he was to get back to the hotel. But Virginia laughed gaily. It was impossible to say whether it was really a pleasure to her to be entertaining these strangers in her dismantled old home or whether her manners were so perfect that she was able to make it appear so. One thing was plain, however. She was determined not to be recognized as the chambermaid of the morning.

They strolled back into what they strongly suspected was the only furnished room on that floor, and distributed themselves about on the sofa and two chairs.

"Won't you play for us, dear, on that beautiful big piano?" asked Miss Campbell, who was really enjoying the adventure.

"I'm afraid I don't play well enough to play before company. It was papa's piano. He was a musician. Perhaps some of you will play, and I'll open the door so that mamma can hear the music from up-stairs."

"Is your mother ill?" asked Miss Campbell, "Are you sure we won't disturb her?"

"She is always ill," answered the girl sadly. "She never leaves her room. But music was once her greatest pleasure and I know she would enjoy hearing some one else play besides me."

"Edward," said Georgiana, "won't you play for Miss l'Estrange?"

The quiet English boy became suddenly animated. He had been leaning on the piano ever since he had been in the room. Perhaps his fingers were itching to touch the keys, for when he sat down and began to play the notes seemed to run from their ends like water from the mouth of a fountain. He played so beautifully that the girls began to comprehend why he never appeared to be hearing anything that was said around him.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Supper is served, Miss Virginia," announced Mammy at the door, just as they were crowding around the young pianist with exclamations of pleasure.

"I'm sorry we can't eat in the dining-room," said Virginia, "but, as you see, the table is too small."

And that was the only apology she made that evening.

"My dear child," cried Miss Campbell, "you ought not to have taken all this trouble for us. I am afraid we have put you out terribly."

Virginia smiled and took her hand.

"It is a pleasure. What would Mamma say if she knew we let our guests leave the house hungry?"

The Motor Maids will never forget that supper party. They were taught a lesson in good manners and hospitality that they had not dreamed was possible.

They found themselves in a big old-fashioned kitchen. In the center was a table covered with a splendid damask cloth and set with the most motley and variegated pieces of glass and china ever beheld together outside of a curiosity shop. At Miss Campbell's place was a beautiful Bohemian glass tumbler. Two silver mugs, one marked "Edward" and the other "Virginia," stood at the sides and at the other places were several pressed glass tumblers and one or two cracked and chipped teacups of rare old china. Miss Campbell had the only silver knife and fork on the table. In the center was a crystal bowl, which had been cracked and mended, filled with oranges.

Uncle Peter, who was Mammy's husband, and the ex-butler of this fine old mansion now appeared in an old blue swallow-tail coat with brass buttons. He bore a platter of crisp, fragrant smelling bacon, and Mammy walked behind him with a dish of cornbread.

That was all the supper and no food ever tasted better to the hungry tourists.

"After all," thought Billie, "everything depends on who gives the party."

After his duties as butler were finished, Uncle Peter passed through the room bearing a large tray, and those who were facing him could not help noticing the appetizing and dainty meal set upon it on plates of old-fashioned blue and gold china, Billie caught a glimpse of half a broiled chicken and a small glass dish of jelly.

"It's for the sick mother," she thought, as she followed the others back into the living room, and it came to her with a throb that this boy and girl were probably denying themselves every luxury in life and working hard to look after their invalid mother. "I feel so worthless and no account when I think of those two," she thought. "I have never had to give up anything in all my life so that some one else could have it."

Elinor played for them after supper, and Virginia also played and sang some delightful old negro melodies. Finally, when she struck up the "Suwanee River," the girls joined in and the house was filled with music.

"Oh dear, I'm having such a good time," exclaimed the young Southern girl. "What a treat it is to be with other girls! I wish you were all going to make me a long, long visit."

"Perhaps you could make the girls a visit in West Haven/" said Miss Campbell "That would be a nice change for you from this Southern climate."

"It would be beautiful but I can't leave mother "

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Miss Virginia," said the voice of Mammy in the hall, "your ma wants you quick "

Virginia darted from the room and they heard her running up the stairs. A door opened somewhere above and for an instant there was a sound of weeping, which was shut out immediately when the door was closed.

"Dear, dear! I'm afraid we have disturbed Mrs. l'Estrange," said Miss Campbell. "How very unfortunate!"

They sat in a silent row listening for more sounds, but the place was as still as a tomb.

Elinor began to talk with Edward in a low voice about music. Georgiana and Mary presently became absorbed in conversation, and Miss Campbell, with her head against the back of the sofa, dropped off into an after-dinner nap.

Billie and Nancy rose and held a whispered conference at the window.

"Let's do it," said Nancy to some suggestion of Billie's. "What can harm us in this wilderness?"

"Mary," said Billie, "if Cousin Helen should wake, tell her we are taking a little stroll in the avenue. We can't endure this close, still place any longer."

The two girls tiptoed from the room and presently found themselves in the broad road which led to the house. How beautiful the place looked by moonlight, with its galleries and noble Doric columns! It was too dark to see the stained and discolored walls, the staring, empty windows, but even in this light they could discern the rickety look of the house which appeared to have slipped over on one side.

"I can easily imagine this place was haunted," whispered Billie.

They were standing in the avenue, examining the old building.

"Heavens, how you give me the creeps," exclaimed Nancy, taking her friend's hand and starting to walk.

They were like ghosts themselves as they flitted down the avenue in their white dresses. They felt it would soon be time for Edward to return, and they planned to meet him at the entrance and ride back.

"There he is now," said Nancy at last.

Far down the avenue they could hear the whirring of a motor engine.

"He's traveling fast," observed Billie, listening with practised ears to the sound of the machinery. "I didn't know the Comet could take such a pace as that."

"How strange for him to have no light," observed Nancy.

"Very careless, but I suppose something happened to the light. I don't think we'd better try to stop him," she added hurriedly. "He's going like the wind," and she drew Nancy back into the path beside the road.

To their surprise, as the machine approached, they saw that two men were in it, and, strange to say, it was not the Comet but a gray car which slowed up gradually as it neared the house.

"Better stop here," said one of the men in a low voice. "So this is the old place," he added. "Poor things! Poor things!"

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"I don't see why you should pity them," said the other man. "You have more reason to hate the mother, than not."

There was silence.

"Now, Ignatius Donahue," went on the second man, the girls' hands met in a frightened clasp and they pressed together behind the trees, "I didn't bring you out here to sentimentalize. I want to talk business. We are both looking for the same thing. If I find it, I tell you frankly, I shall destroy it "

"You scoundrel," cried the man called Ignatius Donahue. "You thief, you sneak "

The two men grappled and began to fight. They fought like wild cats, first in the car and then on the ground. Presently the one on top hit his adversary a terrific blow on the head. He fell backward and lay quite still in the road.

Nancy was about to scream but Billie put her hand over her mouth.

The man kneeled on the ground and felt the other's heart.

"Stone dead," he muttered.

He lifted the man in his arms and, staggering under the weight, carried him through the thick undergrowth of what had once been the park of the old place and deposited him on the ground.

Then, with a terrified glance over his shoulder, as if he were already afraid the ghost of the dead man might follow him, he rushed blindly to the car, cranked it up, backed off and was gone like the wind.

CHAPTER VII. THE COWARD.

Billie and Nancy, too frightened to speak or move, were as still as one of the old pine trees which had shielded them from the gaze of the two men. As the whirr of the motor died away in the distance, the girls heaved a deep sigh almost at the same moment, as if they had awakened from a terrible dream.

"Billie have we just seen a man killed?" whispered Nancy, her knees knocking together with fright.

"Yes," whispered Billie unsteadily.

"What shall we do?"

"Wait and let me think. Must we go and alarm the people in the house or wait for Edward l'Estrange? You wouldn't dare go over there with me and see if the man is really dead, would you, Nancy?"

"No-o-o," cried Nancy. "Never, never, never!"

"Why not tell Edward Paxton?"

"Why not?" answered the other, and pressing close together, the frightened girls hurried back to the house as fast as their shaking knees could carry them.

It was gloomy enough in the great dark hall with only one candle sputtering in a bracket on the wall, and they were not reassured when on opening the door they found the living room empty.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Where on earth are they?" exclaimed Nancy.

"Perhaps they couldn't stand it in here either, and have gone out doors. Let's look for them on the piazzas."

Hand in hand they hastened from the house, looking back fearfully at their fantastic shadows dancing on the walls.

"Thank heavens, I hear them," said Nancy, pulling Billie toward the low sound of voices at the end of one of the side galleries.

"Don't you say anything, Nancy. Leave me to manage it. You will be certain to frighten Cousin Helen."

"Why, there you are," called Miss Campbell herself, as the two girls approached. "Somebody started a false alarm that the sound of a motor had been heard and we came out hoping it was Edward. I was beginning to get uneasy for fear you had wandered too far."

"We just walked down the avenue and back."

"Didn't you hear the motor?" demanded Mary, who scented something in Billie's manner.

"Yes, but it was not Edward, evidently. I suppose there are lots of motors around the neighborhood."

"What did you see? Anything interesting?" asked Elinor. "You both look as if you had seen a ghost."

"You are pale," exclaimed Miss Campbell, "or is it the moonlight? And Nancy's hands are cold as ice. Come in the house, child. You should not be out in this night air. You are trembling. Are you ill?"

"Keep it up, Nancy," whispered Billie in her ear.

"I feel a little faint," said Nancy. "Perhaps I'd better go in and sit down a moment."

Miss Campbell, who was consumed with anxiety if one of her girls had the suspicion of a pain, drew her into the house, made her lie on the sofa and took off her own coat to throw over her.

In the meantime, Billie pulled Edward Pax-ton's sleeve and whispered, "Wait, I have something to tell you."

"What is the matter," he asked, wonderingly.

"When Nancy and I were in the avenue, an automobile drove up and stopped near us. Two men, who were in it, began fighting. They fought out of the car and on the road and one of them hit the other an awful blow. The man is dead, I'm afraid, because the other man pulled him over into the bushes and left him there. Then he jumped into the motor and rushed away. The dead man is over in the bushes down there now." She pointed down the avenue. "What do you think we'd better do?"

Billie had been too agitated to realize how strange the story sounded until she put it into words.

"He's there, I tell you," she exclaimed impatiently, when Edward made no reply. "You look as if you didn't believe me."

"It does sound very much like a curious dream. Why should people be killing each other in this wilderness?"

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"I don't know, I'm sure. But it happened just as I told you."

"You are not playing a joke on me, are you?"

There was nothing in the world which irritated Billie so much as to have her word doubted. Her father had often said that she was absurdly truthful, and as a matter of fact she stuck to the letter of the truth with scrupulous care. She always believed other people, because she expected the truth. And she seldom got anything else. It, therefore, seemed incredible to meet some one who could believe that she would invent a tale just for the sake of excitement.

With a slightly contemptuous spark in her fine gray eyes, she turned to Edward and said,

"If you have any doubts on the subject, you had better come with me and see for yourself."

"Don't you think we'd better wa—a " he stammered, and broke off with an embarrassed laugh.

Then it was she realized that Edward was timid. She could hardly call it cowardice because the boy followed her; but from the corner of her eye she could see that it was with reluctant steps.

She felt sorry for him, somehow. Probably his grandmother had taken all the spirit out of him. That is why he permitted his cousin Clarence to ride over him, and his old granny, too.

"Are you certain he was dead?" he whispered.

"No, I'm not certain at all. We ought to hurry," she continued, "if he isn't, we might be able to help him."

Half way down the avenue, she stopped at two tall pine trees standing closely together like a loving pair which had grown up side by side.

"I think it was just here," she whispered. "We were behind these two trees, Nancy and I, when they began to fight, and it was along this smudged place that he pulled the man's body and pitched it into that clump of bushes."

Edward paused and drew in a deep breath. A brave soldier about to go under fire could not have been more resolute than he when he finally doubled his fists and plunged through the bushes followed by Billie. Although the moon was bright, they could not see any signs of an object having been dragged over the ground. The elastic undergrowth had sprung back into place and the body might have lain there forever under the trees and no one the wiser.

"Was this the place?" he whispered, trying to keep Billie from seeing that he was shaking all over.

"Yes," she answered, parting the branches of the acacias. "It was right in here, I think."

But there was no sign of any creature, living or dead, in the high grasses.

They searched, growing bolder every moment.

At last, with a sigh of deep relief, Edward said,

"Dead or alive, he's gone. And still you say it wasn't a dream?"

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Even the most patient and amiable natures have their turning points. Now, Billie, with all her high spirits, was singularly free from outbursts of temper. From her father she had inherited a happy, even disposition, always willing to see the best and overlook the worst. But the young girl was very tired that evening. It had been only a few hours since she had saved Timothy Peppercorn's life, and that followed by the shock of seeing a man struck down, had unnerved her.

She regretted afterwards the words which came to her lips now, for she was terribly and uncontrollably angry and she hardly knew that it was herself who spoke them.

Perhaps, after all, Billie was at that moment an unconscious instrument of fate, because her impetuous, passionate outburst was the means of changing the lives and destinies of several actors in this little history.

"How dare you accuse me of speaking a falsehood?" she said. "You are a coward and you are glad we didn't find the man's body because you are afraid. You haven't even the spirit or courage to believe the truth. You are afraid of everything and everybody. Afraid of your grandmother and your cousin. You are afraid of me now. You are afraid of being sick; of losing your eyesight. You are afraid of the dark, and you are afraid of the sun. You shut it out with black glasses. You may look like Edward l'Estrange. But you are not really like him. He is brave and strong. He is not afraid to fight to make a living and take care of his sick mother. This afternoon when your cousin told that falsehood about the boats starting wrong, you knew it was a lie, but you were afraid to stand up for what was right. It was your cousin who punched a hole in our boat this afternoon. You know that perfectly well; but you will be afraid to tell him so.

"Just change places with Edward l'Estrange once and let him fight your battles and you will see what courage is."

Billie stopped. The fire of her anger had burned out almost as soon as it had started. She felt shaken through and through and very tired.

"I wonder if Vesuvius feels like this after one of her eruptions," she thought, shamefacedly.

But there was no time for any inward reflections just then, for her attack on Edward bore very quick results. Instead of giving fire for fire as a real coward would do with some one smaller and weaker than himself, Edward buried his face in his hands and burst into a perfect tempest of sobs.

"Oh, don't," cried Billie, remorsefully. "It was cruel of me to speak in that way. I was very angry, but it's all over now, and I apologize. I must have hurt you awfully. Of course you're not a coward."

"No, no. You are quite right. I am a coward. Every word you said was true. I am afraid of everything: the daylight and the dark and draughts and people. I am even afraid of the only thing I want to do in the world be a musician; because my grandmother threatens to cut me off with a shilling if I touch the piano. I am afraid of being poor. You were right in saying I was afraid of the truth, because it hurts, and what you said hurt me terribly. I sometimes wonder why I was ever born. I have always been so miserable."

"You poor boy," said Billie, all the kindness in her nature rising to the top. "I am so sorry I hurt you. Won't you forgive me?" she asked, putting her hand on his arm.

"Oh, yes," he answered. "I'm not angry with you. I wish I could be mad just once. I have always been afraid of scenes."

"Well, don't say again you wish you had never been born, because perhaps some day you may be awfully glad you were, and then you would be sorry you had said it. After all, you have an easier time than Edward l'Estrange. Think how hard he has to work, and Virginia, too. If you were to change places " she began, when the English

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

boy interrupted her.

"Do you think we are very much alike?" he demanded with some excitement in his voice.

"Wonderfully."

"Why not change places then? Our accents are not so very different. I can run boats and automobiles and Edward l'Estrange can "

"Can fight your battles," Billie thought, but she said aloud, "Can take your place for a while?"

"Yes," went on Edward, warming up to the subject. "I would gladly give him my allowance. I dare say it's more than he makes now and he could have what I made, too. I don't want it. All I want is a little freedom."

"But what about your sister and Clarence? Wouldn't they find out?"

"Clarence wouldn't because he has never noticed Edward l'Estrange and doesn't know anything about the likeness. If it were necessary, we could tell Georgiana. But I would rather not. It will be a secret between us three."

"And are we to trust you to run the Firefly and take us out in the motor?" asked Billie, doubtfully.

"Won't you please?" asked the boy so earnestly that Billie smiled.

"It may not be necessary," she said. "Edward has to be won over first. There he is at last," she added, looking down the avenue. "We had better hurry back. They will be missing us."

It was not long before the Firefly party was hastening back to the hotel in the faithful red motor.

"Billie," whispered Nancy, "what happened? Did you find him? And was it Mr. Ignatius Donahue? And was he dead "

"No, Nancy dear, the dead man had run away, thank heavens, whichever one he was."

Nancy gave an hysterical little giggle.

"Then he was alive?"

"What a foolish question, child. You don't suppose the dead can walk, do you? 'Dead men rise up never. ' "

"Ugh " shivered Nancy. "Oh, dear, but I'm glad that we didn't really see a murder. Which did you think struck the blow?"

"How can I tell," answered Billie. "But I would much rather it would be Ignatius Donahue, if it was our Mr. Donahue, who was struck down. Because the other man ran away."

Early the next morning just as sunrise flooded the world with a mellow light, Virginia l'Estrange tiptoed from the front door of her house and climbed into the back of an old spring wagon where she sat down composedly in a rocking-chair.

"Git up, Alexander," said Uncle Peter, who occupied the driver's seat, and off they started down the avenue.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

As they turned into the main road, they noticed a man sitting on the ground holding his head in both hands.

"Stop, Uncle Peter," ordered the girl. "Are you ill?" she asked.

The man looked up with a dazed expression.

"I I think I am," he answered.

"Would you like to ride?"

"You are very kind."

The man climbed into the wagon, and suddenly grasping his head with a groan, fainted dead away.

"Oh, mercy, what shall we do, Uncle Peter? Take him home?"

"We'll have to, little Missy. We cyant car' him to the hotel."

The long-suffering Alexander once again turned his face toward the house and trotted patiently up the avenue. Perhaps he thought he was not to take his usual early morning trip to Palm Beach. By the time they had reached the end of the avenue, the man opened his eyes.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"This is my home," said the young girl. "My name is Virginia l'Estrange. You had better stay here until you feel better. You will look after him, won't you please, Mammy?" she said to the colored woman who had come around the side of the house at the sound of approaching wheels. "This gentleman is ill."

"Virginia l'Estrange," repeated the man, getting slowly out of the wagon with the help of the two, old colored people. "Virginia," he said again, presently, stretching himself wearily on the long sofa while the colored woman bound a wet cloth about his forehead.

In the meantime, Virginia, herself, rocking gently back and forth, was again on her way to the hotel.

"I suppose it's all right, Uncle Peter," she said. "We couldn't leave a sick man in the road."

"Yes, little Missy," said the colored man, "an' they ain't nothin' in our house wuth takin' anyhow ceppen it be the gran' pianner."

CHAPTER VIII. MR. DUFFY GIVES A PARTY.

"O'er the waters so blue, o'er the waters so blue,

We're afloat, we're afloat in our birch-bark canoe."

Elinor's sweet fresh voice, floating across the waters of Lake Worth, seemed a part of the rippling accompaniment made by the waves as they lapped the bow of the Firefly. Edward, the young engineer, absorbed in listening to the music, forgot he was guiding a boatful of people down the lake to an evening party at Mr. Duffy's villa.

"Be careful," whispered Billie, sitting near him. "Look out for that boat on the right."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Edward started from his dream, smiled, and turned the Firefly out of the track of the oncoming boat.

"That's a pretty song," said Timothy Peppercorn, "only to be strictly truthful, you should substitute We're afloat, we're afloat in our little motor boat. "

"There's nothing poetical about the smell of gasoline," interrupted Elinor. "It out-perfumes all the orange blossoms and yellow jasmine at Palm Beach."

"Speaking of gasoline," Miss Campbell here broke in, "Edward, did you find out any more about that leak that came in the Firefly the other night? Was it do you er, could it possibly have been "

Miss Campbell hesitated. She never liked to make accusations on circumstantial evidence, but it certainly looked very much as if Clarence Pax-ton had done the deed, out of spite.

Edward hesitated and Billie replied for him.

"The engineer is busy at this moment, Cousin Helen," she said, "but I will tell you that if it wasn't the person who shall be nameless, he got a good beating anyhow for some one else's sins the next day."

"Is it possible?" exclaimed the little lady with great concern. "Dear, dear. Who beat him?"

"The other one."

"It all sounds very mysterious," laughed Timothy, "like the letter at the trial of the Knave of Hearts:

I gave her one; they gave him two,

You gave us three or more.

They all returned from him to you,

Though they were mine before. ' "

"What are these Paxton people like?" asked Genevieve Martin.

"They are English and peculiar," answered Nancy, "Two orphans and one almost-orphan, and their grandmother. The two orphans are very nice and the almost-orphan is well, rather disagreeable. The grandmother beats them when she is angry "

"Oh, Nancy," exclaimed Elinor.

"She does, for I saw her at Timothy's drowning. She beat Clarence."

"Oh, Clarence. I should think she would have to beat him. But Edward is really quite nice."

The others laughed at this, and the engineer bent down over his machine as if motor engines were the only thing in life that interested him.

"Here we are," cried the ever-watchful Billie, pointing to a pretty villa which was one of many built on a long strip of land separating the lake from the ocean. "This is Mr. Duffy's villa. I can tell it by the three lanterns hung in the boat-house. He told me that would be the Duffy signal."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Since Billie's bravery in keeping Timothy from drowning, Mr. Duffy had been her devoted follower. It was impossible for him to conceal his admiration, he said. He wished all the world to know that she was the finest young lady in three kingdoms and all the states. He brought his wife to the hotel to call on Miss Helen and the girls, but chiefly to exhibit the brave young woman who had kept two heads above water at the same time and not lost either of them. And then he wished to give Billie a party at his own house, and he invited her and all her friends who were at the moment in speaking distance on the piazza. Timothy Peppercorn and Genevieve Martin were included, and the three English cousins who happened to be near at the time. The Firefly party could see their launch now making for the pier.

"Why, look," exclaimed Mary. "Clarence isn't running the boat to-night. Edward Paxton is doing it."

"Good!" cried Billie. "It's a fine sign."

"Sign of what, pray?" demanded Elinor.

"Oh, nothing," began Billie, when she was interrupted by a burst of music played by three negroes on a guitar, a banjo and a triangle which sent a silver tinkling note through the melody, Mr. Duffy, himself, was at the boat landing looking as large as a white elephant in his spick and span linen suit.

"This is a pleasure and an honor, Madam," he exclaimed, helping Miss Campbell out of the boat as gallantly as if he had been a slender young cavalier. "Mrs. Duffy and I have been looking forward to this, I can tell you. The old woman's on the porch. She never walks a step if she can avoid it, you know."

Mr. Duffy always called his wife "the old woman," but it was simply a term of endearment for she was not really old at all. She was almost as fat as her husband, however, but at the top of her mountainous figure was the most charmingly pretty face imaginable, as pink and white as a wax doll's and always wrinkling with little smiles which played hide-and-seek among her many dimples. Her eyes were as blue and innocent as an infant's and her naturally blonde hair, made blonder by artificial means, gave her face a singularly childlike appearance.

"Are you all here?" she cried, giving a funny little elephantine run down the piazza as they came up the steps. "I do hope no one stayed behind. I wish I had told you to bring more people. Mr. Duffy and I love boys and girls, because we haven't any of our own, I suppose. If I wasn't so fat and lazy, I think I should like to be at the head of a big orphan asylum. It would be different from any orphan asylum I have ever seen. The children should have such a good time they would forget they had no parents. The little girls should have pretty dresses," she rattled on, "and not those hideous dun colored things, and every Saturday they should have a party "

"You see how my old woman does run on," laughed Mr. Duffy, winking at the others. "Orphan asylums are her particular fad, but I don't believe any Methodist Association would engage her if they heard her views first."

"If they ever do make you a superintendent of an orphan asylum, Mrs. Duffy," called Billie, on her way up the stairs to leave her scarf and wrap, "you will have your hands full because we shall all join the orphan brigade."

"Bless you, child, Mr. Duffy and I would be only too glad to make a little asylum just for you all alone if you should ever feel inclined to try it," returned the warm-hearted soul who had yearned in vain for a little girl of her own.

Mr. and Mrs. Duffy's winter home was built very much as they were: broad and commodious and of an exceedingly comfortable disposition.

There was plenty of room in the big parlors for dancing; on the broad piazzas were lounging chairs and hammocks, and in the tropical garden, now lighted with Japanese lanterns, settees had been placed in all the

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

prettiest nooks.

Other guests now began to arrive from the neighboring villas, and our Motor Maids soon found themselves at what Nancy called "a real party."

And, oh, how busy Mrs. Duffy was introducing all the boys and girls! She chose Timothy Peppercorn as her assistant and the incongruous pair kept the couples spinning about the room like so many human tops.

"No one shall ever have a stupid time in my house," declared the good woman, leading forth young men and maids to the dance like so many sacrificial lambs. But once things got into swing, she had no further trouble except with poor, awkward, shy Georgiana. The young English girl danced a hoppety dance instead of the American glide, and it was difficult to obtain a partner for her a second time. At last Mr. Duffy himself was called into action. With rivers of perspiration pouring down his rotund countenance, like spring freshets down the side of a mountain, he gallantly piloted Georgiana through the mazes of the waltz. But Mr. Duffy had a light and graceful step, in spite of his enormous weight.

There was a dancer at the ball whose enjoyment was so apparent that Mrs. Duffy felt a thrill of gratification whenever she noticed his flushed, happy face. It was Edward which Edward, you may guess for yourselves, but he danced as Cinderella must have danced when she knew that at midnight she must fly. Billie was his partner as often as Timothy Peppercorn would permit. As soon as Edward had arrived he had pushed his way through the crowd and gone straight to her side.

"How many dances may I have, Miss Billie?" he asked, with a candor not unusual in young Southerners.

"As many as you can get," replied Billie, laughing, but with a bright flush on her cheeks, and Edward had taken her at her word.

Elinor, who was standing next to Billie when this happened, turned away and bit her lip. It was only because she had been saving up something to tell Edward about a duet she wanted him to try some day with her at the hotel, and Edward had merely bowed to her and gone away. Such things are disturbing even to the most dignified and high-bred natures, and it was natural for poor Elinor to wonder why Edward Paxton had never been near her since the evening they all spent together at Virginia's home.

Elinor had many partners that night, but Edward was not one of them. Her feelings were hurt and she could not resist a slight coldness toward Billie, who seemed to have forgotten that she had three intimate comrades and was always talking to Edward in a low voice and stopping immediately any one came near.

"Won't you and Timothy come and stroll in the garden with us, Elinor?" asked Billie, as they passed each other between dances.

"Thanks," replied Elinor, with all the dignity of an injured queen, "I would rather stay indoors."

So it was that Billie and Edward strolled alone in the garden.

"How are you getting on?" she asked.

"Splendidly," he replied. "I gave Clarence such a licking as he'll never forget, and yesterday when the old lady started to rap me in the head with her cane, I caught it in my hand and said 'Don't do that again. ' I could hardly keep from laughing. But she has treated me very politely ever since. I have to watch out for Clarence, though. He is just waiting for a chance to get at me. It will be from behind. That's why I have to be careful. And I want to warn my twin brother. I suppose we'll find him at the boat landing."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"How do you like being in another boy's shoes?" Billie asked, as they turned in the direction of the boat-house.

"It's rather jolly having plenty of clothes and nothing to do but amuse myself; but I'd just as soon live at the foot of Mount Etna as take a permanent job with my present grandmamma.

"Nonsense," said Billie, "I believe you will find her all right if she learns to respect you. She has no respect for her grandchildren. That's why she bullies them with her cane."

Stretched on the cushioned seat of the Firefly, they found the other Edward gazing at the stars, the very picture of contentment.

"Hello," he exclaimed, looking up as he stifled a yawn. "How's the party?"

"Fine!" answered Edward l'Estrange.

"I wish you could have come, too," said Billie.

"Thanks, but I'm much happier here. I hate dancing. It always gives me palpitation. The lights hurt my eyes, too, in a ball-room. I'm just as well off here."

Billie gave a humorous groan.

"Dear me, what a delicate invalid you are," she laughed.

"I am getting better every day," he admitted. "This life of freedom is doing me a lot of good. There is nothing really the matter with me but constant worry and nagging, you know."

"And that reminds me," said the American boy. "You will have to give up your life of freedom, as you call it, for a day or two and go to St. Augustine with your family. They are all going to-morrow night."

"Oh, fizzle," exclaimed the other. "Why can't Grandmamma stay in one place for a week at a time? We came over to New York on business and she couldn't rest until she got here and now she wants to go somewhere else."

"It's only for two days," continued Edward l'Estrange. "They want to see the city. That's all."

"I say, Edward," said his counterpart in a coaxing voice, "won't you go in my place?"

"I'm afraid to. I can't always remember to say 'been' as you do and they might find out. You see, I shall have to be with them constantly. Now I only see them at meals and I never talk unless some one asks me a question."

The English Edward was silent for a few minutes. For the first time in all his days he had been happy. He had tasted the joy of being his own master and of living his own life. He had not even minded the work, although he was not as diligent as the other boy and twice Billie had scolded him about the appearance of the Comet which was not in its usual spick and span order.

"Look here," he said at last, "I'm so anxious for another week's happiness that I'd be willing to do almost anything to get it. Didn't you tell me when you undertook this business that money was the thing in the world you needed most?"

"Yes."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Would you do it for twenty pounds? That's about a hundred dollars in your money."

Edward l'Estrange thrust his hands in his pockets and kicked the ground meditatively with one toe.

"That seems a good deal for you to give and a good deal for me to ask. Have you really got that much money?"

"Oh, yes; I saved it out of last year's allowance. I have kept it a secret. Clarence would have borrowed it from me. He's always in debt. I would gladly pay it to you for going to St. Augustine."

"Do you advise me to accept, Miss Billie?"

"Why, yes, I do," hesitated Billie.

"All right, then, I'll do it. I want some money so badly, that I would do almost anything to earn a hundred dollars all at one time."

Billie, who felt that she was a very responsible party to this strange transaction, was rather uneasy after it was settled. But she knew that Edward l'Estrange must need money very much and it was a quick way to earn it.

"We'll have to change places to-night, though," said the American boy, "because I must go home first and see my mother if I'm to be away for two days. Come into the boat-house and we'll change now."

Billie waited for them, sitting on a bench by the water's edge, and pondering on the curious situation. Overhead the stars gleamed twice as brilliantly as they did at West Haven. The air was full of sweet odors. A little breeze ruffled the bosom of the lake and stirred the palm trees. How sweet it all was! And Mr. and Mrs. Duffy, what adorable, good-natured, fat, funny souls they were. She smiled to herself and closed her eyes. The next dance had begun and the music of a waltz floated out through the open windows. She was to have danced it with some one, but, never mind, she would wait for the other Edward who would now make his appearance in the drawing-room in his real character. It was a pity he was so shy. And she was afraid, too, that he was just a little lazy.

"I believe you have this waltz with me, Miss Campbell," said some one close behind her.

It was the sharp voice of Clarence Paxton that broke the peaceful stillness. Billie remembered that she had promised him a dance early in the evening. She had not had the spirit to refuse with Mrs. Duffy standing at her elbow.

"Oh, yes," she replied. "I am coming now," and she started down the path.

"Do wait a moment, Billie. Perhaps I won't see you again for several days. Won't you say good-bye?" called Edward l'Estrange, running out of the boat-house.

He stopped when he saw Clarence standing near her.

Billie felt very uncomfortable. She wished Edward had not been so hasty, but Southern boys take little pains to conceal their likes and dislikes. Edward liked Billie very much and he was not at all ashamed of it. However he was not prepared for what was now to happen.

CHAPTER IX. THE BULLFROG AND THE POLLYWOG.

Billie hesitated, too embarrassed to know what to reply.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"But " she began, when Clarence interrupted.

"Do you know you are speaking to a lady," he exclaimed angrily, "and you a servant! How dare you call her by her first name, you insolent young upstart. Can't you see that you have made her very angry?"

Billie was so surprised at this unexpected attack that she lost her voice and choked indignantly.

"He is not a servant," she tried to say, but her words were drowned in the abuse which Clarence poured out on Edward.

"Go back to your boat and remember your place hereafter. Don't interrupt when I'm speaking to you, sir in England servants are trained not to answer back."

Even in the half darkness Billie could see the flush on Edward's face growing deeper every instant. He seemed to breathe in sharp little gasps and his body trembled as if he had an ague.

"Run," she said to Clarence, who after one swift glance at Edward had actually turned on his heel and started up the path. But the warning came too late. In an instant Edward had seized him by the collar and was shaking him as a terrier shakes a rat. Then, without a moment's hesitation, he tossed him into the lake.

"You low, contemptible coward," he said. "Stay there until you apologize."

Clarence floundered about in the water snorting and coughing, and started to wade ashore.

"I'm in earnest," said Edward. "Apologize, or you'll get pitched in again if you try to come out."

All this time Billie had been standing silently on the bank. She could hardly blame Edward for punishing the cowardly boy who had insulted him, but she wished with all her heart that she had not been the cause of the quarrel.

"It's just what I get for mixing into other people's affairs," she thought. "It all came about because I put it into the two Edwards' heads to change places. I do wish I hadn't said so much that night."

The other Edward strolled out of the boat-house just then with his hands in his pockets. He was dressed in the white duck trousers and blue serge coat his counterpart had just removed.

"You look as if you had been having a quarrel," he said. "What's happened?"

"Edward, please give that fellow a good flogging," called Clarence from the lake where he stood waist-deep in water. "You can do it, I know. I found that out the other day."

But Edward l'Estrange was in no humor to be bothered.

"You touch me and you go where your cousin did," he said, feeling equal at that moment to exterminating the line of Paxton-Steeles, root, branch and stock.

"Is that old Clarence out there in the water," said Edward Paxton chuckling. "By Jove, but that's funny. You look like 'the bullfrog on the bank and the pollywog in the pool. ' "

Billie laughed outright at this because it was funny— Edward crouched on the bank with a black look on his face, like an angry bullfrog, and pollywog Clarence wading about in the water afraid to come out!

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

At that moment there was a sound of shouting and laughing and a crowd of boys and girls came running from the piazza into the garden. They were chasing Timothy Peppercorn, who was racing down the path in front of the others. It was only a child's game they were playing, but there are always some big children ranging anywhere from fifteen to fifty who love to play games, and the biggest child at Mr. Duffy's party that night was Mr. Duffy himself. He resembled a jolly fat old satyr with a crowd of pretty wood nymphs around him as he ran puffing and blowing through the palm-bordered walks.

It was Nancy, fleetest nymph of them all, who was the first to catch Timothy by the tail of his coat and hold him fast until the others came up, and it was on the bank of the lake she had caught him, not two feet from where Edward l'Estrange was sitting embracing his knees, in moody silence.

Just as the others came up, a row-boat shot from round the boat house and pulled into shore.

"Is this Marse Duffy's res-dence?" some one called from the boat.

Edward started. He recognized the voice of Uncle Peter.

"Is that you, Uncle Peter?" he called. "What is it?"

"You's needed at home, Marse Edward."

"All right. Pull over to the boat landing. I'll meet you there. Will you take back the Firefly for me to-night?" he asked Edward Paxton.

"I'll be glad to," replied the other.

"You may expect me to-morrow morning," added Edward l'Estrange in a low voice. "I'll probably need that hundred dollars more than ever now. Before I go will you promise to take my place in every way until I come back?"

"I promise," said the English boy.

He had not noticed that Clarence, seeing a chance to escape, had now advanced within hearing distance.

"And tell your blackguard cousin," continued Edward l'Estrange, "that the apology is only postponed."

"Edward," said Billie, running after him as he hastened to the boat house, "if you want to use the Comet to-night to get home in, you're welcome to it."

"Thank you, Billie," replied the boy, giving her hand a warm grasp. "You don't mind my not calling you 'Miss, ' do you?"

"Of course not," said Billie. "We're just a boy and girl, anyway. Besides, I called you 'Edward' first."

"Good-bye, again," he said, and was gone down the steps before she could say a word.

Billie took another path to the house and avoided the crowd.

In the meantime, Edward Paxton, seeing Elinor standing apart from the group of young people, had whispered to her.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"It's awfully jolly to see you again. I'm not strong on dancing but I'd like one with you, if you don't mind my bungling."

Elinor looked at him in amazement.

"You seem to have been rather strong on dancing the first part of the evening," she said coldly.

"Oh er, perhaps I was," answered the boy, suddenly remembering that he could not speak for his actions during the first part of the dance.

"But you will dance with me now," he went on, "or better still, suppose we sit on the piazza. I have been thinking up the music for that song," he went on eagerly. "You remember the words you gave me the other night:

'On thy fair bosom, silver lake,

The wild swan spreads his snowy sail

And round his breast the ripples break,

As down he bears before the gale.'

You said you would like to sing it on Lake Worth, and I've got the music all ready to put down. If it's ever published, I'll dedicate it to you. It goes like this," he added, humming the air to the song as they moved slowly off toward the house.

"What's that in the water?" called Nancy, after Uncle Peter had interrupted the game and the merry-makers had paused on the bank of the lake to rest and cool off. Mr. Duffy, mopping his face with his pocket handkerchief, had seated himself on the bench occupied by Billie a few moments before.

"It's a man," announced several voices. "It's a man standing in the water."

"What are you doing, my friend? Cooling your ankles?" asked Mr. Duffy, politely.

Seeing that he was discovered, the man waded in.

"Why, it's Clarence," cried Georgiana Pax-ton.

"Are you quite mad? What will Grandmamma say?" she added in an awed tone of voice.

"Mr. Duffy," said Clarence in a voice quivering with rage, "I have been insulted by a boatman on your place. I thought I wouldn't speak of it at first because I didn't wish to make a scene, but since you have seen me, I must explain."

"Dear me, dear me, dear me," exclaimed Mr. Duffy with great concern. "A boatman on my place? Who could it be? I'm sorry, sir, I'm sure. And what did he do, pray?"

"He was impertinent to a young lady and I reprimanded him, and later when I was standing here talking with her he came up from behind and pushed me off the bank. He rowed off with a man in a boat before I could come out and give him a good flogging."

"Why, he must mean our Edward," said Nancy, "He runs the motor boat and the Comet, too."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Edward, of course. He's a fine boy," said Mr. Duffy. "He often does work for Mrs. Duffy in the garden. It's hard to believe he would play such a mean trick on any one. But you'd better come into the house, Mr. Paxton, and get on some dry things."

"Thanks, I'll take the motor boat back to the hotel. My cousins can go with the others. Ask the young Miss Campbell," he called after them, "if that low fellow didn't have the impertinence to call her 'Billie,' and speak to her as familiarly as if he were her equal?"

"He is her equal," exclaimed Mary, indignantly.

But of course the others only knew Edward as a very useful and capable boy who worked around the hotel at anything he could find to do. He had even been known to carry luggage, so anxious was he to earn money.

CHAPTER X. THE SONG OF THE MOTOR.

Mr. and Mrs. Duffy enjoyed their own party so much that they concluded to give another one immediately. Accordingly at eleven o'clock the next morning, the Comet containing the Motor Maids and Timothy Peppercorn started off behind the Duffy motor in which sat those two ample souls, the master and mistress of the machine, Miss Helen Campbell and the chauffeur.

It was a picnic party, during which they were to visit Mr. Duffy's orange grove and his famous alligator farm.

As the motors passed the station, Billie saw a group of familiar figures standing on the platform. Mrs. Paxton-Steele, as usual, was flourishing her gold-headed cane, this time to point out pieces of luggage to the man and maid-servants who traveled with her. Nearby stood Edward, Clarence and Georgiana. Billie sounded the motor horn several times to attract the attention of the others. Clarence looked over his shoulder and turned around quickly without speaking, Georgiana waved her hand and her handkerchief both at once, and Edward flourished his cap and looked only at Billie, who thought regretfully:

"So, he did get back in time."

"Strange he didn't tell me last night he was going away," observed Elinor.

"I think Edward Paxton is a person of many moods," said Mary. "He is never the same from one day to the next. I don't think he is a bit like Edward l'Estrange in character. It's only his face."

"They are certainly alike in face," put in Billie. "I believe their nearest relatives could not tell them apart if they were dressed alike."

"I could," exclaimed Elinor with conviction in her tones. "There is such a difference in their expressions. Edward Paxton's face is so much more spiritual."

Billie could not help laughing at this, and Elinor was piqued.

"Well, I do think he is much more refined," she observed. "After all, Billie, it was rather familiar of Edward l'Estrange to call you by your first name."

"Nonsense," ejaculated Billie. "He's as good as I am, and I call him Edward. Besides, haven't we accepted his hospitality, 'eaten his bread,' as Papa says? It was quite right for him to call me Billie if he wanted to."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

The girls were rather surprised at this little tiff between the two friends, who were never known to have had the shadow of a quarrel before. Billie made up her mind that she would tell the girls the truth about the two Edwards that very night, even if it were not her secret. She couldn't bear these small misunderstandings, though they disturbed the placid waters of their friendship ever so little.

"Why is it no one ever sees Virginia?" asked peacemaker Mary, changing the subject.

"I did see her in the corridor of the hotel not long ago," replied Nancy, "but when she recognized me she flew down a side hall. Miss Campbell wanted to ask her to luncheon with us and tried to catch her, but she had disappeared."

"Ever since you saved my life, Billie," here broke in Timothy, "I've been meaning to tell you something. I'm almost certain it was Clarence Paxton who yelled 'sharks,' that morning. Of course I couldn't testify in a court about it, because when you are chasing around in deep water you are not apt to examine people's lineaments. Anyway, it was not his face I recognized, but his laugh. The last time he pitched the ball he gave a jeering laugh, and that was why I kept on swimming farther out. I had a feeling he thought I couldn't."

"If it was Clarence, he was punished," said Nancy. "His Grandmamma beat him well with her stick; for I saw her do it and he saw me see her and I saw that he saw that I saw her " she finished breathlessly, while the others laughed and clapped their hands.

"Bravo! Bravo!" cried Timothy.

They now entered a road which was not unlike a green tunnel. As a matter of fact, it was a tunnel, only it had been cut through vegetation and not through earth and rock.

"This must be the road to Miami," observed Billie. "You see it is cut through the jungle. Isn't it wonderful?"

On each side of them tropical trees had grown in such thick profusion and were so closely interwoven with vines and undergrowth as to form an impenetrable wall.

"This must be a dreadful place to be lost in," said Timothy seriously. "There are paths that lead through it, they say. But it is said that the people who ventured to find them were lost themselves and never returned."

"Criminals have hidden there " Mary began, when the sound of another motor coming up behind at a tremendous rate of speed attracted their attention from the jungle. It was a gray racing car and as it flashed past them, Billie and Nancy exchanged a meaning glance.

The other girls had heard the story of their strange adventure that night at the l'Estranges, but they had half forgotten it already, since it was only a fight after all. However, it had been a very real occurrence to Billie and Nancy. They wondered if the gray car contained a man who thought he had committed a murder; and was that man Ignatius Donahue? Of course, there may have been other Ignatius Donahues in the world, but since that night, they had heard no more from Mr. Campbell's old friend.

Ten miles down one road and almost as many along another flew the Comet, flashing his red breast gloriously in the sunshine.

In the whirl of his smoothly running motor engine they could hear a song of the joy of living.

"He's singing this morning," exclaimed Mary ecstatically. "He's got a little song all his own. Listen!"

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

They sat silently for a few minutes harkening to the music of the motor machine.

"I know exactly what he's singing," said Elinor. "I can distinctly hear him say:
'God's-in-His-Heaven-all's-right-with-the-world-God's-in-His-Heaven-all's-right-with-the-world.' "

"I don't hear him say that," put in Nancy.

"He seems to me to be singing: 'Begone-dull-care-begone-dull-care-begone-dull-care.' "

"What do you think he's saying, Mary?" asked Timothy.

"Something entirely different from the others," replied Mary. "Here's what his song sounds to me like:

'My-coursers-are-fed-with-the-lightning-they-drink-of-the-whirlwind's-stream.' "

"This sounds like a quotation party," laughed Billie. "It reminds me of Friday afternoon in the rhetoric class. It's my turn now, I suppose, and I'm afraid I haven't got the Oriental imagination that will make a motor car know verses from Shelley and Browning. All I can hear the old Comet sing is 'Punch-punch-punch-with-care punch-in-the-presence-of-the-passengere.' "

"You've none of you struck it right," said Timothy. "This is the song of the motor and once you catch it you never hear anything else:

" 'Ketch a nigger by the toe,

Ketch a nigger by the toe.

When he hollers, let 'im go,

When he hollers, let 'im go. ' "

"Timothy!" protested the two most poetic souls of the party, Mary and Elinor. But having got that insidious verse in their minds they could not get it out, and for the rest of the journey they heard the motor singing joyfully to himself:

"Ketch a nigger by the toe;

When he hollers, let him go."

Before them stretched the road like a long white ribbon fading into the blue horizon. But they had left the tangled wildwoods far behind them, and were now passing orange groves hedged in with tall fences of arbor-vitae or bushes of the roses of Sharon in full bloom, their white blossoms gleaming in the sunshine like a line of new-fallen snow.

"This must be the Duffy grove," exclaimed Billie. "He told me he had built a board fence as high as the wall of China around his place, because next to his wife, he loved his orange trees."

It was the Duffy grove, for the rotund gentleman himself could now be seen frantically waving his Panama hat and pointing toward a whitewashed board fence, some twenty feet high, at the top of which branched rafters like the uncovered roof of an enormous building.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"He stretches canvas over it when the weather is cool, and he has stoves all about inside with wood fires to keep the baby oranges from catching cold. Isn't he a funny man?"

"In other words he has an orange asylum instead of an orphan asylum," put in Timothy, as they drew up at the gate of the two-acre enclosure wherein Mr. Duffy indulged his taste for an ideal orange grove.

The avenue itself did not enter the enclosure but took its unconsecrated way outside the great white wall. Tall palms, like a row of giant sentinels, seemed to keep guard over the secrets of the grove; but the inquisitive vine of the yellow jasmine had almost reached the top, and innumerable and brilliant flowers grew at its foot. At the end of the avenue was the Duffy lodge.

"Ladies, you must excuse these simple accommodations," he said as he helped them out of the motor. "Mrs. Duffy and I like to come here and camp out occasionally, but it's a little too primitive for the old woman. She prefers Palm Beach and society. And she's right," he added good-naturedly. "This is a fine place to motor to, but it's too far from people, and Mrs. Duffy and I like people, don't we, old lady? Especially young people, eh? I feel like blessing that current that carried you and Timothy against me that day, Miss Billie."

"We feel like blessing it, too," said Billie.

"It was a very well-bred and respectable current," exclaimed Timothy. "It not only saved our lives but it carried us into a moonlight dance and an orange grove."

Although the lodge was hardly the primitive affair Mr. Duffy had described, being a well-built and comfortable bungalow, it had only three rooms—a large living room, a bedroom and a kitchen.

"Take off your coats and hats, my dears," exclaimed Mrs. Duffy, "and put on these aprons, because when people eat oranges in a real grove they need protection, and I would not for worlds have you ruin your pretty frocks."

Thus enveloped in large white aprons, they followed Mr. Duffy, looking like a jolly fat comic opera pastry cook in that costume, to the entrance of the orange grove.

"Jason must have felt like this when he found the Golden Fleece," whispered Mary, while they stood in a group waiting for Mr. Duffy's man to unlock the small door in the wall.

As for their jolly host himself, he smiled mysteriously and beckoned them to follow.

CHAPTER XI. THE ORANGE GROVE.

As they passed through the door they gasped with amazement and wonder. Nothing on the outside of the whitewashed fence could have given them an idea of what it concealed.

Mr. and Mrs. Duffy stood arm in arm, smiling with proud pleasure, as rotund as their own round oranges. It was a thing to be proud of certainly to possess this noble grove.

Imagine rows and rows of orange trees all exactly the same size and each cut in the shape of a beautiful dark green ball. And, as if nature could not be lavish enough with gifts to one of her favorite children, each tree was a bouquet of flowers, ripe fruit and green fruit. Through the polished cool green leaves gleamed the brilliant golden balls, and the clusters of white flowers sent out a fragrance that was sweeter and more delicate than the most delicious perfume ever distilled.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Perhaps the Garden of Eden was an orange grove," said Mary, pinching herself to see if this really were a dream.

"Only this fruit is not forbidden, my sweet child," answered Mrs. Duffy, "and you shall have all you can eat of it this minute. Mr. Duffy, did you tell James to bring the knives?"

"Certainly, my dear. I couldn't forget them because they are in the pocket of this garment, and I've been afraid of sitting on them inadvertently."

He drew forth a number of sharp steel knives and distributed them among the guests.

"The old woman and I will show you first how to peel the oranges," he said, "and then just fall to and help yourselves. You can eat all you want and don't be afraid they will make you sick. They never do. They are very much like rattlesnakes, I think. They won't strike you unless you are afraid of them."

After a few trials they learned to reverse the peeling on the orange and draw it down to one end like a handle. The proper way to eat the orange was to bite into it as if it were an apple.

They never knew how many oranges they consumed that day. Most of them lost count after the fourth or fifth. They even lost sight of each other and wandered about in the beautiful grove like a band of greedy sleep walkers.

"I declare," exclaimed Billie at last, coming out of her absorption long enough to squeeze Mrs. Duffy's plump waist and smile into her face, "we are just a lot of butchers stabbing fruit to death."

"I don't wonder you never stay here for any length of time, Mrs. Duffy," said Timothy Peppercorn. "The smell of these blossoms and the fruit have hypnotized me already. I can't remember who I am. I feel that I am rapidly becoming an orange."

"Or a mock orange, perhaps," suggested Nancy.

"No, the real thing. I'm a genuine Florida orange, a delicious concoction of juice and pulp "

"Not much pulp, Timothy, my son," interrupted Mr. Duffy. "You must lay on a little before you leave Florida. But what about lunch, my dear?"

"Lunch?" gasped Miss Helen Campbell, who had retired to a bench and was leaning back exhausted. "How can you mention the word?"

"Oh, you'll be ready enough to eat after you shake down a bit," said Mr. Duffy. "We'll see the alligators first."

"But, my dear," objected Mrs. Duffy, "alligators are such unappetizing creatures. Perhaps Miss Campbell would prefer to lie down and rest while you take the children to see the animals."

"I feel as if I had been dipped in a shower bath of orange juice," cried Elinor, joining the others who had gradually assembled under one of the trees.

"Now you see why I keep these pinafores for my guests," answered Mrs. Duffy. "I wouldn't have you ruin your pretty frocks for the sake of a few oranges."

"It was worth it," ejaculated Billie. "I haven't a dress I wouldn't have sacrificed for the opportunity of eating all the oranges I wanted to, right off the trees."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"I should have hated to give up my pale pink mulle," observed Nancy regretfully, as if she had already laid that cherished costume on the altar of the goddess of fruits.

After removing their juice-stained pinafores and washing their streaming faces and hands, they repaired to the alligator farm which was another fad of good Mr. Duffy's. Mrs. Duffy loathed the creatures, however, and she and Miss Campbell took their siesta at the bungalow in the absence of the others.

Billie herself harbored a secret distaste for the animals ever after that, on account of what happened while she was feasting her eyes on their hideous bodies.

The alligator farm in another part of Mr. Duffy's plantation appeared to have been arranged and devised solely for the comfort and happiness of these creatures, who disported themselves on the banks of a small lake or wallowed about in the shallow water like the great lazy reptiles they were. Immense logs and great boulders had been placed in the lake for their amusement.

"I could easily imagine they would eat Hindoo babies," said Mary, watching them fearfully through the wire netting which served to screen her from their enormous jaws.

"Jennie is really the only vicious one in the family now," observed Mr. Duffy, apologetically, pointing to an immense alligator which had stretched its length on a log. Jennie opened her jaws with a humorous grin as if her vicious reputation was an amusing subject to her.

They were still laughing at her when one of the children of the lodge-keeper ran up quite breathlessly.

"Miss Campbell is wanted on the telephone," she said.

"Me?" cried Billie. "What in the world? There must be some mistake. Who could want to speak to me over the telephone?"

"Best way to find out is to run and see," replied Mr. Duffy. "If it's long distance, and it probably is, they may be paying for time, remember."

Billie hurried after the child and the other Motor Maids followed, being as curious as she to learn who could be telephoning her in this remote region.

"Oh, my dear, I'm afraid the person couldn't wait, whoever it was," exclaimed Miss Campbell, meeting her young cousin at the door of the bungalow. "I thought it was for me at first, and I tried to take the message. There was some confusion about it. You know I'm no good over the telephone."

Billie seized the receiver.

"Hello!" she cried. "This is Billie Campbell."

An immense distance off, a still, small, and yet strangely familiar voice seemed to be speaking to her out of space:

"Billie—e—e " it said.

"Who are you?" asked the girl, with a feeling of foreboding which an unexpected call on the long distance telephone always causes.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"It's Edward Edward l'Estrange. Listen. I must go away. Something has happened. Make Edward Paxton keep his word. You are the only one who knows about it. Tell Virginia if necessary. But no one else. Everything depends on nobody's knowing I'm not at Palm Beach. Tell Edward I'll be back, and he must represent me in every way until I come, as he promised. You understand, don't you? Every way. You won't lose faith in me, Billie, will you?"

"No," she replied, wondering what it all meant.

"Good-bye."

"Good-bye," she answered mechanically, feeling that she was in some sort of strange dream.

"Wait," called the voice that sounded so like and still so unlike Edward's. "Do you promise?"

"Yes," replied Billie.

"Good-bye again."

"Good-bye," she answered, feeling very much like giving way to a few inexplicable tears.

"Was it Edward?" burst out the bunch of curiosity as soon as Billie had hung up the receiver.

"Yes," said Billie, groping about in her mind for some explanation which would explain, without telling what Edward had really said.

"Which Edward?" asked Elinor.

"Why, the one we saw this morning. They must be in St. Augustine, now."

"But what did he want?" demanded all the girls in one voice.

"He wanted to say good-bye."

"Didn't he send any messages?" demanded Elinor.

"Just to say good-bye," replied Billie, flushing a little under the scrutiny of her friends. "He's going away."

"Not to come back any more?"

"He's coming back but not for a while. He really didn't make any explanations. He just said he was going away."

Mary and Nora laughed and Elinor was silent.

"I always said he was a queer boy," observed Mary.

"But why telephone you, child?" observed Miss Campbell, much mystified.

"I can't imagine," answered Billie. "He just seemed to have to tell some one that he was going away. Thagawats l ht'Iknow.ll Ikeisqw H er" hiee,admittuginm,ough What did Edward l'Estrange mean by going away and shifting all his responsibilities on a strange boy and his poor little sister? And why, oh, why, would he insist on drawing her into his troublesome affairs? She wished with all her heart that he had not been such a nice, interesting boy.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Then it would have made no difference if he had chosen to go to China. Only she would have still been disappointed in him, of course. And what had he meant by saying:

"You won't lose faith in me, Billie?"

It was all very strange and perplexing.

CHAPTER XII. AN UNWISHED WISH.

Miss Helen Campbell was laid low with a sick headache the day after the orange grove party.

"A little too much juice of the fruit, my dear," she explained to Billie, who had tiptoed into her room to see if there was anything she could do. "But you mustn't stay with me. I shall be all right as soon as my head stops throbbing. Only never show me another orange as long as I live. Get Edward to look after you and go for a ride in the Comet. You mustn't miss a moment of this beautiful visit on my account."

"Do you think there would be anything out of the way in our going over to see Virginia, Cousin Helen? She is not working here any longer the housekeeper says, and I suppose we shall find her at home. We could take her for a motor ride and bring her back to luncheon."

"Certainly, child, if she will come. Ask her brother's opinion. He ought to know better than any one else. But whatever you do, be sure and be back to lunch or I shall be very uneasy."

Billie wished to see Virginia very much. She also wished to find Edward, and the plan of the morning she hoped would bring both of these things about. She felt worried, and anxious to disburden her soul of its secret.

Her three friends had noticed at breakfast how quiet Billie was, for her frank and honest face had never been able to conceal any emotion which saddened or brightened it.

"Aren't you feeling well to-day, dear?" Mary asked, as they hurried down the hotel walk to look for Edward, who they had been told was probably at the boat landing.

"Quite well," replied Billie.

"Wilhelmina," said Nancy sternly, "you know something and you won't tell. Now, get it out of your system right off, or it will be making you ill."

Elinor said nothing at all. It was impossible for her to explain her feelings just then even to herself. She was hurt with Billie for no good reason, and she was angry and ashamed of herself for permitting this ugly little bitterness to enter her mind.

"Do tell us, Billie," pleaded Nancy, whose curiosity when with her three intimate friends was insatiable.

"But it isn't mine to tell," answered Billie desperately.

"Ha! She admits she has a secret," cried Nancy dramatically.

"The only way for you to learn this secret," said Billie, cornered at last by her own confession, "is to find it out for yourselves. I can't tell because I promised not to. For some reason, which I don't know any more than you do, it's very important for the secret to remain a secret, and everything depends on its being kept a secret. That's all I can

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

tell you, because, except for the actual thing itself, that's all I know."

"Heavens, how mysterious!" cried Nancy. "I feel I shall burst in a minute if I don't find out."

"I'm afraid you'll have to burst then, you inquisitive child," laughed Billie, giving her a friendly shake.

It was really something of a relief to talk about it, even in this vague and unsatisfactory manner.

Edward was nowhere to be seen at the boat landing.

"Perhaps he's in the Firefly," suggested Mary.

The motor boat was the last of a row of launches moored to the landing, and as they approached they heard a clear, boyish voice, singing:

"On thy fair bosom, silver lake,

The wild swan spreads his snowy sail,

And round his breast the ripples break,

As down he bears before the gale."

Nancy and Mary, who were already half down the flight of steps leading to the boats, paused to listen. Billie also lingered on the platform, when suddenly Elinor, who had lagged behind, busy with her own thoughts, ran up to her friend and seized her by the shoulders with a little low cry that was half a laugh and half a sob.

"Billie Campbell," she whispered, "I know the secret. They've changed places. But why did they do it?"

"For fun, at first," replied Billie. "And now I don't understand. Something has happened because Edward l'Estrange is not coming back."

The two girls looked at each other a moment in silence.

"You mean he's left the other Edward to take his place here?" Elinor whispered.

Billie nodded.

"But that isn't fair."

"I'm sure it is," said Billie stoutly. "Because because ," she went on lamely, "he couldn't do anything that wasn't fair."

"But think what it will mean to him," Elinor persisted, "He will have plenty of money and he can go to school and travel "

"I know," said Billie, "but he told me he was coming back and I believe him."

"And Edward Paxton, what will he be doing? He will have to work for a living."

"It will do him good."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"You are not fussing, I trust," called Mary, who had run back up the steps to look for them.

"No, no, only arguing," replied Elinor.

Edward Paxton now appeared, his hands in his pockets, whistling the same air he had been singing only a moment before. His eyes met Elinor's and he stopped in the middle of a bar. This double identity was awfully mixing. He was always forgetting that as engineer of the boat, Firefly, he was not supposed to know about music.

"What are your orders this morning, Miss Campbell?" he asked, with just a suspicion of mockery in his voice.

"Get the Comet, please, Edward," she said, flushing. "We are going to motor out to see Virginia. Can you go with us?"

"At your service," replied the boy, smiling broadly.

He really seemed so happy that Billie thought, after all, the news she had to tell him would not be so unwelcome.

"How do you like the life?" she asked him presently, following him to the garage, while the other three girls returned to the hotel for mail, motor veils and a last word to Miss Campbell.

"Wonderful," he replied with enthusiasm. "If I only had a piano it would be perfect. I have just finished composing a song and I want to try it."

"You don't mind the work, then?"

"Not specially. You see I don't do very much. I've got it down to the Firefly and the Comet, and let everything else slide."

"But " began Billie with a tone of protest in her voice. "After all," she thought, "it isn't any of my business."

"But what?" he asked.

"I have something to tell you, Edward. What would you say if you really had to work for a living for awhile?"

"Is that what you had to tell me?" he asked smiling. "I should say I would rather study music."

"But you aren't studying music," said Billie. "You're just lying around making up pretty tunes and neglecting the work you promised to do. I'm afraid you can't neglect it any longer, Edward. You've got to look alive and earn some money."

Then Billie gave him the message she had received over the long distance telephone.

Edward was too amazed to answer at first. His lips formed the word "scoundrel," but he seemed to have no voice. At last he burst out indignantly:

"And I thought I could trust him, Billie, when I let him have that money in advance."

"But you can. He will be back, of course."

"What earthly reason could he have for staying away, except to take my place? Don't you think it's a good deal easier life to live with a rich old grandmother, even if she is a scold, than to slave down here as an engineer and a

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

porter and anything else that happens to come along and take insults from people?"

"But I thought you liked it?"

"I did, but not forever. Of course, I shall telegraph Grandmamma or Clarence at once and let them know he is an impostor."

"No, you won't," cried Billie so suddenly that she surprised herself. "No, no, Edward, you couldn't do that. That wouldn't be honest. You gave him your promise, didn't you, to look after his work until he came back. I am sure you would regret it very, very much if you didn't. If he had not meant to come back, he would never have called me up on the telephone. You see, it wasn't necessary. They expected to stay several days, didn't they? But he knew I was going to be at Mr. Duffy's lodge that afternoon, and although he seemed in a tremendous hurry, he called me up to ask me to give you that message. You are to represent him," she repeated, "as you promised. I am sure he meant every word he said. Please, Edward, do wait until you get word from him. How can you distrust any one who looks so exactly like you? It would be like disbelieving in one's self."

Edward did not reply. With an angry, impatient gesture he left her, to bring the car out of the garage. Presently she climbed in beside him.

"It won't hurt you to do something for some one else," she went on. "I don't want to preach, of course, but I'd just like to ask you if you ever have, that you can remember, really made a sacrifice for any one?"

"I can't say I have," said Edward. "Perhaps I've never had the opportunity."

"Do you remember that night when we didn't find the dead man, you told me you had been afraid all your life of daylight and dark and draughts and people and poverty? This is such a splendid chance to show you are not afraid of anything in the world, even of keeping your promise, Edward."

"But," he exclaimed, "I have no money, Billie."

"Take out sailing parties and launch parties and carry baggage and do the things Edward did. Papa always said the proudest moment of his life was the first time he earned five dollars."

"By Jove, it would be rather nice," he said after a pause. "Grandmamma has always treated me like an infant, you know. When she finds out I can earn a living, perhaps she'll have a little more respect for me."

"I'm sure of it," said Billie, climbing into the back seat as they drew up in front of the hotel. "It's a dangerous thing," she said to herself as she sank down upon the cushions, "to wish for a thing unless you really want it, because if your wish comes true, you are just as apt as not to unwish it, and then things are in a muddle."

CHAPTER XIII. IN THE DEEP WOODS.

Billie, having unburdened her mind, felt much happier. The whole situation had come about of course by her own careless words spoken in anger, but after all she could hardly be called a responsible party to the transaction, a phrase which sounded very legal to her. She remembered once her father had playfully called her "a little accessory before the fact," when she had induced him to take her on a foolish excursion that had ended in disaster. Certainly it all sounded very much like a romantic tale, and she did hope it would have a happy ending, but no amount of hopefulness could keep that little entering-wedge of anxiety from finding its way into her mind.

"Billie, is this the road to the left?" asked Edward Paxton, suddenly.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Billie had just time to say she thought it was the road, they had never been over it but once and then at night, when Mary and Nancy pounced upon her.

"We know the secret," they whispered, pointing to Edward.

"You've guessed," she replied, relieved that she was no longer burdened with a secret she had longed to discuss with her friends. And they did discuss it in low voices from every point of view. It was impossible to explain Edward l'Estrange's mysterious telephone message. It did look very much as though he had taken a mean advantage, but Billie believed in him and so did the other two girls.

So absorbed were these young people in their whispered conversations, Edward and Elinor on the front seat and the others on the back, that they had not noticed that the road they had taken was rapidly degenerating from a hard beaten highway into a sandy trail.

The land about them had a lonely, uninhabited look. The stillness was oppressive. Almost imperceptibly, the few sparse palm trees and scraggy pines which stood far apart like people on the outskirts of a crowd, began to grow more closely together in little friendly groups. Then the groups joined and became companies and the companies a multitude, and the multitude a vast legion whose branches interlocked so closely as to form a roof over their heads.

It was hard pulling along the deep sandy ruts, but the Comet uttered no complaints until suddenly with a groan that was almost human, his wheels sank hub-high in the sand and he could go no more.

"For heaven's sake," cried Billie, "this can't be the road to Virginia's."

The motor had stopped whirring and the place was as still as death.

They climbed out of the car and Edward, with his hands in his pockets, stood looking gravely at the half-sunken wheels.

"I'm afraid I've got you into a deuced lot of trouble," he exclaimed remorsefully. "I ought to have been watching the road instead of talking. I'm a poor chauffeur."

Billie secretly thought he was and she wished with all her heart that she had run the car that morning. But chauffeurs, like professional singers, are apt to criticise each other, and Billie had great confidence in her powers as engineer of the Comet.

"Now we have relieved him of our weight, maybe he'll pull out," said hopeful Mary, pointing to the motor. "Why don't you start him up and see?"

"Crank him up, Edward," called Billie, jumping into her own particular seat at the wheel. Somehow she never could feel at home in the other seats.

The machinery began to whirl and the poor Comet strained and tugged until his one "all-seeing eye," as the girls had called it, was almost starting from its socket and his loyal engine heart was nigh to bursting its bonds.

"It's no good breaking a blood vessel, you poor old dear," exclaimed Billie, patting the red cushion beside her as she stopped the motor. "Just you wait and we'll see if we can't find another way out of this hole."

The others laughed. It was always funny to hear their friend talk to her machine as if a heart really did beat in his throbbing mechanism. But after all, it wasn't a joking matter when they began to look about them. It seemed as if

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

the only thing to do was to abandon the Comet and walk back to the main road. But Billie was not one to give up so easily, and before she would consent to a general retreat, her friends knew she would try everything she could think of to release the machine.

"I suppose we'll have to foot it," said Edward with a sigh, glancing at his watch.

Billie flushed. Somehow this lazy boy irritated her. She had been brought up by a man who thought nothing of spanning a great chasm with a bridge or tunnelling through mountains for his railroads. There was something very like contempt in her heart for this young man who played tunes on the piano and thought chiefly of his own health.

"Foot it, indeed!" she exclaimed, "and leave the Comet here to be swallowed in quicksands?"

"But it isn't really that, you know," he answered. "Besides, what can we do? We can't push the thing out and this sun is awfully hot."

"You don't mean to say you're going to give up without a struggle?" cried Nancy.

Even Elinor, who was Edward's champion at all times, was not pleased.

"If you want to watch us work, you can," went on Billie, making a great effort not to be too rude.

Edward's face fairly burned with shame.

"I I didn't mean that," he answered. "Of course, I'll do anything you say. I was only thinking of you."

"He was not," thought Billie. "He was thinking of his own delicate constitution."

But she did not voice her thoughts and tried to swallow her indignation. Never had she met anything in trousers so utterly lacking in spirit.

Having decided to remain and see the Comet through, the question was what would they do? Billie sat down on the ground and began to think.

Finally Edward approached her almost timidly and volunteered a suggestion.

"I saw an ox cart stalled in some mud once, in England, and they got it out with some boards and a cross log. I think we could manage this if we could find the boards."

"But where can we get any boards?" asked Elinor hopelessly.

No one could answer this difficult question, and they were beginning to think that after all, they would have to submit to the easiest way and foot it back to the main road, several miles away.

"A road is obliged to lead somewhere," said Mary Price at last. "Else how did it happen to be at all? Why not 'foot it, ' as Edward calls it, down this path a bit and see what we come to?"

Billie, already ashamed of the temper she had just displayed for the second time in her acquaintance with Edward, jumped up.

"Wise little Mary," she exclaimed, "I think that would be a splendid idea."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"We'll probably be eaten up by boa constrictors," said Nancy with a groan, "but come ahead. They'd be just as vicious here as farther on, I suppose."

"And tarantulas and scorpions," said Elinor, following the others.

As they ran along, they noticed the trail gradually narrowed into a path as if a wagon were in the habit of coming to a sudden stop and the driver got out and walked the rest of the way.

The outskirts of the forest had been as still as the entrance to a tomb. The interior was filled with noises. The songs of the wild birds, the humming of insects, all kinds of inexplicable cracklings and creakings, as if unseen things were creeping about.

"Ugh," exclaimed Nancy. "I'm frightened. Please let's go back."

"Oh, oh, oh!" shrieked Elinor, wringing her hands.

A long green snake had wriggled across the path almost over the toe of her shoe in its haste to hide itself in the undergrowth.

"Oh, Elinor," said Billie, filled with remorse. "I'm so sorry. I remember now how you loathe snakes. Do let's go back."

"Haloo—o—o," called Edward, who had run on ahead, "you were right, Mary. Roads must lead to something."

Filled with curiosity, in spite of their horror of the creeping, crawling things they felt sure the forest was alive with, they hastened down the path which turned abruptly to the right, where a clearing had been made, in the middle of which stood a little wooden shack of the most primitive character, but still with a certain individual look as if the one who had erected it must have put into it some of his own personality.

And why was it that this crude little hut in the forest should have reminded Edward of an English cottage?

The door opened straight on the ground and from under the low overhanging roof peeped one little window. A jasmine vine had been trained against the wall of the house and a hedge of acacia bushes formed a sort of peaceful barrier between the clearing and the advancing hosts of giant pine trees.

The door was open and they walked in boldly.

Inside were a few pieces of furniture, a cot, an old table and a chair.

"This must be a hermit's house," said Edward, who had forgotten all about himself in the excitement and interest of the adventure.

"He must be dead or something, then," observed Nancy, looking about the room curiously. "Because I can see with half an eye that no one has lived here for some time."

"It's a snug little place," said Elinor. "It's almost cosy with this solid wall of green around it. Now, who do you suppose lived here and why did he do it?"

"He must have had some very good reason for hiding himself in this forest," put in Billie, "but I hope if he is still living, he won't begrudge us a few planks from his dwelling, and if he's dead his spirit won't rise up and haunt us for disturbing his earthly dwelling place."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Look," cried Mary, who had been standing in the doorway.

"What is it," demanded the others.

"I'm almost sure I saw some one. It was a man. He stood out against the green just for an instant. There was something white on his head like a bandage or a handkerchief."

"Which way?" they asked, hurrying into the yard and scanning the green wall on all sides.

"He seemed to be over there, but I am not sure. Perhaps I just imagined it after all."

"Looking through the woods like this I could imagine I saw almost anything," said Billie, making a frame of her hands and peering into the forest "People and animals and things."

Here and there a golden sunbeam, slanting through the foliage, cast a flickering, dancing shadow on the trunks of the trees.

"They do look like people," said Mary thoughtfully, gazing at the multitude of trees which seemed to be elbowing and jostling each other for first place. Standing aloof among them was that slim dandy, the magnolia, his black trunk gleaming richly, like a gentleman's frock coat. Next came the rusty gray trunk of the vagabond pine which wanders like a Gypsy into all lands; and beside him, like a good-natured comrade, grew the palm, spreading his fan-shaped leaves in every direction, like so many friendly hands outstretched in welcome.

Suddenly a bird, flying quite low, came so close to Elinor's face that she almost fell backwards. Perched on a corner of the roof he regarded them with two bright beady eyes, as a singer standing behind the footlights might take stock of his audience. Then swelling out his little bosom and throwing back his head, he began to sing.

"It's Dick, the mocking bird," whispered Elinor. "I'm certain of it. You see, he's almost tame."

CHAPTER XIV. THE MOCKING BIRD.

What a morning concert that was! It is true it lasted only a few minutes, but it seemed to be a medley of all the beautiful songs ever sung by birds. Surely Dick gave them his entire repertoire. His little quivering throat seemed to be an instrument on which he played the long, cool, clear notes of the wood thrush, the sweet trills of the canary bird, arpeggios and runs, turns, quavers and semi-quavers. Edward threw himself on the ground in a transport of enjoyment as he watched the throbbing little creature.

Then, with a final chirp, Dick hopped down on the door sill, looked in with an inquiring twist of his head, and flew away as quickly as he had come.

"Was there ever anything to equal that?" cried Billie, breaking the silence which had settled upon them during the concert.

"The darling little fellow," exclaimed Elinor. "Anybody would suppose he had come to make a morning call on a sick friend and give him a concert to cheer him up."

"Virginia's house must be near here, because she told me herself Dick never went far from home," Mary observed.

"There's no telling," answered Billie. "I've lost all sense of direction in this place; but I think we'd better get to work," she answered, glancing at her blue enamel watch. "It's eleven o'clock. Edward, do you think we could

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

knock some of the planks off the lower part of the house without doing much damage?"

Edward, who had been lying flat on his back in a day dream, pulled himself together and jumped up quickly.

"Of course," he said apologetically, "if we can find anything to do it with."

"Perhaps, if the hermit built his own house, he has a few tools," said Mary. "Let's look in and see, at any rate."

Sure enough, they did find an old rusty hatchet standing in one corner of the room. The house had been built on a slight foundation consisting of four pine stumps about a foot high and the space from the floor to the ground level was covered with planking. It was these boards Billie's quick thought had designed to remove.

Warming to the work, Edward hammered vigorously, but it was very difficult to release the thick boards which had been secured with long nails. Edward's slim, piano-playing hands seemed hardly strong enough for the task and after the top nails had been loosened, the four girls, sitting in a row beside him, each took hold and began to pull. The rusty nails clung to the wood with irritating obstinacy and then after all gave way unexpectedly, as obstinate things and people are apt to do. Over they went on their backs in a laughing, giggling confusion of skirts and feet, with the plank on top of them.

They sat up rubbing the dust from their eyes.

Then with wild shrieks they jumped to their feet and fled in every direction, Edward with them. There curled up under the house, his head raised, ready to strike, was a long gray and green snake.

"Oh, dear, oh dear!" cried Elinor, while Edward shivered with disgust, and the other girls pressed together with feelings of terror. How were they not to know that hideous reptiles and beasts were not around them everywhere in this wild place?

But the snake, evidently much relieved that matters were no worse, glided off in the bushes.

"I hope his wife isn't around," groaned Nancy. "They always have a wife about somewhere."

"I don't see her," said Edward, coming resolutely forth and seizing the hatchet. "Shall we get this next board off and finish the thing as soon as possible? This is a deucedly wild place to be in without any weapon but a rusty hatchet."

With feelings of more or less repugnance they finally loosened the second board. Placing one on top of the other, so that all five of the party could lend a hand in carrying them back to the motor, they started down the path.

"What's that?" exclaimed Mary, looking back.

"What's what?" they demanded in a chorus, almost dropping the boards in their nervousness.

"Under the house."

"Not another snake?" shrieked Elinor.

"No, no; it's a box, I think."

"Let's leave it," said Elinor. "It's none of our concern. Probably love letters of the hermit."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

But, strange to say, as if a will stronger than his own impelled him, Edward shifted his end of the board to one of the others and walked back to the house.

"It is a box," he called, moving the object with his foot. "Shall I bring it along?"

The girls laid the boards on the ground to consider. Elinor had worked up a romantic tale in her head about the box which she now imparted to her friends.

"The hermit who lived here," she said, "was probably disappointed in love. He built a house in the woods and put his love letters in the corner stone "

"Which was a cedar post " interrupted Nancy.

"And when he died," went on Elinor.

"But how do you know he is dead?" they demanded.

"If he were not dead, he'd be living there still, like the old woman who lived on the hill," broke in Nancy.

The others laughed. It did not seem unkind somehow to make a little innocent fun of the poor, dead, imaginary hermit who lived such an uncomfortable life for his lost love.

"If you don't think it's highway robbery," observed Billie, "bring it along. Having walked off with two boards, why pause at boxes?"

"A deserted box under a deserted house in a deserted wood should belong to the first person who found it," said Elinor with conviction.

The box, which turned out to be an old cigar box with the lid tacked on, was accordingly placed on top of the board with the hatchet, and once more the procession started on its way.

"We look like a lot of pall bearers at a funeral," said Nancy breathlessly as they trudged along.

At last they reached the Comet. It seemed an age since they had left him wallowing in the sand, and his one great eye, which at night glared so gloriously, now looked at them with mild reproach.

"The first thing to do is to find a log," said Edward, proceeding to look for one.

The girls were surprised at his sudden energy when he appeared presently dragging a fallen pine tree after him. Having got it across the road, he chopped it to a proper length. The two boards he placed under the hind wheels of the motor car, the ends being slightly raised by the pine cross-beam.

"We'll have to run the car backwards," he said, "because, of course, if we try to go on, we'll have to turn around eventually."

Billie had cranked up and was already sitting in the chauffeur's seat. She was beginning to see the usefulness of Edward's plan now. Once more the Comet struggled and groaned in his effort to climb out of the sand pit, but without moving an inch.

"It'll have to be the front wheels or nothing," said Edward, wiping the perspiration from his brow as he carried the two boards and the crossbeam to the front and placed them under the car.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

This time, with a mighty strain, the Comet rolled slowly onto the boards, went the full length and promptly sank again into the sand. But each time he responded promptly to the "board treatment," as Billie called it, and after infinite patience and energy they finally pulled him to harder ground.

"What shall we do now?" asked Nancy. "We're only getting deeper into the woods."

"We can't turn around," answered Billie. "We'll just have to ride over bush and brake, I suppose, and follow the path."

"Sound the horn, then," said Elinor, "to scare away the animals," and as the honk, honk rang out in the stillness the birds and beasts who lived in the woods must have thought some terrible new creature had come to disturb their haunts.

It was a slow ride they took that morning along the trail. The Comet picked his way cautiously, crushing vegetation under his iron wheels, like the car of Juggernaut riding over its victims, while the Motor Maids and Edward Paxton ducked their heads frequently to avoid being hit with vines and branches.

Past the hermit's house they went, past the enclosure and still the path persevered. They could trace it far in front of them. The trail had been carefully and deliberately made, evidently. Trees had been felled on each side and vines and plants torn away, and although a new vegetation had grown up, the path was still open.

Except for the noise made by the wheels of the motor car as it passed over bracken and fern and all the varied undergrowth of a great forest, there was not a sound. The woods were deadly quiet. The birds had stopped singing; even, the insects ceased to buzz. The quiet was terrible.

"I feel," whispered Mary, "as if everything in the place was waiting for something to happen. Do you notice there isn't a sound? The birds are too frightened to sing. I have heard that a poisonous snake could hypnotize a whole forest like this."

No one replied to this unpleasant suggestion. There was a long, uneasy silence. Then, suddenly, the Comet gave a swift backward movement like a terrified horse. Right in his path crouched a creature which might, in that shady twilight spot, have been taken for a good-sized cat. But his body was spotted, each spot outlined with an uneven circle of black, and his tawny eyes gleamed more fiercely than any cat's eyes ever gleamed.

"It's a leopard!" whispered Billie, as she backed the Comet slowly along the path.

CHAPTER XV. OUT OF THE WILDERNESS.

From his reputed royal ancestors, the lion and the panther, the leopard, or jaguar, as he is called in that region, had inherited a sinuous body, swift as a flash in movement, and a savage, feline face. A ray of sunlight, falling on the soft tones of his beautiful spotted skin, gave out a rich lustre. The smooth padded paws, under their velvet covering, were as strong as steel. His fierce, gray whiskers bristled at the whirring of the motor and his ears stood up straight like an angry cat's.

"The horn, the horn," whispered Mary in a choking voice, "it will frighten him."

Billie reached mechanically for the rubber bulb and squeezed it again and again. The honk-honk rang out in the forest like a cry for help, and the leopard shivered where he crouched as if this unmelodious music jarred on his nerves.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Suddenly with a flying leap, he landed in the branches of a tree beside the motor. Billie never knew how she had the presence of mind to start the car. She only knew that they were going as fast as possible on that encumbered path and that the leopard, not counting on this swiftly moving object, had jumped again, grazed the motor and landed just back of them.

Perhaps it was Mary's ear-piercing shriek which frightened him, or perhaps it was the red motor itself, which may have seemed to him a newly created animal with a whirring, bristling noise that made his nerves tingle. At any rate, instead of terrifying them again by jumping into the branches over their heads, he crept behind, half cautiously, but still ready to leap at the first opportunity.

"Keep up the horn, for heaven's sake, and make as much noise as you can," cried Elinor. "They can be frightened, I know, by loud noises."

Edward on his knees beside Billie, worked the horn until his fingers ached, and the girls gave Indian yells and hooted and yodeled until they were exhausted.

For fully five minutes they rolled over the carpet of pine needles along the trail and the leopard dropped farther and farther off, until finally he slunk into the bushes. The intervals of hooting and calling grew longer and longer, and at last they rested. Mary, only, kept watch, kneeling backwards in the seat in a prayerful attitude.

"We'll be out of this dreadful place in a moment now," Billie was saying, when suddenly, there was a blood-curdling shriek. A shot rang out in the stillness, and with a strange vibrant noise that sounded like the echo of the base string of a 'cello, the leopard jumped high into the air and fell backward in the path just behind them.

Billie, with a very white face indeed, stopped the car and turned to see who had saved their lives.

The leopard was still quivering in the death-throes when they reached him, but it had been a clean shot straight through his body and it was only a moment before he lay stiff and stark before them.

"But who killed him?" sobbed Nancy, quite unnerved now that the danger was past.

"Yes, who?" they asked each other.

But there was no one in sight. Whoever had done the deed had slipped quietly away without waiting to be thanked.

"Hello," called Edward, "come out, won't you?" and his voice echoed through the place and came back to them like some one else's.

"I wish we had some way to thank him," said Billie, "but as we haven't, let's be moving. The sooner we get out of this wood, the better. There's no telling what will happen next."

"Shall we take this beast along?" asked Edward with a tone of disgust in his voice, that brought to Billie's mind a remembrance of that evening, not long before, when he could not hide his terror of death and blood.

"No, no," put in Elinor, who had a strong sense of justice. "His skin should belong to the one who killed him. He isn't our trophy."

"I'm sure I don't want it," ejaculated Mary, jumping into the car. "Do hurry and let's be off."

Once more they were on their way. After a long interval of silence, Mary continued:

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"This is like an enchanted wood in a fairy tale. It is full of goblins and elves, wicked fairies and poisonous snakes and wild beasts."

"I don't mean to interrupt your poetic train of thought," said Nancy, "but I'm certainly thankful at this moment that there is no smile on the face of that dead tiger."

They all laughed but Billie. The woods were thinning now and the relief from the strain of the last two hours made them light-headed.

"My beloved friends," exclaimed Billie finally, as the motor car slid into a real road, and the great wood bristled behind them, black and ominous, "oh my beloved friends, we are out of the wilderness at last. And it's no thanks to me that we've all escaped alive. It was wicked, wicked of me," she went on, choking to keep back her tears.

"What was wicked of you, Billie, dear?" asked Elinor, moved at the sight of her friend's remorse.

"Not to have followed Edward's advice and walked back the other way. It was wicked and stubborn of me. I can't forgive myself."

Not one of her friends had ever seen Billie so moved as she was now. Her gray eyes were filled with tears and her generous, finely shaped lips quivered painfully.

"Oh, Billie, dearest Billie," they cried, standing up and leaning over the seat while she bent her head to hide her tears, "don't blame yourself. It was everybody's fault. We agreed with you that it was right, didn't we?" they asked each other.

"Yes, yes," they cried, and Elinor especially pressed her cheek to her friend's shoulder. Billie seemed dearer to her now than ever before, and all the morning a little verse had been running through her head;

"Oh, blessings on that falling out

Which all the more endears,

When we fall out with those we love

And kiss again with tears."

"Don't cry, Billie," said Edward. "I think we've had a great experience. Nobody was hurt and we did the things we started out to do. We've saved the Comet and we are on the road to Virginia's. Don't you recognize this place?"

"It is the same," replied Billie, comforted by the reassurance of her friends and smiling away her tears. "It's the very road we took that day when we came up from the lake."

Already they could see the avenue of pines and as they turned in, the sunlight gleamed quite cheerfully on the old white house at the far end.

"Virginia will have to go back with us," said Billie, "to show us the way home."

The place was as still as ever, when they drew up at the front door, but a certain inexplicable change had taken place. They could hardly tell what it was. Perhaps, that the front door was wide open and a big easy chair with a book and a newspaper stood on the gallery. They had not had time to get down, when Virginia herself appeared at the door and welcomed them as joyfully as if the very nicest thing in the world that could happen to her that

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

morning was to see these new friends.

With a little cry of pleasure she ran out to meet them, her fluffy blonde hair blowing about her face like a pale gold halo.

"I am so glad to see you," she cried. "Won't you come in? Have you had a nice ride?"

Nice? They exchanged glances.

"Wait until you hear about our ride, Virginia," said Elinor. "Then you can judge for yourself how nice it was."

Billie was wondering which of the two Edwards Virginia thought was with them, when the young Southern girl turned to Edward Pax-ton and said in the most natural manner possible:

"I could almost have taken you for my brother in your chauffeur's clothes, Mr. Paxton. But not quite."

They stirred uneasily.

Did Virginia know that her brother had run away? Elinor was wondering; for Elinor had her own views on the subject of Edward's disappearance.

Billie hardly knew what to think. She had a bewildered feeling that Virginia perhaps knew all about what had happened, until Edward Pax-ton broke in with:

"Do you know when your brother is coming back," Miss l'Estrange?"

Virginia opened her eyes wide.

"When is your grandmother coming back?" she asked.

Edward shook his head. The young girl was too deep for him.

"Virginia," said Billie, "we've come to take you back with us to luncheon and to stay all night, too, if you will. I hope you can come."

"If Mamma can spare me, I should love to," she answered eagerly. "Will you come in while I find out?"

They preferred, however, to wait outside and the young girl flew into the house and upstairs as lightly as a thistledown on the breeze. Presently she was back again.

"I can go," she cried joyfully. "Mamma is feeling much better to-day and she would like so much to meet you four girls. You don't mind waiting, do you, Mr. Paxton? I would ask you up, too, but I'm afraid your likeness to my brother might excite her."

As they followed her into the enormous empty house, she added in a lower voice:

"Remember, Mamma knows nothing about our working, or or anything. Be careful what you say."

CHAPTER XVI. MRS. L'ESTRANGE.

The second floor of the l'Estrange house was very different from the first. The hall at the upper end was like a fine drawing room. There were rugs on the floor and opposite the door of the front bedroom were several easy chairs and a sewing table. The door of this room stood ajar and Virginia led the way inside.

"Mamma," she said softly, "I want you to meet my four friends who are stopping at the hotel at Palm Beach."

The girls never forgot the picture of Mrs. l'Estrange in her bedroom. It was all so unreal after the empty old house. It was really a sumptuous chamber, large, and full of polished objects. The light came in dimly through the heavy blue brocaded curtains at the windows and was reflected in the mahogany secretaries and tables and the graceful rosewood lounge at one end.

Mrs. l'Estrange was lying in an invalid's chair drawn up by a table on which stood a bowl of oranges and a glass vase of flowers. She was a small, slender woman, much like Virginia, only more beautiful, with quantities of pale gold hair and sad blue eyes. A ray of light falling across her thin white face gave her a look of one of the early saints, resigned and gentle, sorrowful and happy, all at once.

"I am so happy to meet my little girl's friends," she said, stretching out a small transparent hand through which they could see the pink light shining. "She has told me how kind you have been to her."

"But she was very kind to us, Mrs. l'Estrange," replied Elinor. "I don't know what we would have done if she had not taken us in and given us supper one night when our launch was wrecked in the lake."

"Ah, but that was nothing," continued the poor, pretty invalid. "Think how many times she has visited you at the hotel."

"Oh " began Billie, and broke off quickly, for Virginia, standing back of her mother's chair, had put her finger to her lips, and the truth now dawned upon the Motor Maids.

The young girl had told a brave falsehood to her mother to explain her frequent absences from home.

"It's what might be called a 'noble lie'," thought Billie, "but how can they keep it up? And now there's Edward gone off and left it all to Virginia," her thoughts continued, but she stifled the notion immediately. "It's impossible. I believe he will come back, I do, no matter how strange it seems."

"I am so sorry that Edward, my son, has gone away on a trip with some friends," went on Mrs. l'Estrange. "But he writes he is having such a beautiful time, I don't begrudge the boy a change. It is very dull for him here. I wish you could help me persuade him to go to college next year. He should go North and see something of the world, but he will not leave Virginia and me, and as you see, I am quite helpless."

She spread out her pink hands and smiled faintly.

Presently Virginia, seeing that the girls understood, passed into the next room to change her dress.

They were silent after she left, hardly daring to venture a remark until Nancy threw herself into the breach by saying:

"What a beautiful old house this is, Mrs. l'Estrange. It is as big as a hotel. I never saw so many rooms in a private house."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"I'm glad you like it, dear. It has been in my family for a great many years and it is rather in disrepair now. The furniture is quite old. I have not bought any in my time except the piano. It was all collected by my mother and grandmother and great-grandmother, too. If you have been in my drawing room, perhaps you noticed the inlaid desk. It was brought over from France nearly two hundred years ago. I value it more than anything in the house, I think. And if you are interested in such things, you must ask Virginia to show you the tea set which was once owned by Lady Hamilton. And many other things, the silver bowl presented to my great-grandmother by General Lafayette, and a beautiful sword which was given to one of my great-great uncles by General Jackson."

So the invalid chattered away. It was evident that the lost treasures of that house were her greatest joy and hobby, and her children had never had the heart to tell her they were gone, scattered.

"Perhaps you would like to see my collection of miniatures," went on Mrs. l'Estrange. "They are just inside the cabinet. Won't you bring them over, and I can explain them myself."

On a shelf in the highboy they found two large black velvet plaques on which were pinned a dozen beautiful miniatures, some in jeweled frames.

"These are all my family," she said. "I shall have the children done to add to the collection as soon as I am well enough to go North. There are no good artists in this part of the country. This is my aunt who danced with the Prince of Wales. She is like Virginia, I think, blonde hair and blue eyes and the same sweet expression. This is my uncle who was presented with the sword. He was a brave soldier."

"Here is some one who looks very much like your son, Mrs. l'Estrange," put in Billie.

The picture they were looking at was a tinted photograph showing a handsome young man with black hair and clear blue eyes. It resembled Edward except that the mouth and chin were softer and less resolute in outline. The face indeed was more like Edward Paxton's.

"Oh," said Virginia's mother, "I did not know that was on the plaque. That is my husband's picture." She laid it on the table nervously and then picked it up again and looked at it sadly. "My poor husband," she said softly, continuing to gaze at it so long that the girls felt uncomfortable and embarrassed.

"Who is this?" asked Mary, pointing to another old-fashioned photograph.

The invalid smiled as if the sight of this new face brought up pleasant memories, and the young man in the picture smiled back at her, a kindly, merry smile. It was not a tinted picture and they could only tell that he had dark hair and eyes and a strong, rugged face.

"That," she said sadly, "was an old and dear friend Ignatius Donahue."

Virginia hurried into the room at this moment and looked a quick warning at the girls. In another instant they would have exclaimed: "Ignatius Donahue? We travelled down in his private car!"

"Good-bye, Mamma, dearest," Virginia said, taking the plaque and photographs gently but firmly away from her mother and locking them in the cabinet. "Mammy will take good care of you and I shall be back to-morrow morning. If we are to get to the hotel by lunch time, we had better be hurrying on. It's a quarter to one now. You won't forget your drops at half-past, will you, dear? And your tonic to-night? See, I'll put them here to remind you. Good-bye," and she kissed her mother twice and hurried the girls out of the room quickly.

The old colored woman was waiting in the hall, probably to go on duty, and Billie heard Virginia whisper as she passed:

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"She's been looking at those pictures again, Mammy."

Only one thing more happened before they left that mysterious house. Billie, who was the last in the line of young girls to file down the staircase, heard a door creak in the hall and looked back. There, standing in the doorway of one of the other rooms stood a tall, well-built man. A long white bandage was wrapped around and around his head. But it did not hide his rugged face, and at that moment, his lips, for some unknown reason, were curled into a kindly, merry smile. Perhaps it was Uncle Peter who provoked the smile, for he appeared just then with Virginia's battered old suit case, standing very erect and dignified in his old blue cloth swallowtail with its brass buttons, like the fine old-time servant he was.

On the way back to the hotel, they told Virginia the story of their adventures in the woods.

"Do you think it could have been Dick?" they asked, when they reached the mocking bird part of the history.

"Perhaps," she answered. "He's been off all morning. But there are lots of other mocking birds, you know."

Many and varying were the emotions which reflected themselves in Virginia's face as she heard of the dangers they had been through. She almost shed tears over the attack of the jaguar, as she called it.

"I didn't know there were any left around here," she said. "They are the most dangerous, treacherous animals in the world."

But when she was questioned about the house in the woods, she pressed her lips together into a thin line of determination and was silent for a moment.

"Did you know there was such a house, with a path connecting directly with your place, Virginia?" asked Billie in her usual direct, honest way that was sometimes embarrassing.

"Oh, yes," answered the girl, "but the person who lived there is is dead now."

"Was he a hermit?" demanded Nancy.

"Yes, something like it."

"How interesting," put in Elinor. "And did you really know him?"

"I have seen him," answered Virginia guardedly.

"He must have walked frequently between your house and his," said Edward, "because the trail looks as if it had been well trod."

"And the man who killed the panther?" asked Billie. "Who was he, Virginia? I would like to give him something if it could be arranged. He saved our lives."

"He does not need anything. He would not like a present, I'm sure, for what he did."

"You know him, then?"

"I believe so. He is a man who has been staying in this neighborhood for some time."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

And not another word could be got out of Virginia. Soft, pretty little creature that she was, it could be seen that she had a will of her own.

They were not late to luncheon and Miss Campbell had not been uneasy, but it seemed strange to them to be sitting around a snowy damask-spread table in a beautiful big dining-room, with softly treading waiters at every hand to do their bidding and music floating to them from the piazza. Was it only that morning that they had been lost in a wilderness with poisonous snakes and wild animals about them; or had the forest after all been enchanted and was it all a dream?

After drinking tea in the Cocanut Grove and listening to the concert, they strolled until dinner time in the splendid avenue of palms. But there was one more sensation for the Motor Maids before bedtime. Edward sought them in the evening, and calling Billie off from the others, gave her a letter.

"This was in the old cigar box," he said.

It was addressed to "Ignatius Donahue, Esq.," and Billie, after consulting with Elinor, added that gentleman's New York address under the name, stamped it and dropped it in the mail box at the desk.

It was impossible to fathom the mystery which had wound itself about that name, but if a letter had been waiting for him all this time in the wild wood, he certainly ought to have it as soon as possible.

CHAPTER XVII. A MORNING CALL.

One morning, a few days after the visit to Virginia's home, the Motor Maids and Miss Helen Campbell received a surprise. Never was anything more utterly unexpected than the event which I am now about to record.

They were in their rooms preparing for an after-breakfast dash in the Comet, when there was a tap on Miss Helen's door.

"See who it is," she said to Elinor, the one Motor Maid who knew how to fasten the little lady's blue veil to her satisfaction.

The knock proved to be a bellboy with a sealed note.

"It's addressed to Miss Helen Campbell and the Motor Maids," said Elinor laughing. "Some one who knows us, evidently. Shall I open it?"

"Of course, my dear," answered Miss Campbell, busy at the mirror with her headgear, just as the rest of the maids came in.

Elinor tore off the end of the envelope and took out two cards, while the others with young-girl curiosity made haste to look over her shoulder.

On a piece of folded note paper was written:

"Introducing the Marquis di Briganza and Lord Albert Spencer Ormond. Ignatius Donahue."

The cards were foreign looking square pieces of pasteboard engraved with the names of these noble gentlemen, one of whom was attached to an Embassy in Washington.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Now, what in the world?" cried Miss Campbell, and the girls seemed quite awe-struck at these high-sounding titles. "Why should Ignatius Donahue send these titled persons to meet us? We are just plain, simple Americans and I don't think a Marquis and a Lord would add to our pleasure a bit. Do you, children?"

"No," answered Billie emphatically.

"I shall be afraid of them, I am certain," said Mary.

"We shall have to put on our best clothes to meet them, I suppose," was Nancy's observation; while Elinor, holding herself very grandly, remarked:

"I am sure, we are quite as good as they."

"Noble princess," laughed Billie, "of course you are and so are we all, but don't you think it's a nuisance to have to give up our morning ride and change our dresses just to spend half an hour with two silly foreign lords? They'll probably have little mustaches that are waxed and turned up at the ends, and wear high-heeled shoes and carry rattan canes and "

"But the boy is waiting," interrupted Miss Campbell. "Shall I send word we'll be down presently?"

"Of course," they answered in a chorus, and Miss Campbell smiled to herself. After all, it was not an every-day occurrence to have a Lord and a Marquis pay a friendly morning call.

"You may tell the gentlemen we will see them on the piazza in ten minutes, boy," she said, commencing to unpin her veil as she spoke.

They were much longer than ten minutes, however, in making the proper toilets in which to receive their distinguished guests. Miss Campbell put on a lavender silk she usually wore in the afternoon. Nancy insisted on wearing her very best lingerie and a leghorn hat with a wreath of pink roses encircling the crown.

Billie removed a linen suit only slightly wrinkled and replaced it with a fresh one as dazzling white as the snow that caps the Atlas Mountains. Elinor wore a beautiful creamy organdy trimmed with real lace, a gown that she had been saving for Mrs. Duffy's next party; and little Mary attired herself in the daintiest and prettiest muslin that that clever mother of hers had ever made.

"Shall I wear my hat or not?" asked Miss Campbell, taking a final survey of herself in the cheval glass. "Billie, you have lived in Europe. Is it customary over there to receive visitors at hotels in bonnets in the morning?"

"Dearest Cousin," laughed Billie, "I never received a visitor in my life that I can remember except some of Papa's friends, and I never wore a bonnet for them. I suppose people in very high society may do as they please. Papa told me he saw a funny, shabby old English lady once at a hotel who turned out to be a real duchess. But she poured her tea into a saucer and drank it, and when her granddaughter remonstrated Papa heard her say in a deep bass voice: 'My dear child, don't you know a Duchess may drink tea from a tin pail if she chooses?' "

"Very good, my dear, we are American princesses and it's nobody's business whether we wear hats or not. Now, are you ready? Let me see how all of you look first. Very charming and lovely, my four little rosebuds. I am quite proud of you. Am I all right?"

"Sweet as a peach," answered Billie.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Now, children, let me caution all of you not to let two foreign noblemen make you feel ill at ease. They are not a bit better than you are, remember, no matter how many titled generations they may have back of them."

"I wonder if they live in castles," said Nancy with a little fluttering laugh that showed the state of her feelings better than words could tell.

Elinor swept along with her proud head held high. Her friends decided that she looked the part of a noble princess to perfection. Mary, with a feeling of timidity, stuck close to Miss Campbell's side, and Billie, feeling rather bashful herself about confronting these grand strangers, brought up the rear of the procession. Miss Campbell stepped resolutely into the elevator, determined not to be frightened by two paltry titles, and in this wise they approached the hotel piazza, unable to disguise from themselves that they were all feeling slightly shaky in the region of the knee joints.

"Where are the gentlemen who sent up these cards?" Miss Campbell asked a bellboy, as she searched the piazza which was almost empty at this hour.

The boy took the cards and read them slowly. Then he began an itinerary of the piazzas and parlors calling in a loud voice:

"The Marquese dee Brigander, Lord Albert Spencer Ormond."

"Good heavens, how very embarrassing," exclaimed Miss Campbell. "I didn't know the child was going to scream the names all over the place."

It was indeed a conspicuous moment in the lives of these five ladies. People scattered about the piazzas and in the parlors began slowly to collect near the entrance to the lobby. There were faces at every window. Bellboys peeped from the doorways and around corners. But no gentlemen answering to the names of these ancient titles responded. In truth, Miss Campbell and her charges appeared to form a highly interesting group as they sat waiting for the noble strangers to approach.

At last the boy returned.

"They ain't no such persons registered at this here hotel, ma'am. They may have come over from one of the others. Do you remember the boy as brought you the card?"

"I do," answered Elinor. "He had a freckled face and a snub nose and I think his name is Joey."

Joey was produced immediately. It appeared that he had been watching the callers who had sent up the sealed envelope, but he had not known that it was their names being called about the hotel. He had noticed, however, that they had slipped into the garden with some rapidity and no doubt they were there now, although he, Joey, had distrusted them from the first.

"But why, Joey?" asked Miss Campbell with some concern. "I'm sure they came very properly introduced by our great, although still unseen friend, Mr. Ignatius Donahue."

Joey could give no better reason for mistrusting the strangers than that they seemed sly.

"I am afraid you are a person of exceedingly poor judgment then, Joey," answered Miss Campbell with great dignity. "We shall see the gentlemen in the garden. It is less conspicuous than here. Go before and announce us."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Following the little page, who resembled an imp in bottle green, they went forth into the garden, where in the distance they beheld two figures in white flannels seated on a rustic seat under a poinciana tree.

"They are are," whispered Nancy in an excited voice. "The blonde one is the English lord, I suppose, and the dark one is the marquis."

"It may be just the other way around," replied Billie. "Things always turn out contrariwise when you arrange them yourself beforehand."

"I'm sure the blonde one is English," repeated Nancy with conviction, "and from the back of his head, I should say he was quite handsome."

While they were whispering together as they followed slowly after Miss Campbell, they were amazed to behold Timothy Peppercorn running at full speed down another walk which branched off toward the hotel. In his haste he leaped over a low stone bench and landed right beside the two strangers.

"If this isn't jolly," they heard him cry, slapping the blonde lord on the back. "By Jove, but I'm glad to see you. How are you, old man?"

Suddenly Miss Campbell pressed her lips together. Two red spots appeared on either cheek, and she hurried as fast as her diminutive feet could carry her toward the group of young men.

"Percival Algernon St. Clair," she cried, shaking the blonde lord by the shoulders. "Charlie Clay! You young rascals, how dare you play a practical joke on an unprotected old lady and four helpless children? I would just like to box your jaws well, the both of you two upstarts! Marquis and Lord, indeed! Think of our having wasted the morning dressing up in our best clothes like this! You are a precious pair, but I'm glad to see you," she added, beginning already to relent.

Her occasional mild bursts of anger were like brief summer tempests, done almost before they had begun.

"We are so ashamed, Miss Campbell," answered Percy. "We thought it would be a bully good joke on you and the girls, but we had no idea they were going to shout those names all over the hotel. I got the cards from my senator-uncle in Washington, and we used Mr. Donahue's name for fun. But when they began to yell those titles we had to run. We couldn't face it."

"Well, well," said Miss Campbell, "I will forgive you this time, but never play another practical joke on me. You've no idea what a sensation your names created in the hotel."

There was no bad feeling on the part of the Motor Maids. They were too glad to see their friends from West Haven to mind having been fooled.

"I recognized you as soon as I saw your back, Percy-Algy," said Nancy. "Only I couldn't think who on earth you were."

"Do you call that recognizing, Miss Nancy-Bell?" laughed her friend, his handsome ruddy face flushing deeper with the pleasure of seeing her again.

"But how did you happen to come?" inquired Billie.

"It was Timothy, here, who got us down," answered Percy. "You see we were great chums one summer in the mountains. I didn't know how much I wanted to see him again until I found he was at Palm Beach, and the Midget

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

and I decided we'd run down and look him over."

"So you didn't come to see us at all, then?" inquired Miss Campbell.

Timothy winked slyly and grinned.

"I guess I'm a pretty good excuse, Miss Campbell," he said. "But don't tease the lad. He blushes too easily."

"And Charlie came to see you, too, I suppose?" pursued Miss Campbell, glancing at the other boy who was at that moment engaged in an earnest and interested conversation with Mary Price.

"Let's go back and get into our every-days and take a ride in the Comet," suggested Billie. "We can all squeeze in just as we used to do."

As the notion seemed agreeable, they parted company for a time, while the ladies fled by a side door into the hotel. And you may be sure they were not as long in "dressing down" for old friends as they were in dressing up for foreign lords. It was not many minutes before they crowded into the red motor which Edward Paxton had brought around from the garage.

"Why, hello," exclaimed Percy, noticing the young chauffeur at once. "I'm awfully glad to see you again, but I thought you were gone to New York. You must have changed your mind in a hurry to have beat us down."

"You have made a mistake," said Edward stiffly. "I never saw you before."

"Curious," said Percy, "but you are enough like a fellow we met on the way down to be his twin brother."

"Was he alone?" demanded Billie.

"He seemed to be, but why?"

"Oh, nothing," she replied, jumping into the car with the others.

As the automobile turned down the driveway, it met another approaching. The occupants in it bowed politely to Miss Campbell and her party. They were old Mrs. Paxton-Steele, her granddaughter, Georgiana, and her grandson, Clarence. Edward l'Estrange was not with them.

CHAPTER XVIII. IT'S AN ILL WIND.

Billie and Elinor strolled together that evening along the palm-bordered walk of the hotel.

They had grave matters to discuss and they had slipped away from their friends to be alone. Percy and Nancy waited eagerly on the piazza for the first strains of the orchestra, which meant that dancing would begin, and Mary and Charlie lingered on a bench talking of West Haven.

"It is a queer business, Elinor," Billie was saying. "I do wish he had written."

"He might have sent either you or Edward just a line," exclaimed the other. "How can he think Edward is going to masquerade like this much longer? He is really working quite hard for a boy who has never done anything much in his life."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"It will do him good," insisted Billie. "He's twice as manly as he was when we first met him."

"But what is going to happen now? Is he to wait until Edward l'Estrange comes back?"

"He promised to."

"But he didn't expect him to go beyond St. Augustine, and he's gone to New York."

"The family is here. Edward Paxton could let them know who he is at any moment if he doesn't trust the other Edward. Why doesn't he?"

Elinor was silent.

"He's afraid, Billie, I think," she said presently.

"That's just it," cried Billie. "He's always afraid, afraid, afraid."

"It's certainly queer, all of it," answered Elinor, when a figure which had been standing behind a clump of palms stepped into the path.

It was Clarence Paxton, and so little did Billie trust this treacherous cousin of her friends, that she gladly joined Timothy Peppercorn who had come running down the walk to find her.

"They are playing the barn dance, Billie," cried the red-headed youth, eagerly. "We had such a jimdandy barn dance together at the Duffy's, I thought we might try it again tonight"

"Barkis is willing" answered Billie, and away they ran like two frisky young colts.

"I don't know any of the native dances, Miss Butler," said Clarence, who was much more English than his cousins, "or I would ask you to try this er jig "

"Barn dance," prompted Elinor, who also had no liking for Edward's cousin.

"Will you go for a little stroll?"

"I will go as far as the hedge. Miss Campbell does not allow us to go out of sight of the hotel in the evening."

Clarence thrust his hands in his pockets and walked beside her. He had very grown-up airs, although she had heard from his cousins that he was only seventeen.

"Perhaps you think our meeting just now was accidental," he went on.

"I hadn't thought of it at all," replied Elinor.

"Please don't be unkind to me, Miss Butler. It was because I was in trouble that I wanted to speak to you. I knew you would listen to me when perhaps the other girls wouldn't. You were especially fond of him "

"Fond of whom?" she interrupted.

"Why, of Edward, my cousin. Although we did quarrel a good deal, Miss Butler, I loved him like a brother. That's why I'm so unhappy now."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Do get to the point," she answered impatiently. "Has anything happened to your cousin?"

"Yes."

"Can't you tell me what it is? Is he ill or hurt, or anything?"

"No, no; not that. Something much worse."

"But what?"

"My grandmother has disowned him; cast him off."

"Oh! Are you quite sure?"

"Perfectly. I was present when it happened."

For the first time since he had joined her, Elinor began to notice that Clarence, far from being dejected and cast down, was in such high spirits he could hardly conceal his joy. His eyes had a new light in them. There was an unusual color in his cheeks, and he smiled continually as he flicked the foliage with a light little cane and walked with an elastic step as if he were going down the middle in a quadrille.

"Yes," he went on joyfully, "I was in the room. So was Georgiana. And we both saw the whole thing."

"But what brought it about? Had Edward done anything so terrible as to be punished like that?"

"Oh, he's been going off ever since we came to this place. He's been rebellious and bad tempered and and " here Clarence smiled reminiscently, "I've had some trouble with him myself. Finally, in St. Augustine, Grandmamma and he had an out and out quarrel over nothing apparently, but they worked it up between them until it came near being a pitched battle. They really seemed to enjoy it, the two of them. It was like a game of battledore and shuttlecock, I didn't know Edward had it in him. But Grandmamma, she's a Tartar when she's scratched, and anybody within range of that stick of hers had better look alive. She started to strike him with it, and he caught it and broke it into two pieces and threw it on the floor. Then she turned on him so calmly and quietly Georgiana and I thought she wasn't angry but we changed our minds. 'This changes every prospect you ever had,' she said. 'Leave me and from this day your future, as far as I am concerned, is altered. ' "

"Good heavens," exclaimed Elinor, her thoughts turning to the real Edward Paxton, who was at that moment lying on his back under the Comet, cleaning the machinery. "But don't you think it can be patched up? He's only a boy. Surely, she will take him back."

"I'm afraid not," answered Clarence, smiling with secret pleasure. "I doubt it very much. Georgiana has been on her knees to Grandmamma, but the old General only says, 'Don't let me hear you speak that name again. ' "

"And what have you done for him? Anything?"

Clarence shrugged his shoulders.

"If Georgiana could do nothing, you don't suppose I could?"

"But think of his being in a strange country without any money or friends? Couldn't you let him have some of your allowance until he gets a start?"

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Hardly. My allowance is not sufficient for my own wants."

Here was a state of things, indeed. Elinor began to wonder how Edward Paxton could ever induce his grandmother to forgive the trick he had played on her. Would she ever listen to him? Would she even see him, no matter how many proofs he could give her that he was the real Edward Paxton? And where, oh where, was Edward l'Estrange?

"Then you will be your grandmother's heir," she said presently, breaking the silence which had fallen between them.

"Oh, Georgiana will have a little, I suppose," he replied carelessly. "But I shall have the bulk, of course. You see Grandmamma's second husband, Mr. Steele, who left most of the money, had no heirs."

"What will you do with all those thousands, or millions, is it?"

"A million and a half. Oh, I shall live in a yacht a great deal. I shall have a shooting box in Scotland and a town house in London. I don't care for Grandmamma's London house. It's old and dingy and rather cramped. I shall get rid of it at any price. I shall have a villa on the Riviera, probably at Monte Carlo, and that reminds me, Miss Butler," he broke off suddenly, looking at his watch, "you will pardon me if I leave you, will you not? I am due at the Casino at twenty past eight. Good evening."

Lifting his straw hat with the affected air of a Piccadilly dandy, he tripped down the walk out of sight.

Elinor laughed out loud as she watched him stepping off, flicking the palm leaves with his rattan cane.

"And that is going to get the money!" she ejaculated. "What a shame. I'm sure Edward Paxton has more in him than his ridiculous cousin, who has already commenced to gamble at the Casino on prospects. If Edward could only prove to his grandmother that there is something to him!"

The young people had finished the barn dance and were resting on the broad piazza, overlooking the lake, when Elinor found them.

"Do you suppose we could find Edward Pax-ton?" she whispered to Billie. "I have a piece of very bad news for him. I will tell you about it if we can get away."

Billie knit her brows.

"Is it about the other Edward?" she asked.

"It certainly is. He's been and gone and done it?"

"Done what?"

"Got disinherited and packed off by Mrs. Paxton-Steele, and if you can explain why he didn't pack himself back home, you must know a great deal more about him than the rest of us."

"I can't explain it, Elinor," replied Billie. "I can't even try. But I still believe he's honest and I'd rather wait a little longer before I pass judgment. There may be some explanation."

Elinor could not but admire her friend's loyalty, which was one of the strongest characteristics in her fine nature.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"What a trump you are, Billie," she said. "You are the truest friend in the world."

"The chauffeur wishes to speak to one of the ladies," announced a bell-boy. "He is at the side entrance."

"Elinor and I will go, Cousin Helen," said Billie, promptly seizing the opportunity which had come so quickly.

Edward was waiting for them in a passage leading to one of the side exits. He was in his chauffeur's suit and was singing to himself as they approached the song he had dedicated to Elinor: "On thy fair bosom, silver lake."

"I came for orders for to-morrow," he announced cheerfully. "I have a good many engagements, and I was afraid I would be filled up if I didn't see you this evening."

"Engagements for what?" demanded Elinor.

"To make money," he answered gaily. "I made six dollars to-day and I expect to earn almost twice that much to-morrow. At this rate, I'll be earning a real salary, soon."

"Good," cried Billie, clapping her hands.

"And you are really beginning to like the work, then?" asked Elinor.

"Well, rather, I find machinery almost as interesting as the piano. The climate of this place agrees with me, too. I don't have those attacks of indigestion any more. My eyes are lots stronger and I sleep seven hours a night and eat everything in sight. But what are your plans for to-morrow? There is a man waiting to see me, now."

"We are going to the Duffy's in the Firefly at four o'clock for a tea."

The two girls hadn't the heart to tell him the unwelcome news that night.

CHAPTER XIX. A PASSAGE AT ARMS.

Mr. and Mrs. Duffy's teas were quite different from other people's afternoon affairs. There was always lots to eat for one thing; long buffet tables piled with salads and sandwiches; great bowls of fruit drinks and ices and cakes. There was dancing, too, in the big parlors, and who ever heard of dancing at a tea before?

"Young people like to dance no matter what the hour of the day," Mrs. Duffy had said in explanation to Miss Campbell.

"But this is a very beautiful entertainment, my dear," replied Miss Campbell. "We had expected simple tea and you are giving us an elaborate lawn party. You must have gone to no end of trouble, and what a good time they all seem to be having. My girls are everywhere. Billie is on the tennis court, and Mary is playing croquet, and Nancy is dancing, and here is Elinor hovering over me like a guardian angel."

"You are a careful chaperone, I see," observed a deep, well-trained English voice at her elbow.

Miss Campbell turned quickly. It was Mrs. Paxton-Steele leaning heavily on her stick. Elinor could not keep from looking at that stick with much curiosity. Edward Paxton had told her that the old lady had numbers of canes which her man servant packed around in a case like golf sticks. It would have been interesting, she thought, to have been an unseen witness at that famous battle when the other Edward had seized the stick and broken it in half. She wondered if there had been a great clap of thunder and a flash of lightning, as there was when Siegfried

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

smote the staff of Wotan.

Miss Campbell turned smiling. Her manners were always exquisite and she was not in the least afraid of the old bird of prey, as the girls had disrespectfully christened the war-like English lady.

"Ah, well," she replied, "they are not my own. That is why I must be particularly careful of them. They are only borrowed children. One feels especially responsible for borrowed property, don't you think?"

"They are all equally troublesome, my dear lady," returned Mrs. Paxton-Steele, "whether they are one's own or another's. I assure you that bringing my three grandchildren with me to America was much more difficult than bringing three packages of Bohemian glass of the most expensive and brittle character. That is what they are, these young people, expensive and brittle. They have no stability no strength."

"With your permission, madam, I would like to introduce my four girls to you," put in Miss Campbell proudly. "They are much more satisfactory than Bohemian glass and I can rely on them always."

Elinor smiled to herself. The two ladies reminded her of an old baldheaded eagle in a garden hat and a silver pheasant in a lavender bonnet.

"Perhaps if you were suddenly deprived of your grandchildren, Madam," went on the silver pheasant, "you would realize how much you really cared for them."

The old eagle shrugged her shoulders and flapped the brim of her garden hat with a sort of fierce humor.

"Ah, but they are a problem, Madam, they are a problem. People should not bring children into the world and leave them for others to rear. I had hoped for a peaceful old age and I find neither peace nor rest."

"That's because you don't give any yourself," thought Elinor. "Just leave a few of those canes behind and things would go smoother."

"This young woman," continued the old eagle, pointing to Elinor with her cane Elinor held up her head haughtily because she did not enjoy being under inspection in this way "this high-bred, proud young woman looks as if she might have plenty of backbone."

Elinor blushed slightly. After all, Mrs. Paxton-Steele had a flattering way with her that was not entirely unpleasant.

"Elinor, dear, have you met Mrs. Paxton-Steele?" asked Miss Campbell. "This is Elinor Butler, one of my most precious charges."

"A very good name," pursued the old lady. "Butler, a fine, Irish name. Perhaps, if you will excuse me, Madam, Mistress Elinor Butler will be good enough to walk with me about the garden. I do not notice that my granddaughter, Georgiana, is paying me much attention. What I like about you, child, is that you are not timid. Georgiana is like a frightened hare. She rushes under cover at the first loud noise."

"Perhaps," replied Elinor, feeling that it would do no harm to live up to this high opinion of courage, "perhaps Georgiana is afraid of your ebony stick."

The old lady chuckled.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"My dear Mistress Elinor Butler," she exclaimed, "you have quite hit the nail on the head. That is the very test of courage I have always been setting them, but they don't seem to understand. Why should they be afraid of a stick? I'm not going to murder them. Suppose I should threaten to strike you with this stick. What would you do?"

"If I had the strength, I should break it in two; if not, I should throw it as far as I could send it."

And you would be quite right to do either. I have respect only for those who stand up for their rights. If my sticks were loaded, sder, I be some excuse. They are merely harmless splinters of wood. And yet, I assure you, not a member of my household, either servants or grandchildren, has ever found it out. There is no more harm in them than there was in the Queen of Hearts who cried, 'Off with his head, ' every other moment and never beheaded anyone. But I have only to raise one of these bits of sticks and shake it in the air and they are all at my feet. It is very monotonous."

"Why don't you tell them so?" asked Elinor. "Perhaps poor Georgiana would be happier and so would the others, if they knew it was all a bluff."

"Oh, child; that is the point. That is the test. A coward is always a coward until he proves his own courage, and these grandchildren of mine are cowards, worthless, characterless cowards. If Georgiana were only like you or your friend who saved the young man in bathing what's her name? But she is not. She is a spiritless little creature."

"You mean you would like her better if she wouldn't allow you to go on so?" hesitated Elinor, hardly knowing what name to call the old lady's fits of rages.

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure than to see her stand up for herself. But it is not in her. It is a pity some good red American blood could not be injected into her veins."

"Oh," broke in Elinor, "but I thought you didn't like American girls. I once heard you say you thought they were too bold."

The old lady looked at her with a shrewd smile.

"I find the species improving," she said.

While they had been idling along the path, a bold stroke had occurred to Elinor and she now determined to put it into action. Gently, but firmly, she had turned her companion's footsteps toward the boat landing. As they took the lower walk, she said:

"Is Edward coming back to Palm Beach?"

"I know nothing of Edward or his movements," replied the other sharply.

"And you don't miss him?"

"Miss him, indeed! Lazy, piano-playing fellow! It was his music I could forgive least of all. It has been a curse in my family. I am old and bent from the misery it has brought me."

"But suppose he could do other things besides play? Couldn't you forgive him then?"

"No, no," answered Mrs. Paxton-Steele. "I am tired of hearing his name. Never speak to me of Edward again. You are a presuming, impudent young upstart."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"And you," exclaimed Elinor, flushing scarlet, "and you, Mrs. Paxton–Steele, are a cruel, vain old woman. You think you are wise and you are only stupid. Because it is stupid to be a bully. You are crushing all the soul and spirit out of Edward and Georgiana until, instead of loving you, they they hate you," she ended, stamping her foot on the gravel path.

"What? What?" screamed the old woman, choking with rage.

She raised her stick. But before she could lay it across Elinor's back the young girl seized it with both hands, wrenched it from her and pitched it into the lake. Then she burst into tears.

Mrs. Paxton–Steele sat down on a bench and folded her hands in her lap. "Don't cry, child," she said as calmly as if a moment before a tornado of rage had not almost swept both of them off their feet. "But of course all women must cry," she added. "I was curious to see if you would keep your word, which I am delighted to see you did. I shall have no sticks left if this keeps up. Dear, dear, dear!"

"But you had no right to experiment with me like that," sobbed Elinor. "I'm not one of your unfortunate grandchildren."

Mrs. Paxton–Steele laughed good–humoredly.

"I haven't enjoyed myself so much in years," she said. "It's a dangerous thing, my dear, for a rich old woman to be bored and disappointed, that is, if she has a bundle of sticks nearby. But of course I had no intention of striking you, just now. I should have had the whole Duffy clan on my back in a moment if I had, and your little peacock chaperone in the bargain. It was only an experiment, as you say. So I am a vain, cruel, stupid bully, am I?"

Elinor hung her head. She was ashamed of her outbreak now that calm was restored. She felt that Mrs. Paxton–Steele was really just a big tease; that her grandchildren had never understood her and perhaps perhaps. A notion had come into Elinor's head. Might it not be that she was too deep for any of them to fathom? For just one instant Elinor had caught a glimpse into this strange woman's mind, and now she was more than ever bent on the original object of the walk which had taken its course downward toward the water's edge.

"Why didn't you add that I was an old cat playing with a harmless little mouse?" her eccentric companion added leaning on the young girl's shoulder almost affectionately.

"Because I didn't feel like a helpless mouse," returned Elinor, dabbing her eyes with her pocket handkerchief to remove the last traces of tears from them.

"But where are you bound for now, Elinor Butler?"

"Wouldn't you like to take a motor boat ride? We have a splendid engineer. He is reliable and knows the engine thoroughly."

"I should like it very much. It would cool our blood after our recent passage at arms."

CHAPTER XX. THE HAND OF DESTINY.

Edward Paxton, with nothing special to do, was lying on one of the cushioned seats of the Firefly, humming his favorite tune. Mechanically he felt in his pockets for a roll of bills.

"All earned," he said softly, smiling into the deep blue sky with an expression of ineffable content. "Pretty good

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

for a new hand," he added, listening with pleasure to the quiet music of the waves lapping the sides of the boat.

He drew the money from his pocket and began to count it.

"I beg your pardon," said a voice just over him.

Edward looked up quickly. It was his cousin, Clarence, flicking at his duck trousers with his everlasting rattan cane. "By Jove," added Clarence with a somewhat startled expression on his face, "by Jupiter, but you resemble my cousin Edward! Georgiana told me, but I didn't altogether believe her. I've really never seen your face well by daylight before, you know."

Edward did not trust himself to reply.

"I came down here," Clarence went on, "to make you an humble apology. It was awfully nasty of me, you know, that day to have spoken as I did. I hope it's all over and forgotten now, old man. Isn't it?"

"Yes," said Edward, thrusting his hands in his pockets and turning his face toward the lake.

"How is business at present? Pretty good?" went on Clarence in his most ingratiating tone, climbing into the boat without being asked and sitting down beside Edward.

"Pretty good."

"I imagine you earn quite a good deal now, don't you, taking out parties every day? And I notice you are working on the motor cars at night, too."

Edward shrugged his shoulders. He was not surprised at what was coming next.

"I had a beastly stroke of luck last night, old man. I went over to the Casino with some fellows and lost more than I happened to have on hand just now. What do you say to lending me a small sum at a high rate of interest?"

"Why don't you borrow from your cousin?" asked Edward.

"By Jove but of course you haven't heard the news, old man, have you, not having any way to hear it. Edward's played the deuce with my old Grandmamma and she's disinherited him. Sent him packing, bag and baggage, don't you know."

"What " the engineer began and then turned his face away to hide his expression of amazement, horror, and alas, fear.

"I'm the only heir, now, don't you know. Of course, Georgiana counts for nothing. I'm the old lady's favorite grandchild and I shall be as rich as Croesus, I tell you. You can safely lend me any amount. I'll pay you back twice over. Grandmamma can't last much longer now. She'll go off with apoplexy in one of her fits of rage. She's bound to, don't you know. She'll not last a year."

Edward's shoulders suddenly began to shake with irrepressible laughter, not at the thought of the ending Clarence had pictured for his unfortunate grandmother, but at Clarence's unexampled assurance.

"It is something of a joke, old man, isn't it? But about that money, you know," he was beginning, while he drew a package of cigarettes from his pocket, offered one to Edward which was refused, and lit another himself. "By Jupiter, if here isn't the old woman herself," he exclaimed laying the cigarette down on the seat, "Were you

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

looking for me, Grandmamma?" he asked, jumping off and removing his hat with a flourish.

"No, I'm not looking for you. I'm looking for a boat with a first-class, reliable engineer in it, who will take me out on the lake without upsetting me into the water."

"Here is the one, Mrs. Paxton-Steele," said Elinor, trying not to smile, as she helped the old lady into the Firefly with Clarence's assistance. "This is the boat and the engineer both. Will you take us for a little ride, Edward?" she asked, giving the boy a meaning glance.

"Let me out first," demanded Clarence, who had no mind to go boat riding that afternoon with his aged relative.

"No such thing," snapped his grandmother. "Stay where you are. You know how to run a motor boat and if one engineer fails, we shall have another at hand. Stay where you are, but don't talk. I want to hear Mistress Elinor Butler talk about her home in America, and what methods her parents used to rear her into such a fine, spirited young woman, who is not afraid to speak out when she wants to."

Elinor blushed. She had planned other things for this boat ride and this incorrigible old eagle was upsetting all her schemes. Both grandsons looked up with interest. Never had they heard their grandmother speak in this way before.

Edward started the boat and presently they were sailing smoothly over the pleasant waters of Lake Worth. Mrs. Paxton-Steele, who was enjoying the ride extremely, had hardly noticed the engineer who had pulled his cap well down over his eyes and bent over the engine. Clarence, bored to extinction, looked sullenly toward shore, and took furtive puffs from his cigarette which was concealed between times on the seat beside him. The English lady had become reminiscent. She was telling Elinor a really thrilling story of a shipwreck in which she had nearly lost her life some fifty years before. Elinor remembered afterwards that she had an indescribable feeling of waiting for something. As the tropical shores receded and the striped awnings on the lawn of the Duffy villa became spots of white, she exchanged a long glance with Edward, who smiled slightly and began whistling softly the air he had composed to "The white swan spread his snowy sail."

After all, life was an exceedingly pleasant thing to a perfectly able-bodied and quite talented young man, even if he were disinherited by an irascible old grandparent.

"It all proved to me," finished Mrs. Paxton-Steele, "that courage " (Clarence laid down his cigarette and began to listen and Edward turned his face toward her) "real courage, is the most admirable trait of character that "

One of those inexplicable little puffs of wind which people who sail in boats on a lake must learn to expect, gave the old lady's hat brim an impudent flop, tossed Edward's cap to the other end of the boat, and blew Clarence's cigarette dangerously near the gasoline tank. But this same frolicsome breeze was the means of saving two lives. Both boys rose at the same moment and moved to the other end of the boat, one to get his cap and the other his cigarette which he thought had blown that way.

The next instant there was a loud explosion. The boat was shaken as a leaf in the wind, then with a convulsive shiver lay still in the water, like a creature stricken to death. A puff of smoke followed the noise and after that a tongue of flame shot high into the air and began licking its way hungrily along the seat.

Elinor found herself lying across Mrs. Paxton-Steele's lap and the two boys were flat in the bottom of the boat. The old lady's face had turned a deep purplish red and she sat looking at the flames with a strange, stupid expression.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

Then up jumped Clarence, gave one look at his grandmother, another at the burning boat, and leaped into the water. With long, even strokes he made for the shore. As his grandmother watched him, a light came into her eyes and she tried to speak, but she could only mutter in a thick unnatural voice:

"Cow-ad-cowad-cowad!"

In the meantime Elinor was throwing water into Edward's face. He had been stunned by the explosion but consciousness came back to him with the first dash of cold spray on his cheeks, and he sat up. Perhaps, in his dazed condition, he had forgotten that his grandmother and Elinor were in the burning boat and only saw the flames leaping high into the air. At any rate, without looking behind him, he jumped to the seat, stood for an instant poised on the side of the boat, and dived into the water as his cousin had done. When he rose again to the top and started to strike out toward shore, he glanced back over his shoulder. What he saw was his grandmother's countenance, still that strange purplish color, and Elinor sitting beside her, holding her hand with a very haughty, proud expression on her face.

With three strokes he was at the side of the boat.

"Oh, what have I done?" he cried as he drew himself on board again.

It all happened very quickly, and Clarence was still hardly twenty yards from them, when Edward, kneeling in the bottom of the launch, drew out the fire extinguishers.

"It's the gasoline that's burning now," he said in a quiet, steady voice. "If we can only put that out we're all right."

Wrenching the cap off the top of the torpedo shaped object, he rushed to the burning end of the boat and poured it over the flames. There were only two extinguishers, however, and the fire still continued to lick its way along the cushions after all the fluid had been used.

Elinor drew out a striped Roman blanket that Miss Campbell was in the habit of using to keep her knees warm when sailing, and thrust it into his hands.

They dipped it into the lake and throwing it over the obstinate little flames which still remained, extinguished them completely.

"It's all out," announced Edward, looking quite old and grizzled with his eyebrows and front hair burned to an ashen gray.

"I'm afraid your grandmother has had a bad shock, Edward," said Elinor. "We must get her to shore as quickly as possible."

"Grandmamma, dear grandmamma," he exclaimed, kneeling beside her with a sudden impulse of affection which he would have lavished on her long before with a little encouragement.

The poor old woman lifted one hand heavily and put it on his head.

"Brase-boy sedward-my grandson," she tried to say.

"There comes the other launch," cried Elinor as a boat shot out from shore. And it did not reach them any too soon, for the Firefly had a hole pierced in her side and was already fast filling with water.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

It was not an easy matter to transfer Mrs. Paxton–Steele from one boat to the other, but it was finally accomplished, and towing the stricken Firefly after them, they made for the shore.

Nobody had remembered Clarence until they heard him hail loudly. He was evidently very tired and had been resting on his back when they reached him. But he clambered in and plucked up breath sufficient to say:

"I had hoped to get to land and bring a boat back myself, grandmamma."

"Cowad–an–liar," she mumbled and closed her eyes.

CHAPTER XXI. PICNICKING UNDER THE PINES.

"We are very much like murderers returning to the scene of their crime," observed Mary Price as she followed her friends along a sandy trail which led to the forest. "Suppose the mate of the dead leopard should be lurking about somewhere?"

"And suppose the moccasin we didn't kill should return with self, wife and numerous family," added Nancy.

"Don't suppose so many dreadful things," objected Billie. "The moccasin isn't going to come out here in these open spaces, and as for Mrs. Leopard, Charlie will kill her with his borrowed rifle if she comes snooping about."

Ever since that eventful day when the Comet had been stalled in a sand bank, Billie and her friends had wished to return to the pine forest for a picnic. Leaving the Comet among those vanguard trees which lingered on the outskirts of the woods, before the trail became too soft, they carried their luncheon somewhat within the confines of the pine woods and chose for their picnicking ground an open space carpeted with pine needles. Here the trees grew to immense heights before they put forth their crown of fringy foliage.

Miss Campbell, off on a motor trip with the Duffys that morning, had trusted her young charges to their old West Haven friends, Percy and Charlie. They had invited Timothy Peppercorn to come, and Edward Paxton, who was growing more and more in favor with the Motor Maids every day.

Two days had passed since the explosion of the gasoline on the Firefly and the old eagle, his grandmother, who had suffered a slight stroke, had not asked for him again. Georgiana was at her side, but Clarence, she had ordered to keep out of her sight.

"The girls are not to do any work to–day," announced Percy gallantly. "Be seated, ladies, while we become your slaves."

"But you don't know how," exclaimed Billie. "You haven't been trained in the business as we have."

"Just you wait and watch," returned Percy. "Charlie, you build the fire while we prepare the victuals."

"What an unappetizing word," ejaculated Elinor, sniffing. "Why not viands?"

"The first course will be viands, then," said Percy, proceeding to peel the bark from a long, straight althea twig, while Charlie with a knife and tablespoon dug a circular trench to keep the flames from spreading, swept the pine needles into the centre, and built a beautiful fire of pine logs and branches.

Presently it burned down to a bed of very hot cinders, on each side of which he planted two stout sticks with forked ends.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"What on earth are you doing with those long gumbo shooters, Charlie?" called Billie, fidget-ting from the inactivity of being served by four slaves.

"Something perfectly ripping," he answered. "Wait until you taste what's to come, and see."

"This will be a course of viands, good strong food, I can tell you," added Percy, very busy over the luncheon hamper.

"We don't like the looks of it now," said Nancy. "Fortunately, there are cakes and sandwiches in the basket for those who can't quite go strong food, as you call it."

"Well, this is our contribution to the party beside our services, and I'll wager a pound of candy apiece that after the cooking process you'll eat every scrap, even the onions."

"Ugh!" shuddered Elinor.

In the meantime Edward had opened a bundle containing a large juicy beefsteak which he cut into small round pieces. Percy was engaged in peeling and slicing potatoes and Timothy was putting half a dozen Bermuda onions through the same process.

"Ready, mates?" called Percy.

"Aye, aye, sir," answered the others. And with that they began spearing slices of the meat and vegetables on a long stick and between every potato slice and section of beefsteak, they sandwiched a slice of bacon, then came another piece of potato, then a slice of onion and then the beefsteak again.

"Now for the salt and pepper, gentlemen. Build up the fire a little, Charlie. Swing him over. Who says we are not cooks?"

Resting neatly in the crotchet of the two upright sticks, this unusual arrangement of meat and vegetables began sending out a sizzling, appetizing odor while the four cooks danced a wild Indian war dance around the fire.

"Dear me, it does smell good," admitted Billie at last. "I'm beginning to think I may lose that pound of candy, Percy."

"Spread the cloth, Charlie, dear," called Percy in a high woman's voice which always made them laugh. "Lady Elinor may make the tea now, and Miss Nancy-Bell may cut the cake. I'm head chef of this kitchen. That's the reason I give so many orders. Timothy, suppose you entertain the guests with one of your stunts while the beefsteak is cooking."

"Do 'The Battle of Marathon, ' Timothy," ordered Billie.

Timothy rose obediently and made a bashful bow.

"I'm supposed to be a little schoolgirl," he said, "ridiculous as that may seem, and the teacher has commanded me to tell the story of the Battle of Marathon. This is the history class.

"The Ba-el of Marathon," he began, in an absurd little girl's voice, "the Ba-el of Marathon was a great ba-el. It happened in Greeth yearth and yearth ago. There were two sidths to the ba-el and they fo't and fo't and fo't and ever tho many pe-pel wath killed and at lath the thide that had the moth men killed wath beaten an' the other thide won, an' that wath the end. I forget which wath the thide that won."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

A joyous laugh went up at this lucid and graphic account of the famous battle. But deeper and merrier was the laugh which mingled with it. The young people suddenly became aware that a stranger had joined their circle and was now leaning against a pine tree looking at the picnic party with an expression of intense amusement. He was a handsome man, rather past middle age, of medium height with a fine rugged face, bronzed with sun and wind, and quizzical, laughing, gray-blue eyes. He wore khaki trousers much the worse for wear. His rather large head with its iron-gray hair, slightly thin at the temples, was uncovered, and across the forehead was the red mark of a recent bruise or scar. He carried a rifle under one arm and a fishing rod under the other.

"I beg your pardon, young ladies," he said. "I didn't mean to intrude, but I was attracted by the appetizing fumes of your beefsteak and bacon. Not many visitors at Palm Beach are fond of Gypsy picnics like this. I was curious to see whom it could be."

They knew, all of them, at once, that it was not a tramp who was speaking, in spite of his shabby old trousers and his collarless shirt.

Then Billie, looking at his face closely again, and the beautiful smile which now radiated it, rose rather shyly and said, somewhat to the surprise of her friends

"Won't you join us? We've brought lots of lunch, and I'm sure there is enough of Percy's burgoo, or whatever it is, to feed a regiment."

The stranger hesitated a moment, looking at the others.

"Do please," echoed Nancy, always following the lead of Captain Billie.

"I hope you will," added Percy, cordially, never behind in dispensing hospitality.

"I accept your invitation with pleasure," replied the stranger. "It's most kind of you, I am sure. I'm hungry as a wolf, and it's rather far from er, supplies."

Without the slightest embarrassment, he sat down in the group of boys and girls and joined in the talk and laughter so naturally, that presently they quite forgot he was a stranger at all.

He had a talent, this ingratiating individual, of making all of them talk a great deal, while he listened always with that amused, quizzical expression which Nancy confided to Elinor's private ear "was fascinating." He ate a great deal and enjoyed himself thoroughly. The sizzling, delicious combination of beefsteak and other things, he pronounced the most appetizing dish he had tasted in years. He smacked his lips over Elinor's tea and asked for a second cup. He joked with Nancy, smiled gravely into Mary's serious dark eyes, took many long searching glances at Billie when she wasn't looking, and started each boy, even silent Charlie, on his favorite hobby.

Before that famous luncheon was over, it really seemed that they were entertaining an angel unawares.

CHAPTER XXII. THE LAST OF THE HOUSE OF TROUBLES.

At last, as the afternoon shadows began to lengthen, everybody lent a hand at clearing up the lunch things, while the stranger in the khaki trousers sat under a tree smoking a short black pipe, and watched them thoughtfully.

"I smell burning," announced Charlie, suddenly, sniffing the air like a hunting dog.

"It's your own fire, midget," replied Percy.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"No, no, it's on the breeze. There, look at that."

As he spoke a spark fell at his feet, then another and another.

The stranger jumped up quickly, wet his finger and held it in the air.

"The wind's from the northwest," he exclaimed under his breath.

As he faced the wind, another group of sparks, borne on the breeze, blew against him.

"By Jove," he cried. "It must be Virginia's house. Thanks for your hospitality, I must go," he added, starting to run down the trail.

"Come back," called Billie, "we'll take you in the car quicker than you can cut through the woods."

Without a word the stranger turned and joined them as they gathered their belongings together and raced through the woods to the Comet.

Silently they piled themselves into the machine and in another ten minutes Billie had guided them safely over the ratty wagon track to the hard beaten automobile road and they were speeding along toward Virginia's.

As they tore up the avenue of giant trees, over which hung a cloud of dense smoke, Billie said to the stranger who was sitting beside her:

"I know that you are Mr. Ignatius Donahue. I have known it from the first."

"How did you recognize me?" he asked smiling.

"From your pictures."

"Well, keep the secret awhile longer," he said. "I have been getting over an—er—accident I was in not long ago, and staying here quietly with Virginia and Edward."

The only living soul they could see as they approached Virginia's home was old Mammy who was running up and down the front gallery like a distracted creature, lifting up her voice in wails and lamentations. One wing of the house had entirely burned down and the flames had leapt over the main roof and were making rapid headway.

"Bress de Lord, oh my soul," she cried when she saw the automobile full of people come up to the front door.

Mr. Donahue was the first to jump out.

"Is your mistress in her room, Mammy?"

"Yes, Marsa, yes, sir. I cyan't move her a step," wailed the poor old woman.

"Where's Miss Virginia?"

"A lady don' sen' fur her to come to the hotel quick. She's been gone an hour."

"Where's Uncle Peter?"

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"He don' drive little Missy over, Marsa."

Another moment, and Mr. Donahue had disappeared in the smoke-filled house, followed by the boys.

Then Billie did something for which I am sure you will hardly know whether to commend her for her bravery or blame her for her recklessness.

"Where's Dick, the mocking bird, Mammy?" she asked.

"In his cage in de kitchen, little Missy," moaned the colored woman, rocking herself back and forth.

Running around the back of the house where she dimly remembered the kitchen was situated, Billie pressed her face against one of the windows and peered into the room, which was fast filling with smoke that poured in from a passage leading from the burning wing. She knew it was the kitchen because the floor was of brick and she could make out the dim outline of the great range which had not been used in all these years. It was impossible to find the door in all the intricate back region of the old house. It must be somewhere in that smoke-filled passage. Seizing an old stool under the window, Billie broke in the glass; then using it to stand on, she climbed through.

"Dick, old fellow," she called.

A feeble chirp answered. Yes, there he was, huddled in his cage, his feathers all ruffled up and his head under his wing. She seized the cage and ran to the window just as the roof of the wing with a great crash fell in, covering the porch outside with burning debris. A volume of smoke and flame outside curled into the open window and she knew that escape was impossible that way.

As she ran up the three steps which divided the kitchen from the next room, she stumbled and fell over something stretched across the doorway. It was the body of a man lying face downward, his head on his arm. Seizing him by the shoulders, she dragged him away from the door and closed it to keep the smoke from pouring in. Then to confirm the suspicions which had come to her when she saw the rumpled black hair and slight, wellknit frame, she turned the man over.

"Edward!" she cried. "Get in here, Dickybird," she said, slipping the mocking bird from the cage into her blouse.

Seizing the unconscious boy by his ankles, she began dragging him slowly across the floor. It required all her strength, but she managed to get him through the doorway and into the hall. The smoke was terrible, however. Not in the great fire at Shell Island had it seemed so dense and thick. At last, staggering toward the door, she called:

"Help! Help!"

It was Ignatius Donahue who carried her out in his arms, while she whispered hoarsely.

"Be careful not to crush the bird! He's in my blouse."

Edward's double and Charlie Clay lifted him out of the smoke-filled hall.

"Shan't we try and save the house, sir?" asked Percy, who saw in the stranger now only a very distinguished person, born to command.

"No, no, my boy. It can't be saved and it had better burn. It has been a house of sorrow always."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

They carried Edward l'Estrange farther down the avenue to the automobile which had been moved out of reach of smoke and sparks. As Billie's dazed senses began to return, she saw, sitting in the back, Virginia's mother, very pale and ill. But strange to say, the invalid was not looking at the house. Her eyes were fastened on Ignatius Donahue with an expression in which could be read many things: wonder, surprise, perhaps even joy. Billie thought her more beautiful even than the first time she had met her, and it occurred to her, watching the delicate, lovely face, that at least the poor lady would never know now about her prized heirlooms. They would to her always have been burned with the house.

Edward l'Estrange was not long unconscious, after he was brought into the fresh air. They chafed his wrists and temples and presently he opened his eyes.

"Are they all safe?" he asked as memory returned to him.

"All safe, my boy, and if you are able to stand up, we'd better be taking your mother back to the hotel," answered Mr. Donahue.

As he spoke, the roof of the old house crashed in and the four walls stood out bleak and desolate in the smoking ruins.

The Comet carried a big load that afternoon. For the first time in her life, old Mammy rode in an automobile, but the old woman, like her mistress, was too dazed to realize that she was skimming along the high road at the rate of thirty miles an hour.

On the way to the hotel, Billie heard Mr. Donahue say to Edward: "I didn't know you were in the house or in the neighborhood, my boy."

"I only arrived this morning. I was to stay away two or three days longer, but I went to your office in New York as you directed, with the message for your secretary, and while I was waiting a bunch of mail arrived. The letter on top was this. It may have been wrong, but I took it because you see I couldn't help recognizing the handwriting as my father's. Who directed it or where it came from, is a mystery."

He put his hand in his pocket and drew out a letter which Billie recognized as the very one she had re-directed several days before.

"But where did it come from?" demanded Mr. Donahue in amazement.

"We found it under a little house in the woods," she broke in, "and I sent it to your New York address, which is the one Papa gave me."

"You are a jolly, clever young lady," cried the older man delightedly, "and you can never know what a debt of gratitude we owe you."

It was a lucky chance that Mr. Duffy's motor car happened to pass before they reached the hotel, and some of the party were transferred to that roomy and capacious machine. So that the overloaded Comet did not, after all, create a sensation as it rolled up to the side entrance of the hotel.

Contrary to their expectations, Mrs. l'Estrange was neither ill nor cast down. Perhaps she did not realize yet that her home had just been burned to the ground. At any rate, when Mr. Donahue carried her into the hotel, she rested her cheek on his shoulder and said softly:

"You find me a broken old woman, Ignatius."

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"No, no, Virginia. Only much paler and thinner. There is a great doctor who is an intimate friend of mine, and he has promised to come down in a few days and have a look at that spine of yours. I have enormous faith in him. I believe he can cure you."

The two Edwards were talking earnestly together when Billie restored the little mocking bird to its master, and before they parted they grasped hands like two brothers who had been reunited after a long separation.

CHAPTER XXIII. EXPLANATIONS.

Late that evening, when Billie sat resting on the piazza, not caring to join the others who were laughing and talking together, Edward l'Estrange drew up a chair beside her and told her the strange story which had drawn them all into a network of puzzling incidents.

"My father was an Englishman, Billie. His name was Paxton."

Billie started.

"Then you are "

"Yes, I am Edward's first cousin. Our fathers were twins and adored each other as twins usually do. My father did not get on well with his mother because he wanted to be a musician. Edward's father was more practical and he was her favorite son. But he was dissipated, and once in a fit of wild temper he committed a crime, and when they arrested my father by mistake, his brother let him go to jail."

"How dreadful! How wicked!" put in Billie.

"Yes, it was pretty bad. But Edward's father made up for it afterwards by his misfortunes, and at last he committed suicide. But to go on, my father escaped and came to this country. He changed his name and went south where he met my mother and eloped with her, although she was to have been married the next day to Ignatius Donahue. It was wrong, of course, and I can't defend it except that they were so much in love. They lived very happily until my father got word that they were on the track of him. My mother wanted him to fight it out in the courts, but it would have been a difficult case, because you see he had run away. My father was very delicate and visionary, and I suppose he lacked the spirit to defend himself. At any rate, he would build the house in the pine woods and hide himself, and there he stayed for several months until we brought him home to die, in fact. Just before the end came, he called me into his room one day and told me that he had in his possession a very valuable letter. He had addressed it to Mr. Donahue but it was not to be delivered unless we were in actual want. As we had plenty of money, it didn't seem likely then that the letter would ever be sent. Anyhow, when I went to look for it, I couldn't find it. My father's mind must have been wandering at the time.

"But that wasn't the end of our troubles, because after father's death, mother had a fall and injured her spine so that she has never been able to walk a step since. Then the cotton mills, in which all her money was invested, failed and we lost every cent we had. Mother doesn't know that, though. Virginia and I have managed to keep it from her, so far."

"I know," said Billie, "You were wonderful, both of you. But what was in the letter?"

"It came just before father's death, while he was still at the little house, and it was a full confession written by his brother. After we got so poor, I wrote to Mr. Donahue, thinking perhaps he might have received this lost letter. I suppose father wanted him to have it because of his devotion to mother, and he has helped us in every sort of way. I think he bought the Firefly just for me to take parties out in. He never came to our house, but he used to run

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

down here on his car for a night or two and consult with me."

"One more question?" asked Billie. "What was he doing that night in the avenue when he had the fight with the man in the motor car?"

"Well," said Edward, "you must know that there were people who were trying to get that paper away from us before my grandmother could see it. Clarence's people they were, a bad lot. I suppose they thought if Clarence inherited his grandmother's millions, they would all come in for their share.

"That fellow who fought with Mr. Donahue represented himself as coming from my grandmother. But then he tried to play a double game and Mr. Donahue caught on and they fought."

"Now, a last question, Edward. Where in the world have you been hiding?"

"You see, my grandmother and I made friends immediately. When I took the stick away from her that day, she saw at once I was not Edward Paxton, although that is really my name, and she knew she had found her other grandson. The quarrel we had when I broke her stick later in St. Augustine was all fixed up between us. She enjoyed it immensely. Then she ordered me to lie low somewhere, until she sent for me. She was anxious to see if Edward would really keep his word and get to work. He has, so I suppose she's well pleased. But she has had a hard life. Her children disappointed her one way or another, and have all died, and her grandchildren didn't seem to come up to the mark either. She's just a soured, embittered old woman, but I like her, anyhow, now that we understand each other."

That night Billie related the strange story to her three intimate friends in their bedroom. Each Motor Maid made her own characteristic observation.

Nancy, standing before the mirror, rolling her curls on her pretty fingers, smiled at her image and remarked:

"Mr. Ignatius Donahue is the most charming, fascinating, delightful man I ever met."

Elinor, in a long white bath robe, her braids twisted around her small head like a coronet, observed:

"It was really family pride, I suppose, that made Edward l'Estrange's father keep the letter a secret."

"Oh, no, Elinor," cried Mary, seated cross-legged on the bed, while she thoughtfully brushed her fine brown hair, "it was his love for his brother. They say that the love of one twin for another passeth understanding."

"Whatever it was," said Billie, lying flat on her back on the bed and gazing up at the ceiling, "a fine American boy and girl, honest and plucky and proud, too, for that matter, have come up, head and shoulders from the whole wretched muddle."

CHAPTER XXIV. SO ENDETH THE SECOND LESSON.

"Sit right there in a row in front of me, so that I may have a good look at you, young ladies. Now, tell me all of your names. This one I know: Mistress Elinor Butler, an American Princess. Wilhelmina Campbell? Ah, you are the brave young woman who saves people's lives, Anne Starbuck Brown? You're Irish, my dear, I can tell by your blue eyes and your pretty, impudent face. Mary Anastasia Price? Those eyes of yours, my child, are too earnest and serious for this wicked world."

Mrs. Paxton-Steele had left her room this morning for the first time since the explosion, and the two Edwards, her

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

grandsons, as like as two peas in a pod, had pushed her rolling chair down to the beach. Then she had sent her man servant scurrying back to the hotel with her compliments to the Motor Maids and would they do her the pleasure of calling on her that morning on the sands?

Her tongue was still quite thick and her head shook a little as she spoke, but the old eagle sat as erect as ever, the brim of her garden hat flapping up and down in the breeze as it always had.

The girls felt sorry for the aged woman whose early life had been filled with sorrows and disappointments and her last years poisoned by scheming relatives who desired her money.

"So these are the Motor Maids," went on Mrs. Paxton-Steele. "Do you know, my dears, why I asked you to spend one of your golden hours with a stricken old woman like me? It is because I want to thank you. You have taught me the second great lesson of my life. The first one I learned when I was a young woman. The second one now comes to me on the brink of the grave.

"A vain, cruel, stupid bully! A selfish old woman, eh?"

Elinor flushed. How disrespectful those words seemed to her now!

But the old eagle chuckled to herself.

"I have certainly been all those things," she continued, "and I want to thank you, Mistress Elinor, for speaking out your mind. You might have added blind, too. I have been blind blind.

"My poor boys who have been dead so long, have been restored to me in their own sons, and I am very happy.

Here she paused and closed her eyes to hide the tears which had welled into them.

"Yes, I am happy," she went on. "They are fine boys, both of them. And all of this I owe to the Motor Maids. You have done what I could not do. You have righted a great wrong and reunited a broken, scattered family.

"I am glad yes, proud, that my new grandchildren are half American. And now give me your hand, each one of you, and run along and play. I am old and tired, but, thank God, I am still alive and able to enjoy this last blessing of my life."

One by one the four girls bowed their heads over the hand of the broken old eagle, pretending not to notice the two tears which trickled down her furrowed cheeks.

They smiled at the two Edwards, who stood like sentinels at the side of her chair, waved a gay salutation to Virginia and Georgiana coming toward them arm in arm, and all but collided with Mr. Ignatius Donahue following behind at a slower pace.

"Where are you running away to, my pretty maids?" he cried, spreading out his arms playfully to block their passage.

"This is our last day at Palm Beach, you know," answered Billie. "We leave for home tonight, and we are going to ride out in the Comet to say good-bye to the Duffys."

"And we are to have no more jolly picnics?" he asked.

The Motor Maids by Palm and Pine

"Not unless you come to West Haven, Mr. Donahue, and let us take you on a Comet picnic to Seven League Island."

Mr. Donahue looked at them with that humorous, quizzical expression that they remembered to have noticed in his photograph.

"I'm going to have a picnic party myself in a few months," he said, "and if that picnic comes off, you may see a private car backed upon a side track in West Haven, and you will know, if you do, that at the happiest period of my life I have come to spend a day with the four nice girls who helped to bring it about."

"Why, what does he mean?" asked Elinor, as they hurried on to the hotel.

"I think he means he is going to marry Mrs. l'Estrange," answered Billie. "He has brought a big osteopath down here to see her and something's being put to rights in her spine. She's expected to get perfectly well, Virginia told me."

"But how did we bring anything about?"

"I can't say, unless it was the Comet, bless him, that got us to the burning house in time to save her life."

The red car was waiting for them when they reached the hotel, and Miss Campbell, also, on the piazza, her peach blossom face framed in the familiar motor veil of sky blue.

Presently they rolled swiftly away toward the home of their good friends, the Duffys, and in the memories of all who saw them start on that bright morning, there was left no happier impression of Florida's holiday glory than the light in the faces of the four Motor Maids.

If the girls themselves could have seen, stretching far into the future, the road of experience and adventure over which the Comet was to take them, their faces would have been aglow with anticipation as well as with present pleasure. For the way that they were next to travel is one that each and all should know, and even if you can go in no other party, we are sure that you will enjoy following "The Motor Maids Across the Continent," in the story of their next trip.

END
