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Title: The Girls of Central High Aiding the Red Cross
Or Amateur Theatricals for a Worthy Cause

Author: Gertrude W. Morrison

Release Date: May, 2005 [EBook #8137]
[Yes, we are more than one year ahead of schedule]
[This file was first posted on June 17, 2003]

Edition: 10

Language: English

Character set encoding: ASCII

*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GIRLS AIDING THE RED CROSS ***

Produced by Kevin Handy, Joshua Hutchinson, Charles Franks
and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team.

The Girls of Central High Aiding the Red Cross

OR

AMATEUR THEATRICALS FOR A WORTHY CAUSE

BY

GERTRUDE W. MORRISON

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CHAPTER I

THE ODDEST THING THAT EVER HAPPENED

"Well, if that isn't the oddest thing that ever happened!" murmured Laura Belding, sitting straight up on the stool before the high desk in her father's glass-enclosed office, from which elevation she could look down the long aisles of his jewelry store and out into Market Street, Centerport's main business thoroughfare.

But Laura was not looking down the vista of the electrically lighted shop and into the icy street. Instead, she gave her attention to that which lay right under her eyes upon the desk top. She looked first at the neat figures she had written upon the page of the day ledger, after carefully proving them, and thence at the packet of bills and piles of coin on the desk at her right hand.

"It is the oddest thing that ever happened," she affirmed, as though in answer to her own first declaration.

It was Saturday evening, and it was always Laura's duty to straighten out her father's books for him on that day, for although she was a high school girl, she was usually so well prepared in her studies that she could give the books proper attention weekly. Laura had taken a course in bookkeeping and she was quite familiar with the business of keeping a simple set of books like these.

She never let the day ledger and the cash get far apart. It was her custom to strike a balance weekly, and this she was doing at this time. Or she was trying to! But there seemed to be something entirely wrong with the cash itself.

She knew that the figures on the ledger were correct. She had asked her father, and even Chet, her brother, who was helping in the store this evening, if either of them had taken out any cash without setting the sum down in the proper record.

"It is an even fifty dollars--neither more nor less," she had told them, with a puzzled little frown corrugating her pretty forehead.

They had both denied any such act--Chet, of course, vigorously.

"What kind of hardware are you trying to hang on me, Mother Wit?" he demanded of his sister. "I know Christmas will soon be on top of us, and a fellow needs all the money there is in the world to buy even one girl a decent present. But I assure you I haven't taken to nicking papa's cash drawer."

"I don't know but mother is right," Laura sighed. "Your language is becoming something to listen to with fear and trembling. And I am not accusing you, Chetwood. I'm only asking you!"

"And I'm only answering you--emphatically," chuckled her brother.

"It is no laughing matter when you cannot find fifty dollars," she told him.

"You'd better stir your wits a little, then, Sis," he advised. "You know Jess and Lance will be along soon and we were all going shopping together, and skating afterward. Lance and I want to practice our grapevine whirl."

But being advised to hurry did not help. For half an hour since Chet had

last spoken the girl had sat in a web of mystery that fairly made her head spin! Her ledger figures were proved over and over again. But the cash! Then once more she bent to her task.

The piles of coin were all right she finally decided. She counted them over and over again, and they came to the same penny exactly. So she pushed the coin aside.

Then she slowly and carefully counted again the bank-notes, turning them one by one face down from left to right. The amount, added to the sum of the coins, was equal to the figures on the ledger. Then she did what she had already done ten or a dozen times. She recounted the bills, turning them from right to left.

She was fifty dollars short!

Christmas was approaching, and the Belding jewelry store was, of course, rather busier than at other seasons. That was why Chet Belding was helping out behind the counters. Out there, he kept a closer watch on the front door than Laura, with her financial trouble, could.

Suddenly he darted down the long room to welcome a group of young people who pushed open the jewelry-store door. They burst in with a hail of merry voices and a clatter of tongues that drowned every other sound in the store for a minute, although there were but four of them.

"Easy! Easy!" begged Mr. Belding, who was giving his attention to a customer near the front of the store. "Take your friends back to Laura's coop, Chetwood."

Hushed for the moment, the party drifted back toward Laura's desk. The young girl was still too deeply engaged with the ledger and cash to look up at first.

"What is the matter, Mother Wit?" demanded the taller of the two girls who had just come in--a most attractive-looking maiden, whom Chet had at once taken on his arm.

"Engine trouble," chuckled Laura's brother. "The old thing just won't budge! Isn't that it, Laura?"

The tall youth--dark and delightfully romantic-looking, any girl would have told you--went around into the little office and looked over Laura's shoulder.

"What's gone wrong, Laura?" he asked, with sympathy in his voice and manner.

"You want to get a move on, Mother Wit!" cried the youngest girl of the troop, saucy looking, and with ruddy cheeks and flyaway curls. This was Clara Hargrew, whom her friends called Bobby, and whose father kept the big grocery store just a block away from the Belding jewelry store. "Everybody will have picked over the presents in all the stores and got the best of

everything before we get there."

"That's right," said the last member of the group; and this was a short and sturdy boy who had the same mischievous twinkle in his eye that Bobby Hargrew displayed.

His name was Long, and because he was short, everybody at Central High (save the teachers, of course) called him "Short and Long." He and Bobby Hargrew were what hopeless grown folk called "a team!" When they were not hatching up some ridiculous trick together, they were separately in mischief.

"But you say Short and Long has done some of his Christmas shopping already," Jess Morse, the tall visitor, said. "Just think, Laura! He has sent Purt Sweet his annual present."

"So soon?" said Laura Belding, but with her mind scarcely on what her friends were saying. "And Thanksgiving is only just passed!"

"I thought I'd better be early," said Short and Long, with solemn countenance. "I wrote 'Not to be opened till Christmas' upon the package."

Bobby and Jess and Lance burst into giggles. "Let's have the joke!" demanded Chet. "What did you send the poor fish, Short?"

"You guessed it! You guessed it, Chet Belding!" cried Bobby. "Aren't you a clever lad?"

"What do you mean?" asked Laura, now becoming more seriously interested.

"Why," Jess Morse said, "he got a codfish down at the market and wrapped it up in a lot of paper and put it in a long, beautifully decorated Christmas box. If Purt Sweet keeps that box without opening it until Christmas, I am afraid the Board of Health will be making inquiries about the Sweet premises."

"You scamp!" exclaimed Laura sternly, to Short and Long.

"He's all right!" declared Bobby warmly. "You know just how mean and stingy Purt Sweet is--and his mother has more money than anybody else in Centerport. Last Christmas, d'you know what Purt did?"

"Something silly, of course," Laura said.

"I don't know what you call silly. I call it mean," declared the smaller girl. "Purt got it noised abroad that he was going to give a present to every fellow in his class--didn't he, Short?"

"That's what he did," said Billy Long, taking up the story. "And the day before Christmas he got us all over to his house and offered each of us a drink of ice-water! And some of the kids had been foolish enough to buy him things--and give 'em to him ahead of time, too!"

"Serves you right for being so piggish," commented Chet.

"It was a mean trick," agreed Laura, "for some of the boys in Purt's grade are much younger than he is. But this idea of giving Christmas presents because you expect something in return----"

"Is pretty small potatoes," finished Lance Darby, the dark youth. "But what's the matter here, Laura?" he added. "I've counted these bills and they are just exactly right by those figures you have set down there."

"You turned them from left to right as you counted, Lance," cried Laura.

"Sure! I counted the face of each bill," was the answer.

"Now count them the other way!" exclaimed Laura in despair.

Her friends gathered around while Laura did this. Even Chet gave some attention to his sister's trouble now. From right to left the packet of bank-notes came to fifty dollars less than the sum accredited to them on the ledger.

"Well, what do you know about that?" breathed Lance.

"That's the strangest thing!" declared Jess Morse.

"Why," said Bobby of the quick mind, "must be some of the bills are not printed right."

"Nonsense!" ejaculated Chet.

"Who ever heard of such a thing as a banknote being printed wrong unless it was a counterfeit?" demanded Laura.

Mr. Belding, having finished with his customer, came back to the little office and heard this. "I am quite sure we have taken in no counterfeits--eh, Chet?" he said, smiling.

"And there's only one big bill--this hundred," said Chet, who had taken the package of bills and was flirting them through his fingers. "I took that in myself when I sold that lavalliere to the man I told you about, Father. You remember? He was a stranger, and he said he wanted to give it to a young girl. I-----"

"Let's see that bill, Chet!" exclaimed Bobby Hargrew suddenly.

Chet slipped the hundred-dollar note out of the packet and handed it to the grocer's daughter. But she immediately cried:

"I want to see the hundred-dollar bill, Chet. Not this one."

"Why, that's the hundred-----"

"This is a fifty," interrupted Bobby. "Can't you see?"

She displayed the face of a fifty-dollar bank-note to their wondering eyes. Their exclamations drowned Mr. Belding's voice, and he had to speak twice before Bobby heard him.

"Turn it over!"

The grocer's daughter did so. The other side of the bill was the face of a hundred-dollar bank-note! At this there certainly was a hullabaloo in and around the office. Mr. Belding could scarcely make himself heard again. He was annoyed.

"What is the matter with that bank-note? Whether it is counterfeit or not, you took it in over the counter, Chetwood," he said coldly.

"This very day," admitted his oldest son.

"Then, my boy, it is up to you," said the jeweler grimly.

"What----Just what do you mean?" asked Chet, somewhat troubled by his father's sternness.

"In a jewelry store," said Mr. Belding seriously, "as I have often told you, a clerk must keep his eyes open. You admit taking in this bill. If the Treasury Department says it is worth only fifty dollars, I shall expect you to make good the other fifty."

The young people stared at each other in awed silence as the jeweler turned away. They could feel how annoyed he was.

"Gee!" gasped Chet, "if I'm nicked fifty dollars, how shall I ever be able to buy Christmas presents, or even give anything for the Red Cross drive?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Chet!" Jess Morse murmured.

"Looks as if hard times had camped on your trail, old boy," declared Lance.

"But maybe it is a hundred-dollar bill," Laura said.

"It's tough," Short and Long muttered.

"Try to pass it on somebody else," chuckled Bobby, who was not very sympathetic at that moment.

"Got it all locked up, Laura?" Jess asked. "Well, let us go then. You can't make that bill right by looking at it, Chet."

"I--I wish I could get hold of the man who passed it on me," murmured the big fellow.

"Would you know him again?" Lance asked.

"Sure," returned his chum, getting his own coat and hat while his sister

put on her outdoor clothing. "All ready? We're going, Pa."

"Remember what I said about that bill, Chetwood," Mr. Belding admonished him. "You will learn after this, I guess, to look at both sides of a hundred-dollar bill--or any other--when it is offered to you."

"Aw, it's a good hundred, I bet," grumbled Chet.

"If it is, I'll add an extra fifty to my Red Cross subscription," rejoined his father with some tartness.

"Well, that's something!" Bobby Hargrew said quickly. "We want to boost the fund all we can. And what do you think?"

"My brain has stopped functioning entirely since I got so bothered by that bank-note," declared Laura Belding, shaking her head. "I can't think."

"Mr. Sharp and the rest of the faculty have agreed that we shall give a show for the Red Cross," declared Bobby, with enthusiasm. "Just what we wanted them to do!"

"Oh, joy!" cried Jess, clasping her hands in delight.

"Miss Josephine Morse, leading lady, impressarioess, and so forth," laughed Lance Darby, "will surely be in on the theatricals."

"Maybe they will let you write the play, Jess," said Chet admiringly.

They reached the door and stepped into the street. There had been rain and a freeze. The sidewalks, as well as the highway itself, were slippery. Bobby suddenly screamed:

"See there! Oh! He'll be killed!"

A rapidly-driven automobile turned the corner by the Belding store. A man was crossing Market Street, coming toward the group of young people.

The careless driver had not put on his chains. The car skidded. The next instant the pedestrian was knocked down, and at least one wheel ran over his prostrate body.

Instead of stopping, the car went into high speed and dashed up the street and was quickly out of sight. The young people ran to the prostrate man. Nobody for the moment thought of the automobile driver who was responsible for the affair.

The victim had blood on his face from a cut high up on his crown. He was unconscious. It was Chet Belding who stood up and spoke, first of all.

"I thought so! I thought so!" he gasped. "Do you know who this is?"

"Who?" asked Jess, clinging to his arm as the crowd gathered.

"This is the man who passed that phony hundred-dollar bill on me. The very one!"

"Is he dead?" whispered Bobby Hargrew, looking under Chefs elbow down at the crimson-streaked face of the unfortunate man.

CHAPTER II

THE RED CROSS GIRL

Market street was well lighted, but it was not well policed. That last fact could not be denied, or the recklessly driven automobile that had knocked down the stranger would never have got away so easily. People from both sides of the street and from the stores near by ran to the spot; but no policeman appeared until long after the automobile was out of sight.

The exciting statement that Chet Belding had made so interested and surprised his friends that for a few moments they gave the victim of the injury little of their attention. Meanwhile a figure glided into the group and knelt beside the injured man who lay upon the ice-covered street. It was a girl, not older than Laura and Jess, but one who was dressed in the veil and cloak of the Red Cross.

She was not the only Red Cross worker on Market Street that Saturday evening, for the drive for the big Red Cross fund had begun, and many workers were collecting. This girl, however seemed to have a practical knowledge of first-aid work. She drew forth a small case, wiped the blood away from the man's face with cotton, and then began to bandage the wound as his head rested against her knee.

"Somebody send for the ambulance," she commanded, in a clear and pleasant voice. "I think he has a fractured leg, and he may be hurt otherwise."

Her request brought the three girls of Central High to their senses. Bobby darted away to telephone to the hospital from her father's store. The older girls offered the Red Cross worker their aid.

For a year and a half the girls of Central High had been interested in the Girls' Branch League athletics; and with their training under Mrs. Case, the athletic instructor, they had all learned something about first-aid work.

The girls of Centerport had changed in character without a doubt since the three high schools of the city had become interested so deeply in girls' athletics. With the high schools of Keyport and Lumberport, an association of league units had been formed, and the girls of the five educational institutions were rivals to a proper degree in many games and sports.

How all this had begun and how Laura Belding by her individual efforts had

made possible the Central High's beautiful gymnasium and athletic field, is told in the first volume of this series, entitled: "The Girls of Central High; Or, Rivals for All Honors." This story served to introduce this party of young people who have met in the jewelry store, as well as a number of other characters, to the reader.

In "The Girls of Central High on Lake Luna; Or, The Crew That Won," the enthusiasm in sports among the girls of the five high schools reaches a high point.

As the three cities in the league are all situated upon the beautiful lake named above, aquatic games hold a high place in the estimation of the rival associations in the league. Fun and sports fill this second volume.

"The Girls of Central High at Basket Ball; Or, The Great Gymnasium Mystery," the third book, tells of several very exciting games in which the basket-ball team of Central High takes part, and the reader learns, as well, a good deal more about the individual characters of the girls themselves and of some very exciting adventures they have.

"The Girls of Central High on the Stage; Or, The Play That Took the Prize," the fourth volume in the series, is really Jess Morse's story, although Laura and their other close friends have much to do in the book and take part in the play which Jess wrote, and which was acted in the school auditorium. It was proved that Jess Morse had considerable talent for play writing, and the professional production of her school play aided the girl and her mother over a most trying financial experience.

The fifth volume, "The Girls of Central High on Track and Field; Or, The Champions of the School League," is an all around athletic story in which rivalries for place in school athletics, excitement and interest of plot, and stories of character building are woven into a tale calculated to hold the attention of any reader interested in high school doings.

During the summer previous to the opening of the present story in the series, these friends spent a most enjoyable time camping on Acorn Island, and the sixth tale, "The Girls of Central High in Camp; Or, The Old Professor's Secret," is as full of mystery, adventure, and fun as it can be. Since the end of the long vacation the Girls of Central High, as well as the boys who are their friends, had settled down to hard work both in studies and athletics. Ice had come early this year and already Lake Luna was frozen near the shore and most of the steamboat traffic between the lake cities had ceased.

The great pre-holiday Red Cross drive had now enthralled the girls of Central High, as well as the bulk of Centerport's population. Everybody wanted to put the city "over the top" with more than its quota subscribed to the fund.

In the first place, the boys' and girls' athletic associations of Central High were planning an Ice Carnival to raise funds for the cause, and it was because of that exhibition that Chet Belding and Lance Darby wished to get down to the ice that evening and try their own particular turn, after the

shopping expedition that also had been planned.

As it happened, however, neither the shopping nor the skating was done on this particular Saturday night.

As Bobby Hargrew ran to telephone to the hospital, Short and Long had grabbed the wrists of his two older and taller boy friends and led them out of the crowd in a very mysterious way.

"Did you get a good look at that car?" he whispered to Chet and Lance.

"Of course I didn't," said the latter. "It went up the street like the wind. Didn't it, Chet?"

"That rascal was going some when he turned the corner of Rapidan Street. I wonder he did not skid again and smash his car to pieces against the hydrant. Served him right if he had," Chet said.

"There were no chains on his wheels," said Short and Long, in the same mysterious way.

"You said it," agreed Lance. "What then?"

"There are not many cars in Centerport right now without chains on. The streets have been icy for more than twenty-four hours."

"Your statement is irrefutable," said Chet, grinning.

"Get it off your chest, Short and Long," begged Lance. "What do you mean?"

"I mean," said the earnest lad, "that I know a car that was out this afternoon without chains, and it was a seven-seater Perriton car--just as this one that knocked down Chet's friend was."

"It was a Perriton, I believe," murmured Lance.

But Chetwood Belding said: "I don't know whether that poor fellow is a friend of mine or not. If I have to give Pa fifty dollars--Whew!"

"But the car?" urged Lance Darby. "Who has a Perriton car, Short and Long?"

"And without chains?" added Chet, waking up to the main topic.

"Come along, fellows," said the younger lad. "I won't tell you. But I'll take you to where you can see the car I mean. If it still is without chains on the wheels, and has just been used--Well, we can talk about it then!"

"All right," said Chet. "We can't do any good here. Here comes the ambulance. That poor fellow is going to be in the hospital for some time, I bet."

There was such a crowd around the spot where the victim of the accident lay that the boys could not see the Central High girls, save Bobby Hargrew, who

came running back from her father's store just as the clanging of the ambulance gong warned the crowd that the hospital had responded in its usual prompt fashion.

The boys hailed the smaller girl and told her they were off to hunt for the car that had knocked down the victim. Then the three hurried away.

Meanwhile, in the center of the crowd Laura Belding and Jess Morse had been aiding the girl in the Red Cross uniform as best they could to care for the man who was hurt. The latter had not opened his eyes when the ambulance worked its way into the crowd and halted beside the three girls on their knees in the street.

"What have you there?" asked the young doctor, who swung himself off the rear of the truck.

Laura and Jess told him. The third girl, the one who had done the most for the unfortunate man, did not at first say a word.

The driver brought the rolled stretcher and blanket. He laid it down beside the victim. When the doctor had finished his brief notes he helped his aid lift the man to the stretcher. They picked it up and shoved it carefully into the ambulance.

"I know you, Miss Belding," said the doctor. "And this is Miss Morse, isn't it? Do you mind giving me your name and address?" he asked the third girl.

Was there a moment's hesitation on the part of the Red Cross girl? Laura thought there was; yet almost instantly the stranger replied:

"My name is Janet Steele."

"Ah! Your address?" repeated the doctor.

This time there was no doubt that the girl flushed, and more than a few seconds passed before she made answer:

"Thirty-seven Whiffle Street."

At the same moment somebody exclaimed: "Here comes Fatty Morehead, the cop. Better late than never," and a general laugh went up from the crowd.

Jess seized Laura's wrist, exclaiming: "Oh, Laura! he will want to take down our names and addresses, too. Let's get away."

The Red Cross girl uttered an ejaculation of chagrin. She began pushing her way out of the press, and in an opposite direction from that in which the portly policeman was coming.

Jess whispered swiftly in Laura's ear: "Come on! Let's follow her! I'm awfully interested in that Red Cross girl, Laura!"

"Why should you be?" asked her chum. "Although she looks like a nice girl,

I never saw her before."

"Neither did I," said Jess. "But did you hear the address she gave? That is the poor end of Whiffle Street, as you very well know, and mother and I used to live right across the street from that house. I did not know anybody lived in the old Eaton place. It has been empty for a long, long time."

CHAPTER III

ODD!

Bobby Hargrew met Laura and Jess on the edge of the crowd, for she had been unable to worm herself into the middle of it again, and told them swiftly of the boys' departure to hunt for the car that had done the damage.

"And that's just like the boys!" exclaimed Jess Morse, with some exasperation. "To run away and desert us!"

"I don't know but I'm glad," said Laura. "I don't feel much like shopping after seeing that poor man hurt."

"Or skating, either," complained Jess.

Presently the three overtook the strange girl. Bobby, whom Chet had said was "just as friendly with strangers as a pup with a waggy tail," immediately got into conversation with her.

"Say! was he hurt badly?" she asked.

"I think his right leg was broken," the Red Cross girl replied. "And his head was badly hurt. Your friends, here, could see that."

"He bled dreadfully," sighed Laura. "But you had the bandage on so nicely that the doctor did not even disturb it, my dear."

"Thank you," said the Red Cross girl. She hesitated on the corner of the side street. "I fear I must leave you here. I am going home."

"Oh," cried Jess, who was enormously curious, "we can go your way just as well as not, Miss Steele! We live at the other end of Whiffle Street--up on the hill, you know."

"All but me," put in Bobby. "But I can run right through Laura's yard to my house."

She indicated Laura as she spoke. The Red Cross girl looked at Mother Wit with some expectancy. Jess came to the rescue.

"Let's get acquainted," she said. "Why not? We'll never meet again under more thrilling circumstances," and she laughed. "This is Miss Laura Belding, Miss Steele. On your other hand is Miss Hargrew--Miss Clara Hargrew. I am Josephine Morse. I used to live across the street from the old Eaton place where you live now."

"You are a stranger in town, are you not?" Laura asked, taking the new girl's hand.

"Yes, Miss Belding. We have only been here four weeks. But I have worked in the Red Cross before--and one must do something, you know."

"Do something!" burst forth Bobby. "If you went to Central High and had Gee Gee for one of your teachers, you'd have plenty to do."

"We are all three Central High girls," said Laura gently. "Have you finished school, Miss Steele?"

"I have not been able to attend school regularly for two years," admitted the new girl. "I am afraid," and she smiled apologetically, "that you are all much further advanced in your education than I am. You see, my mother is an invalid and I must give her a great deal of my time. It does not interfere, however, with my doing a little for the Red Cross."

"I am sorry your mother is ill," said Laura.

"We were advised to come up here for her sake," said Janet Steele hastily. "We have been living in a coast town. The doctors thought an inland climate--a drier climate--would be beneficial."

"I hope it will prove so," said Laura.

"It seems a shame you can't get out with the other girls," Jess added.

"And come to school and let Gee Gee get after you," joined in Bobby grimly.

"Is she such a very strict disciplinarian?" asked Miss Steele, smiling down at the irrepressible one as they walked through the side street toward Whiffle.

"She's the limit," declared Bobby.

"Oh," said Laura mildly, "I think Miss Carrington is nowhere near so strict as she used to be. Margit Salgo really has made her quite human, you know."

"Say!" grumbled Bobby, "she can hand out demerits just as easy as ever. And she had her sense of humor extracted years ago."

"Has that fault cropped up lately, my dear?" asked Laura, laughing. "It must be so. What happened, Bobby?"

The younger girl, who was a sophomore, whereas Laura and Jess were juniors, came directly under Miss Carrington's attention in several classes. Bobby

was forever getting into trouble with the strict teacher.

"Why, look, now," said Bobby, warmly, "just what happened yesterday! English class. You know, that's nuts for Gee Gee. I was bothered enough, I can tell you, trying to correct a paper she had handed back to me, and she kept right on talking and asking questions, and the recitation period was almost ended. I didn't want to hang around there to correct that paper--"

"You know very well you should have taken it home to correct," Laura put in.

"Oh, don't tell me that! I take so much extra work home as it is, that Father Tom Hargrew asks me if I don't do anything at all in school. And, anyway, I didn't think Gee Gee saw me. But, of course, she did."

"And then what?" Jess asked.

"Why, she shot a question at me, and I didn't get it at first. 'Miss Hargrew! Pay attention!' she went on. Of course, that brought me up standing. 'What is a pseudonym?' she wanted to know. How silly! You know the trouble we've been having with that car Father Tom bought. 'I don't know what it is, Miss Carrington,' I told her. 'But if it is something that belongs to an automobile, father will have to buy a new one pretty soon, I'm sure.'"

"And she docked you for that!" exclaimed Jess, as though wildly amazed. "How cruel!"

"Really, I am afraid we are sometimes cruel to our dear teachers," laughed Laura. "But if they are too serious they are such a temptation to us witty ones."

"Now, don't be sarcastic, Mother Wit," said Jess, shaking her chum a little by the elbow. "You know very well you enjoy nagging the teachers a bit yourself, now and then. And Professor Dimp!"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" gasped Bobby suddenly. "Did you hear the latest about Old Dimple?"

"Now, girls," said Laura, quite sternly, "I refuse to hear of Professor Dimp being made a goose of."

"Gander, dear! Gander!" exclaimed Jess, *sotto voce*.

"He's an old dear," declared Laura, quite as earnestly. "We found that out, I am sure, when we went camping on Acorn Island last summer."

"True! True!" admitted her chum.

"Oh, nobody wants to hurt the old fellow," chuckled Bobby. "But one day this week there was a bunch of the boys down at the post-office, and Professor Dimp came in to mail a letter. You know he is always reading on the street when he walks; never sees anybody, and goes stumbling about

blindly with a book under his nose. He got into the revolving door and Short and Long declares Old Dimple went around ten times before he knew enough to come out--and then he was on the street again and had failed to mail the letter."

"Oh, Bobby!" cried Jess, while Miss Steele was quite convulsed by the statement.

"He's so absent-minded," said Laura sympathetically. "Why didn't Short and Long tell him he was in the revolving door?"

"Humph!" chuckled Bobby, "I guess Short thought the old fellow needed the exercise."

Just then the girls came to the corner of Whiffle Street. The street was narrow and crooked in an elbow here. The houses were mostly small, and were out of repair. It was, indeed, the poor end of Whiffle Street. On the hill end were some of the best residences in Centerport.

"There's the Eaton place across the street," said Jess briskly. "I see there is a light, Miss Steele."

"That is mother's room on the first floor--right off the piazza. You know, we could not begin to use all the house," the girl added frankly. "There are only mother and I and Aunt Jinny."

"Oh! Your aunt?" asked Jess.

"She is mother's old nurse. She has come with us--to help do the housework, you know," Miss Steele said frankly, yet again flushing a little. "I--I guess I have never lived just as you girls do. We have moved around a great deal. I have got such education as I have by fits and starts, you see. I suppose you three girls have a perfectly delightful time at your Central High?"

"Especially when Gee Gee gets after us with a sharp stick," grumbled Bobby.

"Don't mind Bobby," said Laura, laughing. "She is dreadfully slangy, and sometimes quite impossible. We do have fine times at Central High. Especially in our games and athletic work."

"Miss Steele must be sure and come to our Ice Carnival next week," said Jess.

"Ice Carnival?" cried the Red Cross girl. "And I just love to skate!"

There came a sudden tapping on the window of the lighted room in the old Eaton house. The girls had crossed the street and were standing at the gate. Janet Steele wheeled quickly and waved her hand. A sitting figure was dimly outlined at the long, French window.

"Oh!" Janet said. "Mother wants us to come in. She doesn't see many people--and she enjoys young folk. Won't you come in? It will be a pleasure

for us both."

Jess and Bobby looked at Laura. They allowed Mother Wit to decide the question, and she was but a few seconds in doing so.

"Why, of course! It's not late," she said. "We shall stay but a minute this time, Miss Steele."

"Call me Janet," whispered the Red Cross girl, squeezing Laura's arm as they went through the sagging gate.

The quartette climbed the steep steps to the piazza. That the Eaton house was in bad repair was proved by the broken boards in steps and piazza floor and the dilapidated condition of the railing. Even the lock of the front door was broken. Janet turned the knob and ushered them into the dimly-lit hall.

This was neatly if sparsely furnished. And everything seemed scrupulously clean. Their young hostess opened the door into her mother's room, which was that originally intended for the parlor.

The eager and curious girls of Central High saw first of all the figure of the woman in the wheel chair by the window. She had pulled down the shade now and dropped the curtains into place. The whole room was warm and well lighted. There was a gas chandelier lighted to the full and an open grate heaped with red coals. There was a good rug, comfortable chairs, and a canopied bed set in a corner. A tea-table with furnishings was drawn up near the fireplace. If one was obliged to spend one's time in a single room, this apartment seemed amply furnished for such a condition.

Mrs. Steele herself was no wan and hopeless-looking invalid. She was as buxom as Janet, and Janet was as well built a girl, even, as Laura Belding. The invalid had shrunken none in body or limbs. She owned, too, a very attractive smile, and she held out both hands to greet her young visitors.

"I am delighted!" she said in a strong, quick voice, which matched her smile and bright glance perfectly. "Why, Janey, you may go out every evening, if you will only bring back with you such a bevy of fresh, sweet faces. Introduce me--do!"

The introductions were made amid considerable gaiety. Mother Wit took the lead in telling Mrs. Steele who they were. Later Janet related the accident on Market Street, which had led to her acquaintance with the three girls of Central High.

Laura's keen eyes were not alone fixed upon Mrs. Steele while they talked. She took into consideration everything in the house. There was no mark of poverty; yet the Steeles lived in a house in a poor neighborhood and one that was positively out of repair, and they occupied only a small part of it.

When the three girls came out again and Janet had gone in and closed the door, Laura was in a brown study.

"Wake up, Mother Wit!" commanded Jess. "What do you think of the Steeles-- and all?"

All Laura Belding could say in comment, was:

"Odd!"

CHAPTER IV

THE MYSTERY MAN

The three boys who had set off to find the car that had knocked down the stranger on the icy street were as mysterious the next day as they could be. At least, so their girl friends declared.

Being Sunday, there was no general gathering of the Central High girls and boys, but Laura, naturally, saw her brother early. He was coming from his shower in bathrobe and slippers when Laura looked out of her own door.

"What sort of fox-and-goose chase did Short and Long take you and Lance away on?" she demanded.

"Oh, I don't know that he was altogether foolish," said Chet doubtfully.

"Then did you really find some trace of the car?" cried Laura, eagerly.

"Well, we found a car. Yes."

"Goodness to gracious!" as poor Lizzie Bean says. You are noncommunicative, Chetwood Belding. What do you mean--you found a car?"

"Laura," said her brother, "I don't know--nor does Lance, or Short and Long--whether the fellow we suspect had anything to do with that accident or not."

"Oh!"

"And we don't want to get him in wrong."

"Who is it?" demanded his sister, bluntly.

"No. We won't tell anybody who it is we suspect until we make further investigations."

"I declare, you are as mysterious as a regular detective! And suppose the police do make inquiries?"

"They will, of course,"

"And what will you boys tell them?"

"Pooh!" returned Chet, going on to his room to dress, "they won't ask us because they don't know we know anything about it"

"I guess you don't know much!" shouted Laura after him before he closed his door.

It was the same when Jess Morse met Lance Darby on the way to Sunday School.

"Ho, Launcelot!" she cried. "Tell us all the news--that is a good child. Who was that awful person who ran down the man last night? I hear from Dr. Agnew that they had to patch the poor victim up a good deal at the hospital. Did you boys find the guilty party?"

"I don't know that we did," said Darby. "You see, nobody seemed to see the license number of the automobile."

"But didn't Short and Long have suspicions?"

"Well, what are suspicions?" demanded the boy. "We all agreed to say nothing about it unless we have proof. And we haven't any proof--as yet."

"Why, I believe you are 'holding out' on your friends, Lance," declared Jess, in surprise. "For shame!"

"Aw, ask Chet--if you must know!" exclaimed Lance, hurrying away.

As it chanced it was Bobby Hargrew who attempted to play inquisitor with Short and Long, meeting the boy with the youngest Long, Tommy, on the slippery hill of Nugent Street Tommy was so bundled up in a "Teddy Bear" costume that he could scarcely trudge along, and he held tightly to his brother's hand.

"For goodness' sake!" exclaimed Bobby, when she saw Tommy slipping all over the icy sidewalk, "what is the matter with that boy?"

"He hasn't got his sea-legs on," grinned Short and Long.

"You mean to tell me he is nearly five years old and can walk no better than _that?_" exclaimed Bobby teasingly. "Why, we have a little dog at home that isn't even a year old yet, and he can ran right over this ice. He can walk twice as good as Tommy does."

"Hoh!" exclaimed that youngster defensively. "That dog's got twice as many legs as I have."

"Right you are, Kid!" chuckled his brother. "He got you there, Clara."

"And did you boys get that man who ran the poor fellow down on Market Street last night?" demanded Bobby, with interest. "Did you have him

arrested?"

"No. What do you suppose? We're not going around snitching to the police," growled Short and Long.

"But if that man at the hospital is seriously hurt----"

"Oh, we're not sure it's the right car," said the boy, and evidently did not wish to talk about it.

"Billy Long!" exclaimed the girl. "Are you boys trying to defend the guilty person?"

"Aw----"

"Suppose that man at the hospital dies?"

"Pshaw! He wasn't hurt as bad as all that."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've been to the hospital to find out He's got a broken leg and a broken head----"

"Is he conscious yet?" demanded Bobby Hargrew quickly.

"No-o. They say he doesn't know anybody--and nobody knows who he is."

"Now you see!" cried the girl "Maybe he will die! And you boys will let the man who did it get away."

"Oh, he won't get away," grumbled Short and Long. "We know where to find him when we want to."

"You'd better let the police know where to find him," said Bobby tartly.

"You're not the police, Bobby Hargrew!" returned Short and Long, grinning and going on with Tommy.

The girls, of course, got together and compared notes and decided that the boys were "real mean, so now!" To pay Chet and Lance and Billy Long for being so secretive about the person they suspected of having caused the injury to the stranger Saturday evening, the three girls went alone that Sunday afternoon to the hospital to inquire after the injured man.

And there they met Janet Steele again. The Red Cross girl had been making inquiries, too, about the same case.

"It really is a very serious matter," Janet said to her new friends. "The man who knocked him down should be found. Although the doctors think he has no internal injuries after all, there is a compound fracture which will keep him in bed for a long time, and in addition he seems unable to give any satisfactory explanation of who he is or where he comes from."

"Goodness!" exclaimed Jess Morse. "Do you mean he has lost his mind?"

"Merely mislaid it," said Janet with a smile. "Or, at least, he cannot remember his name and address."

"Didn't he have any papers about him that explain those points?" asked Laura.

"That seems to be odd, too," said Janet "No. Not a mark on his clothing, either. But he was plentifully supplied with money, and all the bills were brand new."

"Oh!" exclaimed Laura. "That reminds me. That funny bill he passed on Chet was brand new, too. I wonder if all his money is queer?"

"What do you mean?" asked Janet, wonderingly. "Is the man a criminal, do you think?"

Laura and Jess explained about the peculiarly printed bill, which had given the first named so much trouble in making up her father's accounts the evening before.

"But that may be all explained in time," said Janet.

"All right," grumbled Bobby Hargrew. "But suppose poor Chet has to lose fifty dollars?"

"Father is going to take the bill to the bank to-morrow to see if they can explain the mystery," Laura said.

"But that will not explain the mystery of the stranger." said Jess. "Why, he is a regular 'man of mystery,' isn't he?"

"Humph!" said Bobby. "And so is the fellow the boys think ran him down. He is a man of mystery as well."

CHAPTER V

SAND IN THE GEARS

Since the whole school had taken such a tremendous interest in "the profession" at the time Central High blossomed forth in Jess Morse's play, the M.O.R.s had given several playlets, and Mrs. Case, the physical instructor, had staged folk dances and tableaux in the big hall.

For the Red Cross the association of girls connected with the Girls Branch Athletic League that had carried forward these smaller affairs, had determined to stage "a real play." Nellie Agnew, the doctor's daughter, and

secretary of the club, had sent to a publisher for copies of plays that could be put on by amateurs, and interest in the affair waxed high already.

The principal point of decision was the identity of the play they were to produce. Mr. Sharp and the other members of the school faculty had agreed to let the girls act, and the big hall, or auditorium, could be used for the production. At noon on Monday the girls interested in the performance met in the principals office to decide upon the play.

"And of course," grumbled Bobby Hargrew to the Lockwood twins, Dora and Dorothy, "all the teachers have got to come and interfere. We can't do a sol-i-ta-ry thing without Gee Gee, or Miss Black, or some of them, poking their noses into it."

"You can't say that Professor Dimp pokes his nose into our affairs," laughed Dora.

"No, indeed," said her twin. "Outside of his Latin and physics he doesn't seem to have a single idea."

"Doesn't he?" scoffed Bobby. "The boys say he's gone into the dressmaking business, or something."

"What is that?" asked Dora, smiling. "What do they mean?"

"Why, the professor's niece is living with him now. He is not much used to having a woman in his sitting-room, I guess. She sits and sews with him in the evening while he reads or corrects our futile work," said Bobby, grinning.

"The other night Ellie Lingard--that's his niece--lost her scissors and she said they hunted all over the room for them. The next morning in one of the physics classes the professor opened his book, and there were the lost scissors, which he had tucked into it for a bookmark while he helped Ellie Lingard hunt for her lost property."

"Oh, oh!" laughed the twins.

"The worst of it was," continued Bobby, with an elfish grin, "Old Dimple grabbed them up and said right out loud: 'Oh, here they are, Ellie!' The boys just hooted, and poor Old Dimp was as mad as a hatter."

"The poor old man," said Dorothy commiseratingly.

It was a fact that, although Professor Dimp did not interfere in this play business, most of the other teachers desired to have their opinions considered. The girls would not have minded Mr. Sharp. Indeed, they courted his advice. But when Miss Grace Gee Carrington stood up to speak, some of them audibly groaned.

Miss Carrington was Mr. Sharp's assistant and almost in complete control of the girls of the school. At least, the girls came in contact with her much more than they did with Mr. Sharp himself.

She was a very stiff and precise woman, with an acrid temper and a sharp tongue. She had been teaching unruly girls for so many years that she was to a degree quite soured upon the world--especially that world of school which she had so much to do with.

Of late, however, Miss Carrington had become interested "quite in a human way," her girls said, in a person who had first appeared to the ken of the girls of Central High as a Gypsy girl. Margit Salgo's father, a Hungarian Gypsy musician, had married Miss Carrington's sister, much against the desire of Miss Grace Gee Carrington herself. When the orphaned Margit found her way to Centerport she made such an impression upon her aunt's heart that the latter finally took the girl into her own home and adopted her as "Margaret Carrington."

That, however, could not change Miss Carrington's nature. She was severe and (in the opinion of fly-away Bobby Hargrew) she was much inclined to interfere in the girls' affairs. On this occasion the girls were not disappointed when Miss Carrington "said her little say."

"I approve of any acceptable attempt to raise funds for such a worthy object as this we have in mind," said Miss Carrington. "An exhibition which will interest the school in general and our parents and friends likewise, meets, I am sure, with the approval of us all. Some of our young ladies, I feel quite sure, show some talent for playing, and much interest therein. Without meaning to pun, I would add that I wish they showed as great talent for work as for play."

"She could not help giving us that dig, if she were to be martyred for it," Nellie Agnew whispered to Laura.

"Sh! She'll see your lips move," warned Dora Lockwood, on the other side of the doctor's daughter. "I believe she has learned lip reading."

Miss Carrington went on quite calmly: "The first consideration, however, it seems to me, is the selection of the play. I should not wish to see the standard of Central High lowered by the acting of a play that would cater only to the amusement-loving crowd. It should be educational. We should achieve in a small way what the Greek players tried to teach--a love of beauty, of form, of some great truth that can be inculcated in this way on the public mind."

"But, Miss Carrington!" cried Bess Yeager, one of the seniors, almost interrupting the staid teacher, "we want to make money for the Red Cross. We could not get a room full with a Greek play."

"I beg Miss Yeager's pardon," said Miss Carrington stiffly. "We have our standard of education to uphold first of all."

"I hope you will excuse me, Miss Carrington," said Laura, likewise rising to object. "Our first object is to give the people something that will amuse them so that they will crowd the auditorium. Otherwise our object will not have been achieved. This is a purely money-making scheme," added

the jeweler's daughter with her low, sweet laugh.

"I am amazed to hear you say so!" exclaimed the instructor, quick for argument at any time. "Have you young ladies no higher desire than to make the rabble laugh?"

"I want you to know," muttered Jess Morse, "that my mother is coming, and she isn't 'rabble.'"

Perhaps it was fortunate that Miss Carrington did not hear this comment. But she could not fail to hear some of the others made by the girls. There was earnest protest in all parts of the room. Mr. Sharp brought them to order.

"Miss Carrington has, under ordinary circumstances, made an excellent point, and I want you all to notice it," said the principal. "We are an educational institution here on the hill. If we were giving a class play, or anything like that, I should vote for Miss Carrington's idea. At such a time something primarily educational should be in order.

"But as I understand it, you young ladies are going to act for the benefit of the Red Cross fund, and what will benefit that fund the most is the drawing together of a well-paying crowd to see you act.

"I am afraid we shall have to set aside our own desires, Miss Carrington," he continued, smiling at his assistant. "We must let the actors choose their own play--as long as it is a proper one--and abide for once by the decision of those of our friends who wish to be amused rather than educated."

"He's half backing her up!" complained Dora.

"Well, he has to pour oil on the troubled waters," whispered Laura.

"Huh!" grumbled Bobby Hargrew. "But Gee Gee is determined to throw sand in the gears, not oil on the waters. She always does."

Really, Miss Carrington seemed in an interfering mood that day. Nellie had a collection of plays from which they were supposed to choose that very session the one to be acted. There was but brief time to learn the parts and the acting directions. But Mr. Mann, who had directed them in other plays, said he thought he would be able to whip the girls into shape for a performance in two weeks. Although they were amateurs, they had all had some experience.

When the girls themselves got a chance to talk it was shown that their desires were all for a parlor comedy with bright lines, some farcical turns to the plot, but a play of sufficient weight to gain the approval of sober-minded people. It was, however, far from being classic.

"Such a play is preposterous!" ejaculated Miss Carrington, breaking out again. "Don't you think so yourself, Mr. Sharp?"

The principal had the book in his hand and was skimming through some of the dialogue. If the truth was told he was on a broad grin.

"I don't know about that, Miss Carrington. It--it is really very funny."

"Funny!" gasped his assistant, with all the emphasis she dared show in the presence of the principal. "As though to make fun should be our target!"

"What would you like to have us play?" asked Bobby, daringly. "Julius Caesar? If we do, I want to play old Julius. He dies in the first act. The rest of us would be killed lingeringly by the audience, I know, before the last."

"Miss Hargrew!" snapped the teacher. Then she remembered that this was not a recitation and she could not easily punish the girl. She shook her head and looked offended during the remainder of the discussion.

"But you know very well," snapped Lily Pendleton, a rather overdressed girl, as they all crowded out of the schoolhouse after the meeting, "that Gee Gee will do her wickedest to spoil it all."

"Oh, no!" cried Laura. "Not when it is for the Red Cross!"

"It wouldn't matter what the object was," said Jess morosely. "She always does try to crab the game."

"Goodness, Josephine!" gasped her chum, "you are positively as slangy as Chet."

"I guess I catch it from him," admitted Jess Morse. "And she is a crab!"

"Now girls!" called Nellie, a regular Martha for trouble at the present moment. "Now girls, remember the 'sides' will be here day after tomorrow, and Mr. Mann will look us over and give out the parts that afternoon in the small hall. Nobody must be absent. We want this show to be the biggest success that ever was."

"It won't be if Gee Gee can help it," growled Bobby Hargrew, shaking her curls.

CHAPTER VI

THE BANK-NOTE

"There's one sure thing about it," Lance Darby said to Laura when she told him of the way in which Miss Carrington had tried to interfere with the girls' choice of the play, "she cannot butt into the Ice Carnival arrangements. Nobody but your Mrs. Case and our Mr. Haskins has anything to

say about the Carnival Committee's arrangements."

"Oh! Indeed?" laughed Laura. "There you are mistaken about the far-reaching influence of our Miss Carrington."

"What do you mean?"

"You forget that our share of the Carnival is under the jurisdiction of the Girls Branch League, and in the constitution and by-laws of that association it is stated that none of us girls can take part in any exhibition without the consent of our teachers, and without, indeed, having a certain standing in all branches of study. Miss Carrington can get her word in right there."

"Wow, wow! That's so, I presume," admitted Lance.

"But we have gone so far now," said Laura complacently, "that I don't think even Bobby will be refused permission to join in the festivities--and Bobby is a splendid little skater, Lance."

"Bobby is all right," agreed the youth. "But here comes old Chet--and his face is as long as the moral law. He is still worried about that fifty dollars he may have to dig down into his jeans for--if your father sticks to what he said he'd do."

Chetwood had a cheerful word, however, despite his serious aspect.

"Have you seen the ice, Lance?" he demanded, brightening up.

"Not to-day, old boy."

"It's scrumptious--just!" exclaimed the big fellow. "They have been shaving it, and have got it all roped off."

"Better have somebody watch it, too, or the kids from downtown will get in there and cut it all up. Just like 'em," growled Lance.

"Don't fret. Old Godey is on guard. Trust him to keep the kids off the track," said Chet. "Is father at home, Laura?"

"He's just come in," said his sister. "Has he found out about that bank-note yet?"

"That is what I wanted to know," said the worried Chet. "I've been over to the hospital this afternoon--before I went down to the lake shore. That chap who was hurt is off his nanny----"

"Chet! Don't let mother hear you," begged Laura, yet laughing.

"I wouldn't want the mater to be shocked," admitted Chet. "But that is exactly what is the trouble with that man who gave me the phony bill. The doctor told me the crack he got on the head had injured his brain."

"The poor man!" sighed his sister.

"What about 'poor me'?" demanded Chet indignantly. "And they say he carried a roll of brand new bills big enough to choke a cow! The doctor says he thinks the money is good, too. But he passed that hundred-dollar note on me----"

"If it is a hundred," interjected Lance.

"Now you said a forkful," grumbled Chet, shaking his head. "Let's go in and see what father has to say about it. He was going to see Mr. Monroe at the First National. They say Mr. Monroe knows all about money--knew the fellow who invented it, personally, I guess."

The young folks found Mr. Belding in the library, and he welcomed them with his customary smile when the three came in.

"The bank-note?" he repeated. "I left it for Mr. Monroe to look at. He was out of town. But he will tell me when he returns--if he knows about it. It is a curious thing. And I hope it will teach you a lesson, Chetwood."

"Sure!" grumbled Chet, "Of course, there is nothing so important in this world as learning lessons. Little thing about me being nicked fifty dollars isn't considered."

His father laughed at his rueful countenance. "Well, Son, I can't offer you much sympathy. Perhaps the Treasury Department will make it right. And how about that man who gave it to you? He can't get far with a broken leg."

"He's gone far enough already," declared Chet. "They say he has lost his memory."

"What's that?" cried Mr. Belding.

"Looks fishy, doesn't it?" said Lance. "Lots of folks who owe money lose their memories."

"No," said Chet, shaking his head. "This chap really got a hard bang on the head, and the doctors say he may never remember who he is."

"Lost his identity?" demanded Mr. Belding.

"Completely. At least, he doesn't know his name or where he came from. He remembers a part of his life, they say, for he seems to think he has been in Alaska. Asked the nurse, in fact, how long Sitka had had such a hospital as this. Thought he was in Sitka, you see."

"Why, isn't it strange?" Laura said. "The poor fellow!"

"He's not poor, I tell you," said the literal Chet.

"He's got a lot of money. But not a card, or a mark about him--not even on his clothes--to tell who he is."

"How about his hat?" questioned Lance. "And his suit? The labels, I mean."

"The hat was brand new," said Chet, "and was bought right here in Centerport. Oh, the hospital folks have been trying through the police to find out something about him. Nothing doing, they say."

"Why," said Mr. Belding thoughtfully, "there must be some way of discovering who the unfortunate is, even if he cannot remember himself."

"Who do you mean, Pa, by 'the unfortunate'?" demanded his son. "I should think I was the unfortunate. Especially if that bank-note is phony."

"But you did not get a broken leg--and a broken head--out of it," his father said dryly.

"That's all right," muttered Chet "But I am likely to have a broken pocketbook, all right all right!"

CHAPTER VII

SOMETHING EXCITING

Mr. Belding was not unmindful of his son's anxiety regarding the odd bank-note that Chet had taken over the counter in the jewelry store. Besides, Laura sat herself upon the arm of his big Morris chair after dinner that Monday evening, and said:

"You know, dear Pa, Chet is a pretty good boy. And fifty dollars is much more money than he can afford to lose--all in one bunch."

"Indeed?" said her father indignantly. "And how about me? With my expensive family, do you think I can afford to lose fifty dollars? And the boy is careless."

"I deny it," said Laura briskly.

"Chet! not careless?"

"Only thoughtless."

"What is the difference?"

"Academic, or moral?" demanded Mother Wit, looking at him slyly.

"Oh, well, it doesn't pay to split hairs with you," declared her father, pinching a warm cheek until it was rosier than ever. "But what's the big idea, as Chet himself would say?"

"Why, now, Pa Belding----"

"Out with it! What do you want me to do?"

"I--I thought if you'd make Chet pay only half of the fifty dollars, that perhaps you lost----"

"Well?" he growled, in apparent indignation still.

"Why, I would pay the other twenty-five!" burst out Laura hurriedly. "Only you must promise not to tell Chet."

"What do you mean? To pay half his fine?"

"Well, you don't need to halloo so about it, Pa dear," she pouted.

"I wouldn't let you!"

"Oh, yes you would. You know it is going to be awfully hard on Chet to take that money out of the bank to pay you."

"There, there!" said Mr. Belding gruffly. "We won't talk about it--yet. Perhaps we'll find the bank-note is all right."

But he said afterward to his wife that evening: "What are we going to do with such children, Mother? You can't punish one without hurting the other right to the quick."

"We have been blessed in our children, Henry," said Mrs. Belding proudly. "And--really--Chet should not be too much blamed."

"There, there!" exclaimed her husband in a disgusted tone of voice. "You're every whit as bad as Laura."

Mr. Monroe did not return to the bank for several days; and meanwhile other important and interesting things were happening. The three boys who seemed to have secret knowledge about the accident on Market Street refused to answer the questions of their girl friends as to the identity of the car that had run the victim down.

"You are just the meanest boys!" flared out Bobby Hargrew, as they all trooped down to Lake Luna to take almost the last look at the roped-off arena before the carnival would twinkle its lights that evening at six o'clock.

"I don't know, Bobby," drawled Chet. "I believe we really could be meaner if we tried."

"No you couldn't!" snapped Clara Hargrew with finality.

"Oh, girls!" gasped Laura suddenly, "tell me what this is coming up the hill? Or am I seeing something that you folks don't?"

"Gee!" exclaimed the slangy Bobby, forgetting her indignation with Chet and the other boys. "Is it? Can it be?"

"Pretty Sweet!" ejaculated Jess, beginning to laugh. "And he is in his forest green hunting suit. _I_ call it his 'Robin Ridinghood' suit."

"It just matches him, all right," said Lance. "He's verdant green and so is the suit. And look how he is carrying that gun, will you?"

The gun was in its case, but the boy in question was carrying the shotgun in a most awkward manner. Without a doubt he was half afraid of it.

"And I bet he hasn't had a charge in it all the time he's been out. Who did he go with?" asked Chet.

"Some of the East Siders. They cater to him a lot, and you know," said Lance, with disgust, "tight as Purty is with money, if you flatter him you can pull his leg."

"Dear me!" murmured Laura, "it is not in your province to use such slang, Lance. Leave that to Chet and Bobby."

"Hey, Pretty!" Chet shouted to the very dandified lad, as he crossed the street toward them. "What luck, old top?"

Although when they had first seen him, Prettyman Sweet was undoubtedly footsore, he began to strut now and pride "fairly exuded from his countenance," as Jess whispered to her chum.

"Did you get any cottontails?" demanded Lance.

"Oh, a few--a few, muh boy," declared Pretty Sweet airily.

Then they saw that he had a game bag slung over his shoulder in true sportsman style.

"I did not suppose you would go out to shoot the poor, innocent little rabbits, Mr. Sweet," said Laura, with sober face but dancing eyes. "They have never done you any harm."

"I bet a real bad rabbit would make Purty run," muttered Bobby.

"Oh, Miss Belding!" said the school dandy. "You know I'm awf'ly keen on sport--awf'ly keen, doncher know. I just _have_ to get a day now and then in the woods, when game is in season."

"He's as keen on it as the two Irishmen were, who went hunting for the first time," broke in Bobby. "When they sighted a bird sitting on a bush Meehan took very careful aim and prepared to fire. Said his friend, grabbing him by the arm:

"Don't fire, Meehan! Shure an' yez haven't loaded yer gun."

"That's as it may be, me lad,' retorted Meehan, 'but fire I must. The bur-rd won't wait!"

Prettyman Sweet was used to being laughed at, yet he flushed at the gibe.

"Never mind," he said. "I bring home the game, just the same."

"You 'bring home the bacon,' in other words," said Chet, approaching him. "Let's see the bunnies?"

Nothing loath, the overdressed boy opened the bag and displayed his plunder. He brought two big hares out of the bag by their ears and held them up with pride.

"Bet they were trapped," said Bobby in an undertone.

"They were not trapped!" cried Purt Sweet sharply. "See! That is where one was shot! And there is the other--see?"

"Jinks!" said Lance. "Both through the head. _You_ never did it, Purt?"

"I did so!" cried the huntsman angrily. "I shot them both."

Chet was looking them over closely. He shook his head.

"They have been shot all right," he said. "And you shot them over there on Cavern Island?"

"I can prove it," said Purt haughtily.

"That's all right," said Chet thoughtfully. "You may have shot them--and on Cavern Island. But whose rabbits were they before you bought them?"

"What? I--Oh!"

Bobby and Jess began to giggle. Chet grinned as he added:

"Those are Belgian hares, not rabbits, Pretty. Somebody has put something over on you. Belgian hares don't run wild in the woods of Cavern Island--that is sure."

"Bet he shot them hanging up on a fence," snapped Short and Long, who thus far had said never a word to Prettyman Sweet.

"And I know the market to-day is full of Belgian hares," chuckled Chet. "Oh, Purt! you never could pull off anything like that on us in a hundred years."

"I don't care--I--I--"

The angry Purt snatched up his game bag and marched away.

"That he's been caught in the trick puts a crimp in him," chuckled Chet

Belding.

"And that isn't all that ought to happen to him," muttered Short and Long, who seemed to have become suddenly very bitter against the dandified Sweet.

"Can it, Billy, can it," advised Lance. "Give a calf rope enough and he will hang himself."

"And maybe that fellow ought to be hung," was Short and Long's further comment.

"Why, Billy!" exclaimed Laura, "what ever do you mean?"

"Yes, Short and Long," said Jess. "Why the 'orrid hobservation about poor Purt?"

Perhaps Billy Long would have blurted out something, had not another incident taken place which so excited all the young people that they forgot Purt Sweet and his foibles.

The group had reached Lakeside Avenue, which overlooked many shore estates and some private docks. This was the residential end of Centerport, and the vicinity in summer was lovely. Now the outlook on Lake Luna's sparkling surface--frozen in a sheen of ice to the shore of Cavern Island in the middle of the lake--was wonderfully attractive.

At the foot of Nugent Street, which they now reached, the girls and boys from Central High heard suddenly a great shouting and peals of laughter from up the hill. Some snow still lay on the side of Nugent Street; and the hill was a glare of ice. Down the steep descent were coming three or four heavy sleds loaded with young folks. Many of them were girls and boys of Central High.

"Some coasting!" exclaimed Chet. "I had no idea it was so good. We ought to get our bob out, Lance."

"Oh, see, Laura!" murmured Jess. "There comes Janet Steele. She must have been canvassing for Red Cross members away over here. I wish we had time to do some of that work."

The Red Cross girl appeared from around a turn in the avenue, and the instant she spied her new friends she waved her gloved hand.

"Is that the girl who gave first-aid to the man on Market Street Saturday night?" asked Chet.

"Some little queen, isn't she?" rejoined Lance, with twinkling eyes.

"Oh," said Laura placidly, "you needn't think that you can get us girls jealous about Janet Steele. She is an awfully sweet girl."

"And she isn't little at all," put in Jess, tossing her head. "She is as husky as Eve Sitz."

Before they could say more, or further hail the Red Cross girl, there was a crash and terrific rattling around the turn of the avenue. The next instant a horse appeared, madly galloping along the roadway, and drawing the shattered remains of a grocery wagon after him.

The maddened beast would, so it seemed, cross the foot of Nugent Street just as the bobsleds shot down to that point. Across the avenue was a steep bank against which the sleds were easily halted. But they could not be stopped before they crossed Lakeside Avenue!

CHAPTER VIII

THE FOREFRONT OF TROUBLE

The three boys drew Laura and her girl friends into the gateway of a residence that faced the lake. The Red Cross girl was on the other side of Nugent Street, and the runaway horse was coming along the avenue behind her.

Chet would have leaped away to her assistance had not Jess grabbed him by the arm and screamed. The sleds were almost at the crossing, and surely Chet Belding would have been knocked down.

Janet Steele proved to be perfectly able to look out for herself. And on this occasion she could even do more than that.

She whirled and saw the horse coming with the wrecked wagon. She could not see up the hill of Nugent Street, for the corner house barred her vision in that direction. But without doubt she had heard the eager shouts of the coasters and understood what was ahead of them.

The runaway would cross the foot of the hill just in time, perhaps, to collide with one or more of the bobsleds.

Almost opposite the foot of Nugent Street and right beside the steep bank against which the coasters had been wont to stop their sleds, was a narrow lane pitching toward the lakeshore. This lane was near Janet Steele.

Chet saw it and realized how the horse might be turned. But the boy was too far away. Even as he shook off Jess Morse's frenzied hold on his arm, the runaway was upon Janet Steele.

The latter had whipped off the Red Cross veil she wore. Seizing it by both extremes she allowed the veil to float out on the brisk winter breeze, darting with it into the street.

The runaway's glaring eyes caught sight of the flapping folds of the veil, and he swerved, his hoofs sliding on the slippery drive. The eyes of a

horse magnify objects tremendously, and the girl's figure and her flowing veil probably looked to the frightened animal like some awful and threatening bogey.

Scrambling and snorting, he swerved to the side of the road, saw the open lane, and the next moment thundered into it, the broken wagon skidding across the lane and smashing into a gatepost.

It was at the same instant that the head sled came sweeping down Nugent Street, crossed the avenue, and stood almost on end against the bank, stopping abruptly in the snow bank.

The other sleds poured down and stopped; but none had been in so much danger as that first one. Laura and Chet and their friends started on the run for the spot--and for Janet Steele.

"Oh! _Oh! OH!_" shrieked in crescendo one girl who had ridden on the first bobsled. "We might have been killed!"

Some of the boys ran after the horse. The rest of the young people surrounded Janet Steele.

"How brave you were," murmured Jess Morse admiringly.

"You've got a head on you, sure enough!" exclaimed Bobby Hargrew, while the Red Cross girl, blushing and with downcast eyes, began hastily to adjust her veil again.

"Oh, it was nothing," murmured Janet.

"Tell it to Lily. Here comes Lily Pendleton," said Jess, smiling again. "She won't think it was nothing."

The girl who had shrieked so loudly came up quickly to the group of Central High girls.

"Did you turn that horse?" she demanded of Janet Steele. "You are a regular duck! We might have all been killed! I never will ride down a hill with Freddy Brubach again! There should have been somebody down here to signal that we were coming!"

"Guess the horse would not have paid much attention to signals, Lil," laughed Laura.

"Only the kind that Miss Steele waved," added Bobby.

"Is that your name?" Lily Pendleton asked the Red Cross girl. "I'm awfully glad to know you."

"And much gladder that she was right on the job here when the horse came along, aren't you, Lil?" chuckled Bobby.

"She ought to have a medal," declared one of the other girls.

"Let's write to Mr. Carnegie about her," proposed Jess, but good-naturedly, and hugged Janet now that she had rearranged her veil.

"Oh, dear me!" gasped Janet Steele, "please don't make so much over so little. I shall almost be sorry that I turned the horse into the lane. And it was a little thing. I am not afraid of horses."

"A mere medal is nothing to Miss Steele, I bet," said Bobby, the emphatic. "I expect she has a trunk full of 'em. Like the German army officer who had his chest covered with iron crosses and medals and the like. Somebody asked him how he came to get them all.

"'Vell,' he said, pointing to the biggest and shiniest medal, 'I got dot py meestake; undt dey gif me de odders because I got dot one!'"

"Oh, you and your jokes, Bobby!" said Lily Pendleton, with some scorn. "This was a serious business. And there is another very serious matter, girls, that I have to call to your attention," she added, turning to Laura and Jess.

"What has gone wrong? Nothing about the play, I hope!" cried Jess.

"It is worse, because it is right at hand," said Lily, shaking her head. "What do you suppose Miss Carrington has done?"

"Oh, Gee Gee!" groaned Bobby, in despair. "I knew she would break out in a fresh spot."

"Do tell us what it is," begged Jess Morse.

"It is about Hessie," said Lily.

"Hester Grimes?" demanded Laura, with a rather grim expression. "What has happened to her now?"

"Why!" cried Lily, rather sharply, "you speak as though Hessie was always getting into trouble."

"You cannot deny but that she has frequently made a *_faux pas_*, as it were," said Jess, smiling.

"And what she does wrong," added Laura, with some bitterness, "usually affects the rest of us."

"She did not do a thing wrong!" cried Lily stormily. "You girls are just too mean!"

"Oh, come on, Lil," said Bobby. "Tell us the worst. We're prepared for murder, even."

"You are very rude, Clara Hargrew," declared Lily Pendleton. "Hessie is not to blame. She failed in rhetoric, and when Miss Carrington tried to put a

lot of home work on her she refused to take it."

"What?" gasped Jess.

"Oh! She did refuse, did she?" snapped Bobby. "And a fat lot that would help her!"

"Well, I don't care!" cried Lily. "Gee Gee is just as mean----"

"Granted!" agreed Bobby, with emphasis. "But tell us how much Hessie has been set back?"

"Of course Miss Carrington has punished her if she was impudent," said Laura decidedly.

"She has punished us all!" cried Lily. "She refuses to allow Hessie to skate to-night. She's out of it."

"Out of the carnival?" cried several of her listeners in chorus.

"And Hester," cried Bobby, "is in the Dress Parade. What did I tell you? Gee Gee was just hoping to queer us."

"It is Hester Grimes who has queered us," Laura said, much more sternly than she usually spoke. "And we were all warned to be so careful!"

"Now, don't blame Hessie!" cried Hester's chum angrily.

"I'd like to know who we are to blame, then?" demanded Jess Morse, with disgust, "Knowing that Gee Gee is what she is, why couldn't Hester keep her own temper?"

"Well! I just guess--"

But after all it was Mother Wit who, though greatly offended, became peacemaker.

"There, there!" she said. "Enough is done already. We shall miss Hester. But we mustn't get angry with each other and therefore spoil the whole Dress Parade. That masquerade should be the most spectacular number on the program."

"But who will take Grimes' place?" demanded Bobby.

Laura stood beside Janet Steele, whose eyes were wide open, her cheeks glowing, and even her lips ajar with excitement. Laura had a very keen mind, and already she had apprehended that Janet was more deeply interested in this discussion, and the subject of it, than a stranger naturally would be. She turned now to stare into the Red Cross girl's face.

"Oh, Miss Steele!" she said, "didn't you tell us that you loved to skate?"

"Ye-es," admitted Janet.

"And she's as big as Hessie Grimes!" exclaimed Jess on the other side, and catching her chum's idea.

"Would you take Hester's part in the masquerade?" asked Laura pointblank.

"But she doesn't belong to Central High!" wailed Lily Pendleton.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Jess. "What does it matter? This is all for a show. It is no competition with other members of the League."

"Right-o, Jess!" crowed Bobby Hargrew.

"We-ell!" murmured Lily doubtfully.

"Come, Miss Steele--Janet," said Laura, pleadingly. "I know you can help us. Hester, being the biggest girl, was to lead in certain figures on the ice. You could easily learn them. And you can wear her costume, I know."

"Why--I----"

"You don't know anything of the kind, Laura Belding," snapped Lily, interrupting Janet. "I don't believe Hessie would let any other girl wear her masquerade suit."

"Sure she wouldn't!" exclaimed Bobby, with disgust. "She'll crab the whole game if she can. Hester Grimes always was a nuisance."

But Laura suddenly clapped her hands in real joy. "Oh, no!" she cried. "We won't ask Janet to wear any other girl's costume. I know what would be fine."

"Let's hear it, Laura dear," said Jess, eagerly. "Of course, you would have a bright idea. You always do."

"Why," said the pleased Laura, "if Janet will come and skate with us, she need only wear the very cloak and veil she has on now. What could be more fitting for a leader of our costume parade? The whole carnival is for the Red Cross, and with a Red Cross girl to lead the procession, and Chet in his Uncle Sam suit to lead the boys--Why! it will be the best ever."

"Hooray!" shouted Bobby, wild with enthusiasm.

"It is splendid!" agreed Jess.

Everybody in hearing agreed, save, perhaps, Lily Pendleton. Laura turned to Janet again and clasped her gloved hands over the new girl's arm.

"Will you, dear? Will you help us out?" she asked.

CHAPTER IX

THE ICE CARNIVAL

"Oh, Miss Laura! Do you really mean it?" murmured Janet Steele, her full pink cheeks actually becoming white she was so much in earnest.

"Of course we mean it," Jess Morse said practically. "And glad to have you."

"I don't know--"

Janet looked for a moment at the sulky-faced Lily Pendleton. Jess immediately pulled that young girl forward.

"Why, Lil isn't half as bad as she sounds," declared Jess, laughing. "This is our very particular friend, Janet Steele, Lil. You've got to treat her nicely. If you don't," she added sharply, "you'll never get a chance to go camping with us girls again as you did last summer. You and your Hester Grimes can go off somewhere by yourselves."

Really, Lily Pendleton had improved a good deal since the time Jess mentioned, and the latter's blunt speech brought her to a better mind at once.

"Well, of course," she said, offering Janet her hand, "I did not mean it just that way. You know how cranky Hessie is when she does get mad. But Laura has suggested a perfectly splendid idea. Miss Steele as a Red Cross girl and Chet as Uncle Sam will be fine to lead the grand march on skates."

So it was decided, and they hurried Janet down to the girls' boathouse, which had a warm, cozy clubroom at one end where Mr. Godey, the watchman, stayed, and where, at this time of year, he was often busy sharpening skates. Laura found a pair of skates for the Red Cross girl, and for an hour the latter practiced with the girls of Central High the steps and figures of the masquerade parade, which Laura and her friends already had worked out to perfection.

"Don't worry a bit about to-night, Janet," Laura told her, when they all hurried away from the lakeshore about dusk. "We'll push you through the figures. Jess and I will be on either side of you, except when we pair off with the boys. And then you will be with my brother Chet. And if he isn't nice to you he'll hear from me!" she added with vigor.

"Oh, but Laura!" whispered Jess Morse, as they separated from Janet, "Chet mustn't be too nice to her. For Janet Steele is an awfully pretty girl."

"Now, dear!" exclaimed her laughing chum, "don't develop incipient jealousy."

With only two hours before them in which to do a hundred things, the girls were as busy as bees for the remainder of the afternoon. That Hester Grimes

had been forbidden to take part in the carnival by Gee Gee troubled the girls of Central High less than they might have been troubled had it been almost any other of their number that the strict teacher had demerited. For, to tell the truth, Hester Grimes was not well loved.

The daughter and much-indulged only child of a wealthy butcher, Hester had in the beginning expected to be catered to by her schoolmates. With such rather shallow schoolmates as Lily Pendleton, Hester was successful. Lily toadied to her, to use Bobby Hargrew's expression; nor was Lily alone in this.

Upon those whom Hester considered her friends she spent her pocket money lavishly. She was not a pretty girl, but was a tremendously healthy one--strong, well developed, and tomboyish in her activities. Yet she lacked magnetism and the popularity that little Bobby Hargrew, for instance, attained by the exercise of the very same traits Hester possessed.

Hester antagonized almost everybody--teachers and students alike. Even placid, peace-loving Mother Wit, found Hester incompatible. And because Laura Belding was a natural leader and was very popular in the school, Hester disliked her and showed in every way possible that she would not follow in Laura's train. Yet there had been a time when Hester had felt under obligation to Laura.

Laura was secretly glad to see Lily Pendleton weaned slowly away from the butcher's daughter. The last summer had started Lily in the right direction, and although the overdressed girl had still some weaknesses of character to overcome, she had greatly improved, as this incident of the afternoon revealed.

Lily was not alone in complaining about Miss Carrington's harshness, however. It was the principal topic of conversation when the girls gathered in the boathouse rooms to prepare for the races and the features that were to precede the principal attraction of the carnival--the masquerade grand march.

"Sh! She's right here now," whispered Bobby Hargrew sepulchrally, coming into the dressing-room. "She's on watch at the door."

"Who?" asked Jess Morse.

"Not Hester?" cried Lily. "She told me she wouldn't come down here!"

"Gee Gee," shot back Bobby, with pursed lips. "She is going to be sure that Hester doesn't appear."

"Mean thing!" Nellie Agnew said. And when the doctor's gentle daughter made such a statement she had to be fully aroused. "She thinks she has spoiled the whole act!"

"I believe you," Bessie Yeager said. "I wonder if Miss Carrington really sleeps at night?"

"Why not, Bess?" cried Dora Lockwood.

"I think she lies awake thinking up mean things to do to us."

"Oh, oh!" murmured Nellie.

"I bet you!" exclaimed the slangy Bobby.

"Careful, girls. If she hears you!" warned Laura.

"Then you would be 'perspicuous au gratin,' as the fellow said," chuckled Bobby. "There! the whistle has sounded."

"The fete has begun," sighed Jess. "I do hope everything will go off right."

"The boys are taking in money all right," Laura said with satisfaction. "I believe we shall make a thousand dollars for the Red Cross."

"I hope so," said her chum. "Come on, girls! It's first the fancy skating before the ice arena is all cut up."

The effort to make the Ice Carnival of the Central High a success was aided by a perfect evening and perfect ice. The latter had been shaved and smoothed over every gnarly place. There was not a single crack in which a skate could be caught to throw the wearer. The arena roped off from the spectators was as smooth as a ballroom floor.

It was about two acres in extent. Around three sides of the roped-off space there was a roped-off alley with boards laid upon the ice upon which the spectators could stand. Uprights held the strings of colored lights which were supplied with electricity from the city lighting company; for this was not the first exhibition of the kind that had been staged upon Lake Luna.

Around the alley allotted to the audience, each member of which had to pay a half dollar for a ticket, was a guarded space so that those who did not pay entrance fee could not get near enough to enjoy the spectacle.

The short-distance races, following the figure skating, were all within the oval of the principal arena. Then the ropes were taken down at one end and the long-distance races came off, a mile track having been marked with staffs upon the ice, staffs which now held the clusters of colored lanterns.

For two hours the company was so well amused that few were driven away by the cold--and it was an intensely cold night. The ringing of the skates on the almost adamant ice revealed the fact that Jack Frost had a tight clutch on the waters of Lake Luna.

"I wish my mother could have seen this," Janet Steele murmured to Laura Belding. "I think it is like fairyland."

"Isn't it pretty? Now comes the torchlight procession. The boys arranged this their own selves. See if it isn't pretty!"

The short end of the oval had been closed again after the long-distance races, and now there dashed into the arena from the boys' lane to the dressing-rooms a long line of figures in dominos, each bearing a colored light. They were the boys that could skate the best--the most sure-footed.

Back and forth, around and around, in and out and across! The swift movement of the figures was well nigh bewildering; while the intermingling of colored lights, their weaving in and out, made a brilliant pattern that brought applause again and again from the spectators.

Then the boys divided, taking stations some distance apart, and the torches were tossed from hand to hand, as Indian clubs are tossed in gymnasium exercises. The effect was spectacular and seemed a much more difficult exercise than it really was.

Meanwhile the girls selected for the masquerade were dressing in the boathouse. Their masquerade costumes were as diverse and elaborate as though it were a ball they were attending. There was no dress as simple as Janet Steele's Red Cross uniform; yet with her glowing face and sparkling eyes and white teeth there were few more effective figures in the party.

She had proved herself to be a fine and strong skater. Laura and Jess, who sponsored her, were delighted with the new girl's appearance on the ice. She had learned, too, her part quite perfectly. When the girls first came out and the boys darted back to get into their fancy costumes, the summary of the figures the girls wove on the ice were already known to Janet. She fulfilled her part.

Then returned the boys, "all rigged out," Bobby said, and the masquerade parade began. The crowd standing about the arena cheered and shouted. It really was a most attractive grand march, and there chanced, better still, to be no accident. Smoothly the young people wended their way about the ice, their skates ringing, their supple bodies swaying in time to the music, led by those two masks of Uncle Sam and the Red Cross girl.

"It is lovely," Mrs. Belding said to her husband. "What a fine skater our Chetwood is, Henry. And it is so near Christmas! I hope that bank-note will turn out to be a good one so that he will not lose the money," she finished wistfully.

"There, there!" said the jeweler. "I'll go to see Monroe to-morrow. He's at home again."

CHAPTER X

BUT WHO IS HE?

"Well, Mr. Monroe," the jeweler said, when he was ushered into the banker's office the following forenoon by the bank watchman, "I presume that bill is a counterfeit of some kind?"

"My dear Belding," said the banker, who was a portly and jolly man, who shook a good deal when he chuckled, and who shook now, "I thought you were old enough, and experienced enough, to discover the counterfeit from the real."

"My son took the bill in over the counter," said the jeweler, rather chagrined.

"But haven't you examined it?" said Mr. Monroe, taking the strange bank-note from a drawer of his desk.

"Well--yes," was the admission, made grudgingly.

"And are you not yet assured?"

"Neither one way nor the other," frankly confessed the jeweler. "It was taken by Chet for a hundred-dollar bill. And it is that on one side!"

"It certainly looks to be," chuckled Mr. Monroe.

"But who ever heard of such a thing?" demanded the exasperated customer of the bank. "A hundred printed on one side and a fifty on the other! The printers of bank-notes do not make such mistakes."

"Hold on! Nobody is infallible in this world--not even a bank-note printer," said the banker, reaching into another drawer and bringing forth a large indexed scrapbook.

"Here's a case that happened some years ago. I am a scrapbook fiend, Belding," chuckled Mr. Monroe. "There were once two bills issued for a Kansas bank just like this one you have brought to me. Only this note that we have here was printed for the Drovers' Levee Bank of Osage, Ohio, as you can easily see. This note went through that bank, was signed by Bedford Knox, cashier, and Peyton J. Weld, president, as you can see, and its peculiar printing was not discovered.

"Ah, here we have it!" added Mr. Monroe, fluttering the stiff leaves of the scrapbook and finally coming to the article in question. "Listen here: 'It was found on communication with Washington that a record was held there of the bill, and the department was anxious to recall it. With another bill it had been printed for a bank in Kansas, and the mistake had been made by the printer who had turned the sheet upside down in printing the reverse side. The first plate bore the obverse of a fifty-dollar bill at the top and of a hundred-dollar bill at the bottom, while the other plate held the reverse of both sides. By turning the sheet around for the reverse printing, the fifty-dollar impression had been made on the back of the hundred-dollar bill.'

"Do you see, now?" laughed the banker. "Quite an easy and simple mistake, and one that might often be made, only the printers are very careful men."

Oddly enough, Mr. Belding, although relieved by the probability that the Department at Washington would make the strange bill right for him, was suddenly attracted by another fact.

"I wonder," he said, "if that man came from Osage, Ohio?"

"What man? The one who passed the bank-note on your son?"

"Yes. You know, he was injured and is now in the hospital."

"I don't know. Go on."

Mr. Belding related the story of the accident and the unfortunate mental condition of the injured man. "They tell me all the money he had with him was new money--fresh from the Treasury."

"He probably did not make it himself," chuckled the jolly banker. "Poor chap! Don't the doctors think he will recover his memory?"

"That I cannot say," the jeweler said, rising. "Then you think I may relieve Chet's mind?"

"Oh, yes. I will give you another hundred for this bill, if you want me to. I will send this to Washington, where they probably already have a record of it. Bills of this denomination are printed by twos, and the other has probably turned up--as in the case of the Kansas bank-note."

Aside from the satisfaction this interview of his father's with Mr. Monroe accorded Chet Belding, further interest on the part of all the young people was aroused in the case of the injured stranger. Oddly enough, when Laura and Jess went to the hospital to inquire about the man, they found Janet Steele, the Red Cross girl, there on the same errand.

Since the Ice Carnival, that had proved such a money-making affair for the Red Cross, the Central High girls had considered Janet almost one of themselves. Although nobody seemed to know who or what the Steeles were, and they certainly lived very oddly in the old house at the lower end of Whiffle Street, Janet was so likable, and her invalid mother was evidently so much of a gentlewoman, that Laura and her chum had vouched for Janet and declared her to be "all right."

The matron of the hospital was the person whom the girls interviewed on this occasion. Mrs. Langworth had some interest in each patient besides the doctor's professional concern. She was sympathetic.

"We do not know what to call him," she explained. "He laughs rather grimly about it and tells us to call him 'John.' But that, I am sure, is not his name. He merely wishes us to have a 'handle' for him. And you cannot tell me," added the matron, shaking her head, "that he is one of those rough miners right out of Alaska!"

"Does he say he is?" asked Janet, with increased interest.

"He remembers of being in Alaska, he says. He was coming out, he tells us, when something happened to him. And that is the last he can remember. He believes he 'made his pile,' as he expresses it. Oh, he uses mining expressions, and may have lived roughly and in the open, as miners do, at some time in his life. But not recently, I am sure."

"And not a thing about him to identify him?" asked Laura.

"Not a thing. Plenty of money. Not much jewelry----"

"Oh! The lavalliere my brother sold him!" cried Laura. "He said it was for 'a nice little girl he knew.' It was only a ten dollar one--one of those French novelties, you know, that we sell so many of at this time of year."

"He had that in an envelope in his pocket," said Mrs. Langworth.

"Then he had not made the presentation of it to 'the nice little girl,'" murmured Laura, thoughtfully.

"It almost proves he is a stranger in town, does it not?" asked Jess. "He bought the chain in the morning, and he was not hurt until evening. Do you know if he had any lodging in Centerport?"

"The police have searched the hotels, I believe," said the matron, "and described the poor fellow to the clerks and managers. Nobody seems to know him."

"Do--do you suppose we might see him?" Laura asked hesitatingly.

"Oh, Laura! Would you want to?" Jess murmured.

"Why not?" said the matron, smiling. "Not just now, perhaps. But the next time you come--in the afternoon, of course. He will be glad to see young faces, I have no doubt I will speak to Dr. Agnew when he comes in," for Nellie's father was of importance at the Centerport Hospital.

"But who is he, do you suppose?" Jess Morse demanded, when the three girls left the hospital and walked uptown again. "He can't be any person who has friends in Centerport, or they would look him up."

"That seems to be sure enough," admitted her chum. Then: "Shall we walk along with Janet?"

"Of course," said Jess. "Are you going home, Miss Steele?"

"Yes," said the girl in the Red Cross uniform. "I have been on duty at the Central Chapter; but mother expects me now."

"How is your mother, dear?" asked Laura, with sympathy.

"She is as well as can be expected," said Janet gravely. "If she had nothing to worry her mind she would be better in health," and she sighed.

Janet did not explain what this worry was, and even Jess, blunt-spoken as she often was, could not ask pointblank what serious trouble Mrs. Steele had on her mind.

Again the Central High girls went in to see the invalid upon Janet's invitation. They found Bobby Hargrew there before them. Harum-scarum as Bobby was, nobody could accuse her of lack of sympathy; and she had already learned that her fun and frolic pleased the invalid. Bobby did not mind playing the jester for her friends.

Of course, the strange man at the hospital was the pivot on which the conversation turned.

"Were you there, too, to inquire about him?" asked Mrs. Steele of Janet.

Laura noticed a certain wistfulness in the invalid's tone and look; but she did not understand it. Merely, Mother Wit noted and pigeonholed the remark. Janet said practically:

"I can't help feeling an interest in him, as I helped him that evening he was hurt."

"But have they learned nothing about him?"

"Only that the hundred-dollar bill he gave Chet is probably all right," laughed Jess Morse.

"They say he had a big money roll," said Bobby.

"Not a poor man, of course," Laura agreed.

"And Mrs. Langworth says she is sure he has been in Alaska," Jess added.

Laura noted the swift glance that passed between the invalid and her daughter.

"Oh, my dear!" exclaimed Mrs. Steele, "you did not tell me that"

"No," said Janet, shaking her head, "But lots of men go to Alaska, Mamma."

"Ye-es," admitted Mrs. Steele.

"And come back with plenty of money," put in Bobby, smiling. "This poor man's money doesn't help him much, does it? He doesn't seem to have any friends here in Centerport. He is just as much a stranger as the man they tell about who came back to his old home town after a great many years and found a lot of changes. As he rode uptown his taxicab stopped to let a funeral go by.

"Who's dead?" asked the returned wanderer of the taxicab driver.

"Dan Jones," said the driver.

"Not Dan Jones that kept the hotel!" cried the man. "Why, I knew him well. Can it be possible that Dan is dead?"

"I reckon he's dead, Mister," said the chauffeur, as the hearse went by. "What d'you think they're doin'--rehearsin' with him?"

"How very lonely the poor man must feel," said Mrs. Steele, after laughing at Bobby's story.

"We're going in to see him the next time," Jess said.

Mrs. Steele looked again swiftly at her daughter. "You will see him, too, won't you, Janet?" she murmured.

Her daughter seemed not to like the idea; but Jess said quickly:

"We will take Janet with us, Mrs. Steele. And Bobby, too. If Mrs. Langworth approves, I mean. 'The more the merrier.' Really, I'm awfully interested in him myself."

Laura, said nothing; but she wondered why the invalid showed so much interest in the injured man.

CHAPTER XI

A REHEARSAL

The copies of the play chosen for production by the girls of the Central High Players Club had arrived, and Mr. Mann, who was to direct the production, called the members of the club together in the small hall which was just off Mr. Sharp's office.

"And thank goodness!" murmured Bobby Hargrew, "Gee Gee cannot break into this session. What do you suppose she has suggested?"

"Mercy! how do you expect us to guess the vagaries of the Carrington mind?" returned Lily Pendleton. "Something foolish, I'll be bound."

"Sh! Remember Mr. Mann is an instructor, too," said Nellie Agnew.

"That is all right, Doctress," giggled Lily. "Mr. Mann is a good fellow and will not peach."

"Tell us the awful truth, Bobby," drawled Jess. "What is Gee Gee's latest?"

"I understand," said the younger girl, "that she has been to Mr. Sharp and

begged him to exercise his authority and make us act 'Pyramus and Thisbe' instead of 'The Rose Garden.'"

"Goodness! That old thing?" flung out Dora Lockwood.

"There is a burlesque on 'Pyramus and Thisbe' that we might give," chuckled Jess. "And it's all in doggerel. Let's!"

"Reckless ones! Would you spoil all our chances?" demanded Laura.

"Aw--well----"

"Remember, we are working for a worthy cause," Dorothy Lockwood mouthed, in imitation of the scorned Miss Carrington.

"You are right, Dory," Laura said soberly. "The Red Cross is worth suffering for."

"Right-o, my dear girl," declared Jess Morse with conviction. "Let us put aside Gee Gee and listen to what Mr. Mann has to say."

They had already talked over the characters of the play. None of them was beyond the capabilities of the girls of Central High. But what delighted some of them was that there were boys' parts--and girls would fill them!

Of course, Bobby Hargrew had been cast for one of the male parts. Bobby's father had always said she should have been a boy, and was wont to call her "my eldest son." She had assumed mannish ways--sometimes when the assumption was not particularly in good taste.

"But Short and Long," she growled in her very "basest" voice, "says I can't walk like a boy. Says anybody will know I'm a girl. I have a mind to get my hair cut short"

"Don't you dare, Clara Hargrew!" Laura commanded. "You'd be sorry afterward--and so would your father."

Bobby would never do anything to hurt "Father Tom," as she always called Mr. Hargrew, so her enthusiasm for this suggested prank subsided. But she growled:

"Anyway, it's a sailor suit I am going to wear, and I guess I can walk like a sailor, just as well as Short and Long."

"Better," declared Nellie soothingly. "And then, those wide-legged trousers sailors wear are quite modest."

At this all the girls laughed. Knickers in their gymnasium and field work had become second nature to them.

"But think of me," cried Jess, "in what Chet calls 'the soup to nuts!' Really the dress-suit of mankind is awfully silly, after all."

"And uncomfortable!" declared Dora.

"Attention, young ladies!" exclaimed Mr. Mann at that moment.

He was a rotund, beaming little man, with vast enthusiasm and the patience--so Nellie declared--of an angel.

"Not a full-sized angel," Bobby had denied seriously. "He is more the size of a cherub--one of those you see pictured leaning their elbows on clouds."

But, of course, neither of the girls made this comment within Mr. Mann's hearing.

The final decisions regarding the choice of parts were now made. The copies of the play were distributed. Mr. Mann even read aloud the first two acts, instructing and advising as he went along, so that the girls could gain some general idea of what was expected of them.

Before they were finished another point came up. There was a single character in the play that had not been accorded to any girl. It was not a speaking part; but it was an important part, for the other characters talked about it, and the silent character was supposed to appear on several occasions in "The Rose Garden."

"We need a tall, dark girl," said Mr. Mann. "One who walks particularly well and who will not be overlooked by the audience even when she merely crosses the stage. Who----?"

"Margit Salgo!" exclaimed Jess, who had every bit of the new play and its needs very close to her heart.

"Of course!" cried Laura and the Lockwood twins. "Margit is just the one," Mother Wit added.

"Oh!" said Mr. Mann at last. "You mean Margaret Carrington?"

"And she walks like a queen," sighed Lily Pendleton. "I wish I could learn to walk as she does."

"You know what Mrs. Case says," put in Bobby, in an undertone. "She says your feet, Lil, have been bound like a Chinese woman's of the old regime."

"Oh, you!"

"Margit went barefoot and lived in the open for years," said Laura.

"She was 'near to Nature's heart,'" laughed Jess. "Of course, she never tried to squeeze a number six foot into narrow twos."

"Never mind the size of her feet," said Mr. Mann good-naturedly. "If she can take the part, she will be just the one for it I remember that Miss Carrington's niece does have a queenly walk. And that is just what we need. But do you think we can get her?"

"She has never joined our club," said Jess thoughtfully.

"I am not sure that she has ever been invited," Laura said. "But she is always busy----"

"Gee Gee pretty near works her to death," growled Bobby. "I shouldn't wonder if Margit flew the coop some day."

"I am not sure, Miss Hargrew," said Mr. Mann, without a smile, "that I ought not to take you to task for your language. It really is inexcusable."

"Oh, dear me, Mr. Mann, don't you begin!" begged the culprit "If I am academic in school in my speech, let me be relieved out of sessions, I pray."

"But about Margit Salgo?" queried Laura. "Do you suppose she will be able to help us? I know she will be willing to, if we ask her."

"Gee Gee will object, you bet," growled Bobby under her breath.

That was not to be known, however, without asking. Laura said she would speak to Margaret about it, while Mr. Mann intimated that he would mention to Miss Carrington, the elder, that her niece was almost necessary to the success of the play.

Margit Salgo was not so straightly kept by Miss Carrington as she was engaged from morning to night in her studies. Having been utterly neglected as far as mental development went for several years, the half-gypsy girl was much behind others of her age at Central High.

Miss Grace Gee Carrington was pushing her protegee on as fast as possible. She was not yet in the classes of those, girls of her age whom she knew at Central High; but she was fast forging ahead and she took much pride in her own advancement.

Therefore she did not see Miss Carrington's sternness as Bobby, for instance, saw it. She found her aunt kind and considerate, if very firm. And the girl who had been half wild when Laura Belding first found her, as has been related in "The Girls of Central High on Track and Field," was settling into a very sedate and industrious young woman.

What girl, however, does not love to "dress up and act?" Margit Salgo was delighted when Laura explained their need to her.

"Just as sure as auntie will let me, I'll act," declared the dark beauty, flushing brilliantly and her black eyes aflame with interest. "You are a dear, Laura Belding, to think of me," and she hugged Mother Wit heartily.

Two days passed, and then came the first rehearsal. This, of course, could be little more than a reading of the parts before Mr. Mann, with the latter to advise them as to elocution and stage business. But Bobby declared she had been practicing walking like a boy and had succeeded in copying Short

and Long almost exactly.

"Why me?" demanded Billy sharply, whose usual sweet temper seemed to have become dreadfully soured of late.

"Well, why not?" demanded Bobby. "Should I copy Pretty Sweet's strut?"

"Aw--him!" snorted Billy Long, turning away in vexation.

"Now, tell me," said the quick-minded Bobby Hargrew to Laura and Jess, with whom she chanced to be walking at the moment, "why it is that Billy has taken such a violent dislike to poor Purr of late? Why, he doesn't feel kindly enough toward him to send him another dead fish!"

They were going to the rehearsal, which was in the small hall of the school. Of course, there was a sight of bustle and talking. Every girl was greatly excited over her part. Some were "sure they couldn't do it," while there were those who "could not possibly remember cues."

"And I know I shall laugh just at the wrong place," said Lily Pendleton. "I always do."

"If you do," growled Bobby, "I'll do something to you that will make you feel far from laughing, I assure you."

"How savagely you talk!" sighed Nellie Agnew. "That boy's part you are to fill is already affecting you, Clara."

"'Sailor Bob' is going to be terrifically rough, I suppose," Jess said, laughing.

Mr. Mann called them to order, and the girls finally rustled into seats and prepared to go through "The Rose Garden" for the first time. Everybody knew her first speeches, and as Mr. Mann accentuated the cues and advised about the business the girls did very well during the first act.

But with the opening of the second act there was a halt. Here was where "the dark lady" should come in. Her first appearance marked a flourishing period by Jess, who strode about the stage as the hero of the piece.

"And Margit's not here!" cried Dora Lockwood. "Shouldn't she be, Mr. Mann? Really, her entrance gives me my cue, not Adrian's speech."

Adrian was Jess Morse. She nodded her head vigorously. "Of course, Margit ought to be here to rehearse with us."

"I am afraid," said Mr. Mann, with pursed lips, "that we shall have to give up the idea of having Miss Carrington--the younger--for the part."

"Oh, oh, oh!" chorused some of the girls. "Can't Margit play?"

"Isn't that just like Gee Gee?" demanded Bobby furiously.

"She wanted to, I am sure," Laura said. "It is not Margit's fault."

"Of course it isn't," snapped Jess. "That old--"

Fortunately she got no farther. The door opened at that instant and Miss Grace Gee Carrington entered. She was a very tall woman with grayish hair, eyeglasses, and a sallow complexion. Her dignity of carriage and stern manner were quite overpowering.

"Young ladies!" she said sharply, having come into the room and closed the door, "I have a word to say. I told Mr. Mann I would come here and explain why my niece cannot take part in any such foolish and inconsequential exhibition as this that you have determined on."

She glared around, and the girls' faces assumed various expressions of disturbance. Some, even, were frightened, for Miss Carrington had always reigned by power of fear.

"I would not allow Margaret to lower herself by appearing in such a play. I disapprove greatly of girls taking boys' parts. The object of the play itself is merely to amuse. There is nothing worth while or educational about it."

Again silence, and the girls only glanced fearfully at each other.

"I have a proposition to make to you," said the stern teacher. "It is not too late to change your plans. I have Mr. Sharp's permission to make the suggestion. He will agree to your changing the play and will be--er--satisfied, I am sure, if you accept my advice and put on the play which I first suggested. This is an old Greek play with real value to it We gave it once in my own college days, and it truly made a sensation. I should be quite willing for Margaret to appear in that play, and I should, in fact, be willing to give Mr. Mann the benefit of my own experience in rehearsing the piece."

Mr. Mann actually looked frightened. The stern instructor overpowered him exactly as she did many of the girls.

CHAPTER XII

BUBBLE, BUBBLE

"Toot! Toot! Toot-te-toot! Back water!" muttered Bobby Hargrew. "Wouldn't I cut a shine acting in a Greek play? Oh, my!"

Her imprudence--and impudence--was fortunately drowned by the general murmur of objection that went up from the girls of the club. That Miss Carrington's suggestion met with general objection was so plain that even the stern woman herself must have realized it.

"Of course," she said, really "cattish," "you girls would prefer something silly."

"Perhaps, Miss Carrington," said Laura with more boldness than most of her mates possessed, "we prefer something more simple. 'The Rose Garden' does not call for more than we can give to it. I am afraid the play you suggest would take too much study."

"Ha!" snapped the tall teacher. Then she went on: "I want you all to understand that your recitations must be up to the average while you put in your time on such a mediocre performance as this you are determined upon. Of course, if the play was of an educational nature we might relax our school rules a little--"

"Oh! Oh! Bribery!" whispered Jess to Nellie.

"It seems," Mr. Mann finally found voice to say, "that the desire of the young ladies is for the piece selected. It is too late, as Miss Belding says, to make a change now."

"Then Margaret cannot act!" exclaimed Miss Carrington, and, turning angrily, she left the hall in a way that had she been one of the girls, it would have been said, "She flounced out."

The rehearsal continued; but most of the girls were in a sober state of mind. There was a general desire among them to stand high in all their studies. They had learned when first they entered upon the athletic contests and exercises of the Girls Branch League that they must keep up in studies and in deportment or they could not get into the good times of the League.

It was so with the secret society, the M. O. R.'s, and likewise in this acting club. "Fun" was merely a reward for good work in school. Not alone was Miss Carrington stiff on this point, the principal and the rest of the faculty were quite as determined that no outside adventures or activities should lower the standard of the girls of Central High.

At the present time the members of the club had a serious fact to contemplate. A girl to fill the part of the "dark lady" in the garden must be found. As it was not a speaking part, the person filling the character must more particularly look as she was described in the play.

"We want a type," said Mr. Mann. "Tall, graceful, brunette, and with queenly carriage. You must find her before the next rehearsal. I must have plenty of time to train her, for her appearance is of grave importance--as you young ladies can yourselves see."

"Oh, dear me!" groaned Nellie Agnew, when the rehearsal was finished. "And Margit Salgo would have been just the one!"

"And the poor girl certainly would have enjoyed being one of us," Laura said.

"Take it from me," said Bobby gruffly, "she's just the meanest--"

"Margit?" cried Jess.

"Gee Gee! I'm good and disgusted with her."

But Bobby, for once in her life, was very circumspect during recitations that week. She felt that Gee Gee was watching for a chance to demerit her, and the girl did not intend to give the teacher occasion for doing so.

"For once I am going to be so good, and have my lessons so perfect, that she cannot find fault."

"But trust Miss Carrington to find fault if she felt like it!" grumbled the girl a day or so later.

"Miss Hargrew, do not stride so. And keep your elbows in. Why! you walk like a grenadier. And don't sprawl in your seat that way. Are you not a lady?"

Ah, but it was hard for saucy Bobby to keep her tongue back of her teeth!

"Have you lost your tongue?" nagged Miss Carrington.

Bobby's eyes flashed a reply. But her lips "ran o'er with honey," as Jess Morse quoted, *sotto voce*.

"No, Miss Carrington. I am merely holding it," said the girl softly.

Miss Carrington flushed. She knew she was unfair; and Bobby's unexpected reply pilloried the teacher before the whole class. There was a bustle in the room and a not-entirely-smothered snicker.

Had there been any way of punishing the girl Miss Carrington would certainly have done it. She was neither just nor merciful, but she was exact. She could see no crevice in Bobby's armor. The incident had to pass, and the girl remained unpunished.

However, it did seem as though Miss Carrington were more watchful each day of the girls who belonged to the Players Club. She was evidently expecting those who had parts to learn to show some falling off in recitation, or the like. Her sharp tongue lashed those who faltered unmercifully. The girls began to show the strain. They became nervous.

"I really feel as though I must scream sometimes!" said Nellie Agnew, almost in tears, one afternoon as the particular chums of Central High left the building for home. "I know my lessons just as well as ever, but Gee Gee has got me so worked up that I expect to fail every time I come up to recite to her."

"She is too old to teach, anyway," snapped Jess. "My mother says so. She ought to have been put on the shelf by the Board of Education long ago."

"Oh, oh!" gasped Dora Lockwood. "What bliss if she were!"

"She is not so awfully old," said Laura thoughtfully.

"But she is awful!" sniffed Jess.

"She acts like a spoiled child," Nellie said. "If she cannot have her own way in everything she gets mad and becomes disagreeable."

This was pretty strong language from the doctor's daughter. At the moment Bobby Hargrew appeared, whistling, and with her hands in her coat pockets. She was evidently practicing her manly stride. But she did not grin when she saw the juniors approaching. Instead, in a most dolorous voice she sang out, quoting the witches' chant:

"Double, double; toil and trouble;
Fire burn and cauldron bubble.'

"Everything's stewing, girls, and it is bound to be some brew. Do you know the latest?"

"Couldn't guess," said Jess Morse. "But it is something bad, I warrant."

"Everything's going wrong, girls!" wailed Nellie.

"I just saw Mr. Mann and Lil. Couldn't help overhearing what she was giving him. What do you suppose she wants to do?"

"Play the lead instead of Laura," snapped Jess.

"That would not be so strange," Dora Lockwood observed. "Would it, Dorothy?"

"Not at all. Lil Pendleton--"

"Wait a minute," proposed Laura Belding. "Let us hear her crime before we sentence her to death."

"That's right," agreed Bobby. "Oh, she surely has put her foot in it! She told Mr. Mann that Hester is just the girl to act 'the dark lady' in our play. What do you know about that?"

"Ow! Ow! That hurts!" squealed Dora.

"She never did?" gasped her twin.

"Hope to die!" exclaimed Bobby recklessly. "That is exactly the game she is trying to work."

"Hester Grimes! Of all persons!" groaned Nellie.

"Lil hasn't said a word about it to me," Jess Morse declared.

"No, she is going to get Mr. Mann himself to propose Hester--"

"But Hessie isn't a member of the club!" cried Nellie.

"We have set a precedent there," said Laura thoughtfully. "We took Janet Steele into the ice carnival, and she was not a member of the school."

"That was an entirely different thing!" snapped Jess.

"Why, Hester Grimes is no more fit to play that part than I am fit for the professional stage!" Nellie Agnew said. "What can Lil mean?"

"I bet a cooky," Bobby growled, "that Hester put Lil up to it. You know, Hess is crazy to get her finger into every pie; but she would never come straight out and ask to join our club."

"She'd be blackballed," said Dora tartly.

"I believe she would," agreed her twin.

Bobby chuckled. "There would be two black beans against her, and no mistake."

"What did you say to Lil, Clara?" demanded Laura thoughtfully.

"Not a word."

"How was that?" Jess asked. "You didn't have a sudden attack of lockjaw, did you?"

"Don't fret, Jess," said Bobby sharply. "I know when to keep my mouth shut on occasion. I came right away from there to find you girls. Something must be done about it."

"Oh, dear me!" groaned Nellie. "If Margit Salgo had only been allowed to take the part!"

"What did I tell you?" almost snarled Bobby. "Gee Gee has managed to queer the whole business. This play is going to be a failure."

CHAPTER XIII

MOTHER WIT HAS AN IDEA

The ice carnival had been such a success in a spectacular as well as a monetary way that many of the friends of the Central High girls and boys declared they would like to have it repeated. More than a thousand dollars--to be exact, one thousand and twenty dollars--had been made for

the Red Cross.

Centerport was doing its very best to gather its quota for the great institution that was doing so much good in the world. Janet Steele confessed to Laura that she had gained more than one hundred dollar memberships, and that nearly all of these had given something in addition to their membership fee.

"I wish we girls could help," said Laura wistfully.

"And you having done so much already!" cried Janet. "Why, you've already done more than your share! And doing a play, too!"

"I am afraid the play will not be a great success," Mother Wit sighed, but more to herself than to the other girl.

Those who wished to repeat the ice carnival success had to give the idea up, for before the end of the week there swept down over the North Woods and across frozen Lake Luna such a blizzard as the surrounding country had not seen for several years. The street cars stopped running, traffic of all sorts was tied up, and even the electricity for lighting purposes was put out of commission for twenty-four hours.

Of course, it did not keep many of the girls and boys of Central High at home. Snow piled up in the streets did not daunt them at all. But when the amateur actors undertook to rehearse they had to do so by the light of candles and kerosene lamps.

The rehearsal did not go very well, either. The girls were "snippy" to each other--at least, Jess said they were, and Bobby declared she was one of the very "snippiest--so there!"

"Girls! Girls!" begged Laura, "when there are so many other people to fight, let us not fight each other. 'Little birds should in their nests agree,' and so forth."

"Oh, poodle soup!" ejaculated Bobby, under her breath. "Don't anybody dare spring old saws and sayings on me in my present mood."

"I believe you'd bite, Bobby," whispered Nellie Agnew.

A cry went up for Lily Pendleton, and then it was found that she was not present.

"The only girl who is made of either sugar or salt," declared Josephine Morse. "Of course, the snow would keep her away!"

"But where is her friend, Miss Grimes?" asked Mr. Mann, rather tartly. "I shall have my work cut out for me in training her, I fear."

"You will, indeed," moaned Laura.

"Now, Mr. Mann!" cried Bobby boldly, "you are not really going to let that

Hester Grimes act in this play, are you? She is perfectly horrid!"

"Miss Hargrew," was the somewhat sharp answer, "I hope you will not let personal dislikes enter into this play. It does not matter who or what Miss Grimes may be, if she can take the part--"

"But she'll never be able to do it in the world!"

"That is to be seen," said Mr. Mann firmly. "Remember, we are working for the benefit of the Red Cross."

"Hear! Hear!" murmured Laura. "Perhaps Hester will do very well."

"And perhaps she won't!" snapped Bobby.

"Why, she can't possibly _act!"_ Jess Morse said hopelessly.

"You will let me be the judge of that, Miss Morse, if you please," said Mr. Mann, speaking rather tartly.

"Mercy, everybody to-day is as crisp as pie-crust--no two ways about it!" whispered Bobby to Jess.

The girls plowed home through the deep snow, most of them in no mood for amusement. Even Laura Belding had a long face when she entered the house.

"How was the funeral?" asked Chet, who was buried in one of the deep library chairs with a book.

"What?" she asked before she caught his meaning.

"You must have buried somebody by the way you look," declared her brother.

"Don't nag, Chettie," sighed his sister. "We are having terrible times."

"I judged so," Chet said dryly. "Don't you always have sich when you girls go in for acting?"

"Now--"

"I am sympathetic, Laura--I swear I am!" her brother cried, putting up his hands for pardon. "Don't shoot. But of course things always will go wrong. Who is it--Bobby? Or Jess? Or Lil?"

"It is Hester Grimes."

"Wow!" exclaimed Chet. "I didn't know she was in it at all."

Laura told him of the emergency that had arisen and how Hester Grimes seemed certain to be drawn into the affair.

"Why, that big chunk can't act," said Chet quite impolitely. "She looks enough like her father to put on his apron and stand behind one of his

butcher blocks."

"Oh, that is awful!" Laura objected. "But I know she will spoil our play."

"Humph! Why didn't you, Laura, suggest somebody else for the part, as long as Margit couldn't take it?"

"I didn't know of anybody."

"I thought they called you 'Mother Wit,'" scoffed Chet. "You're not even a little bit bright."

"No, I guess you are right. I have lost all my brightness," sighed Laura. "It has been rubbed off."

"Then you admit it was merely plate," laughed Chet. "But say! why didn't you think of the girl who helped you out before?"

"Who? What girl?"

"That Red Cross girl. What's her name?"

"Janet Steele!"

"That's the one. Some pippin," said Chet with enthusiasm. "I saw her this afternoon and helped her plow home--"

"Chetwood Belding! Wait till Jess Morse hears about it."

"Aw--"

"Jess will spark, old boy; you see if she doesn't"

"Jess is the best girl in the world; and she's got too much sense to object to my helping another girl home through the snow."

"All right," chuckled Laura, in a much more cheerful mood. "But don't make the mistake of praising Janet to Jess. That is where the crime comes in."

"Oh! Well, I won't," her brother declared thoughtfully.

"And where did you beau Janet from?" Laura asked.

"The hospital."

"Were you there to see that poor man?"

"Rich man, you mean," grinned her brother. "I took him some books and a lot of papers. He is able to sit up and read."

"But he doesn't know who he is?"

"He declares his name is John _Something_, and that he ought to be in

Alaska right now. Says the last he knew he was in Sitka. Something happened to him there. Whatever it was, his brain must have been affected at that time. For he cannot remember anything about the first part of his life."

"But, Chetwood!" exclaimed Laura earnestly, "that man is not a miner. He is not tanned. His hands are not rough. He was as well groomed, the matron says, as any gentleman who ever was brought to the Centerport Hospital."

"But he was in Alaska. You should hear him tell about it."

"He has lived two lives, then," said Laura thoughtfully.

"And must be beginning his third now," put in Chet. "What do you know about that? And him with a roll of more than two thousand dollars--every bill brand-new."

"Oh, Chet!"

"Well, what is it?" her brother asked, looking curiously into Laura's suddenly glowing face.

"Does he know he has so much money?"

"Why, yes. I've been telling him to-day all about that funny bill he passed on me. He says he is glad he has so fat a purse, as he will be obliged to remain in bed long with that leg in a cast."

"But, Chet! has he got the money himself?"

"It is in the hospital safe."

"I wonder! I wonder!" the girl murmured.

"What is it now?" asked Chet

"I wonder if any other bills in his roll are like that hundred-fifty note father swapped with Mr. Monroe for you."

"Huh?" ejaculated her brother, quite puzzled.

"It was on the Drivers' Levee Bank, of Osage, Ohio. I wrote it down, and the names of the cashier and president of the bank. Do find out, Chet, if there are any more of those new bills issued by that bank in his roll."

"What for?" demanded Chet.

That Laura would not tell him, only made him promise to do as she asked. Mother Wit had an idea; but she would not explain it to anybody yet.

CHAINS ON HIS WHEELS

"How came you to meet Janet?" asked Laura Belding, remembering what her brother had first told her about the Red Cross girl.

"She was coming my way, of course."

"Coming your way?" Laura repeated, her eyebrows raised questioningly. "Oh! I see! You met her at the hospital."

"You said a forkful," declared the slangy youth.

"Dear me, Chet," Laura observed soberly. "I think your slang is becoming atrocious. So Janet was down there!"

"She had been calling on our friend with the broken leg, too," said Chet.

"She does seem interested in him, doesn't she?" Laura said thoughtfully. "I wonder why?"

"Because her mother's half-brother went to Alaska years ago and they never heard of him again," said Chet. "She told me."

"Oh!"

"Nothing wonderful about that," the brother declared.

"It is interesting."

"To them, I suppose," said Chet "But why don't you ask Miss Steele to join you girls in the play you are getting up?"

"I never thought of it," confessed Laura.

"Your thought-works are out of kilter, Sis," declared Chet, laughing again. "I'd certainly play Miss Steele off against the menace of Hester Grimes."

There was something besides mere sound in Chet Belding's advice, and his sister appreciated the fact. But she did not go bluntly to the other girls and suggest the Red Cross girl for the part of "the dark lady." She realized that, if the new girl could act, she would amply fill the part in the play. But Hester was supposed to have it now, and the very next day Mr. Mann gave that candidate an hour's training in the part Hester was supposed to fill.

When they all came together for rehearsal again the second day, Hester Grimes was present and she showed the effect of Mr. Mann's personal help. Yet her work was so stiffly done, and she was so awkward, that it seemed to most of the girls that she was bound to hurt and hinder rather than help in the production.

"She'd put a crimp in anything," declared Bobby Hargrew, as the Hill girls went home that afternoon.

The streets in this residential section had been pretty well cleared of snow, and people had their automobiles out once more.

"Say, Jess!" exclaimed Bobby.

"Say it," urged Josephine Morse. "I promise not to bite you."

"If Hester plays that part, what are they going to do with her hands and feet?" asked the unkind Bobby.

"Oh, hush!" exclaimed Laura.

"Well, when she's supposed to pick the rose and hold it up to the light, and kiss it, her hand is going to look like a full-grown lobster--and just as red."

"Girls, we must not!" begged Laura. "Somebody will surely tell Hester what we say, and then--"

"She'll refuse to play," said Jess.

"Oh, fine, _fine_!" murmured one of the Lockwood twins.

"If we get her mad it will do no good," Nellie Agnew said. "Maybe then she will insist on being 'the dark lady.'"

The boys were on the corner of Nugent Street waiting for the girls to come along.

"How goes the battle, Laura?" asked Lance Darby. "Have you learned your part yet?"

"I thought I had," sighed Laura. "But when I come to take cues and try to remember the business of the piece, I forget my lines."

"This being leading lady is pretty tough on Mother Wit," laughed Chet.

"Oh, my!" exclaimed Bobby Hargrew suddenly. "Here comes Pretty Sweet in his car. Why! he's got Lil with him. I thought that was all over."

They gaily hailed the driver of the automobile and his companion as the vehicle passed. Short and Long, with gloomy face, watched the car out of sight.

"Well," he growled, "he's got nonskid-chains on his wheels to-day, all right"

"Chains on his wheels, Billy?" asked Bobby. "What do you mean? Doesn't he always have them on in winter?"

"Humph! He forgot 'em once, anyway."

"Hey, Billy!" exclaimed Chet Belding, "you are skidding yourself, aren't you?"

"Aw----"

"Least said soonest mended," added Lance, likewise giving the smaller boy a quick, stern look.

"Oh, I see!" muttered Bobby, searching the flushed face of Short and Long.

"Say, Billy----"

But Short and Long started on a quick trot for home, and left his friends to stare after him. It was Bobby who did most of the staring, however. She said to Jess and Laura, after they had parted from the other boys:

"What do you know about that boy? I'm just wise to him. I believe I know what is the matter with Short and Long."

"Do you mean," asked Laura, "what makes him act so to Purt?"

"You have guessed my meaning, Mother Wit."

"What is the trouble between them?" demanded Jess. "Although Billy never was much in love with Purt Sweet."

"Don't you two girls remember the Saturday night that man was hurt on Market Street?"

"I should say I do remember it!" Laura agreed. "He is in the hospital yet, and he doesn't know who he is or where he came from."

"Oh, it's nothing to do with his identity," Bobby hastened to say. "It is about the car that ran him down. You know the police never have found the guilty driver."

"Goodness!" gasped Jess. "You surely don't mean----"

"I mean that the car had no chains on its rear wheels. That is all that was noticed about it Nobody got the number. But I heard Short and Long say he knew somebody who had been driving a car that day without chains. And the boys left us, didn't they, to look up the car?"

"What has that to do with Purt Sweet?" demanded Laura.

"Why, you heard what Billy just said about him and his chains!" cried Bobby. "'He's got nonskid-chains on his wheels to-day, all right.' Didn't you hear him? And he's had a grouch against Pretty Sweet ever since the time--about--that the man was hurt."

"Oh, Purt wouldn't have done such a thing. He might have run the man down; but he would never have run off and left him in the street!"

"I don't know," Jess said. "He'd be frightened half to death, of course, if he did knock the man down."

"I do not believe Prettyman Sweet is heartless," declared Laura warmly. "The boys are making a mistake. I'm going to tell Chet so."

But when she took her brother to task about this matter she could not get Chet to admit a thing. He refused to say anything illuminating about the car that had run down the stranger at the hospital, or if the boys suspected anybody in particular.

"If we think we know anything, I can't tell you," Chet declared "Billy? Why, he's always sore at Purr Sweet. You can't tell anything by him!"

Just the same it was evident that the boys were hiding much from their girl chums; and, of course, that being the case, the girls were made all the more curious.

CHAPTER XV

PIE AND POETRY

Laura's sleeves were rolled up to her plump elbows and she had an enveloping apron on that covered her dress from neck to toe. There was flour on her arms, on one cheek, and even on the tip of her nose.

Out-of-doors old Boreas, Jess said, held sway. Shutters flapped, the branches of the hard maple creaked against the clapboarded ell of the house, and there was an occasional throaty rattle in the chimney that made one think that the Spirit of the Wind was dying there.

"You certainly are poetic," drawled Bobby, who had come into the Beldings' big kitchen, too, and was comfortably seated on the end of the table at which Laura had been rolling out piecrust.

"Now, if that crust is only crisp!" murmured Mother Wit.

"If it isn't," chuckled Chet, stamping the snow off his shoes, "we'll make you eat it all."

"I'm willing to take the contract of eating it, sight unseen, if Laura made the pie," interjected Lance Darby, opening the door suddenly.

"Come in! Come in!" cried Jess. "Want to freeze us all?"

"You would better not be so reckless, Lance," Laura said, smiling. "These are mock cherry pies; and I never do know whether I get sugar enough in them until they are done. Some cranberries are sourer than others, you

know."

"M-m! Ah!" sighed Chet ecstatically. "If there is one thing I like----"

Lance began to sing-song:

"There was a young woman named Hooker,
Who wasn't so much of a looker;
But she could build a pie
That would knock out your eye!
So along came a fellow and took 'er!"

"Oh! Oh! We're all running to poetry," groaned Chet. "This will never do."

"Poetry, indeed!" scoffed Jess Morse. "I want to know how Lance dares trespass upon Bobby's domain of limericks?"

"And I wish to know," Laura added haughtily, "how he dares intimate that I am not 'a good looker'?"

"_Peccavi!_" groaned Lance. "I have sinned! But, anyway, Bobby is off the limerick business. Aren't you, Bobby?"

"She hasn't sprung a good one for an age," declared Chet.

"A shortage," sighed Laura.

"Gee Gee says the lowest form of wit is the pun, and the most execrable form of rhyme is the limerick," declared Jess soberly.

"Just for that," snapped Bobby, "I'll give you a bunch of them. Only these must be written down to be appreciated."

She produced a long slip of paper from her pocket, uncrumpled it, and began to read:

"There was a fine lady named Cholmondely,
In person and manner so colmondely
That the people in town
From noble to clown
Did nothing but gaze at her, dolmondely.'

Now, isn't that refined and beautiful?"

"It is--not!" said Chet. "That is only a play upon pronunciation."

"Carping critics!" exclaimed Lance. "Go ahead, Bobby. Let's hear the others."

As Bobby had been saving them up for just such an opportunity as this, she proceeded to read:

"There lived in the City of Worcester

A lively political borcester,
Who would sit on his gate
When his own candidate
Was passing, and crow like a rorcester!"

"Help! Help!" moaned Chet, falling into the cook's rocking chair and making it creak tremendously.

"Don't break up the furniture," his sister advised him, as she took a peep at the pies in the oven.

"Pies and poetry!" exclaimed Jess. "Go ahead, Bobby. Relieve your constitution of those sad, sad doggerels."

Nothing loath, the younger girl, and with twinkling eyes, sing-songed the following:

"There was a young sailor of Gloucester,
Who had a sweetheart, but he loucest'er.
She bade him good-day,
So some people say,
Because he too frequently boucest'er."

Take notice all you 'bossy' youths."

"Isn't English the funny language?" demanded Chet, sitting up again. "And spelling! My! Do you wonder foreigners find English so difficult? Here's one that I found in an almanac at the drug store," and he fished out a clipping and read it to them:

"A lady once purchased some myrrh
Of a druggist who said unto hyrrh:
"For a dose, my dear Miss,
Put a few drops of this
In a glass with some water, and styrrh.""

"Do, do stop!" begged Laura.

"I promise not to offend again," said Lance. "Besides, I hope to taste some of the pie, and a pie-taster should not be a poetaster."

"Oh! Oh! Awful!" Jess cried.

"I've run out of limericks myself," confessed Chet.

"But one more!" Bobby hastened to say. Then dramatically she mouthed, with her black eyes fastened on Chet:

"Said Chetwood to young Short and Long,
"Just list to my warning in song:
If you know of the crime,
For both reason and rhyme
Betray it--and so ring the gong!""

The other girls burst out laughing at the expression on the boys' faces. Chet and Lance looked much disturbed, and Chet finally scowled upon the teasing Bobby and shook his head.

"What do you know about that?" whispered Lance to his chum.

"You are altogether too smart, Bobby," declared Chet. "What do you mean?"

"We know you and Short and Long are trying to hide something from us," said Jess quickly.

"You might as well tell us all about it," Laura put in quietly. "What has Billy really got against Purt Sweet?"

"I don't admit he has anything against Purt," said Chet quickly.

"Nothing but suspicion," muttered Lance, likewise shaking his head.

"Then there is something in it?" Laura said quickly. "Can it be possible that Purt Sweet would do such an awful thing and not really betray himself before this?"

"There you've said it, Laura!" cried Lance. "That is what I tell both Chet and Billy. If Pretty was guilty, he would be scared so that he would never dare go out again in his car."

"Oh! Oh!" cried Bobby with dancing eyes. "Then my rhyme is a true bill?"

"Aw, Lance would have to give it away!" growled Chet.

"Boys are as clannish as they can be!" said Jess severely. "We are just as much interested as you are, Chet. What made Billy believe Pretty Sweet ran the man down?"

"Oh, well," sighed Chet, "we might as well give in to you girls, I suppose."

"Besides," laughed his sister, "the pies are almost done, and both you and Lance will want to sample them."

"Go on. Tell 'em, Chet," said Lance.

"Why, Billy had been riding that day in the Sweets' car. You know Purt is too lazy to breathe sometimes, and he wouldn't get out his chains and put 'em on. Billy knew that the chains were not on at dinner time that evening, for he passed the Sweet place and saw the car standing outside the garage with the radiator blanketed.

"Well, the only thing we were sure of about the car that ran that man down--the Alaskan miner, you know--was that the rear wheels had no chains on them, and that it was a Perriton car like Purt's."

"Yes, it was a Perriton," said his sister.

"So we fellows hiked up there to Sweets'. Purt was out with the car. He came home in about an hour, and he was still skidding over the ice. We tried to get out of him where he had been, but he wouldn't tell. We had to almost muzzle Billy, or he would have accused him right there and then. And Billy has been savage over it ever since."

"Really then," said Laura, "there is nothing sure about it."

"Well, it is sure the car was a Perriton. And since then we have found out that Purt's is the only Perriton in town that isn't out of commission for the winter. You can talk as you please about it: If the police only knew what we know, sure thing Purt would be neck-deep in trouble right now!"

CHAPTER XVI

EMBER NIGHT

The three girls of Central High and their boy friends had not come together on this stormy Saturday morning merely to feast on "pie and poetry."

The ice carnival had made them so much money that Laura and her friends desired to try something else besides the play which was now in rehearsal. They wanted to "keep the ball rolling," increasing the collections for the Red Cross from day to day.

Fairs and bazaars were being held; special collectors like Janet Steele were going about the city; noonday meetings were inaugurated in downtown churches and halls; a dozen new and old ways of raising money were being tried.

And so Mother Wit had evolved what she called "Ember Night," and the young people who helped carry the thing through were delighted with the idea. To tell the truth, the idea had been suggested to Laura Belding during the big storm when the lighting plant of the city was put out of order for one night.

She and her friends laid the plans for the novel fete on this Saturday after Laura's pie baking and after they had discussed the possibility of Prettyman Sweet being the guilty person whose car had run down the strange man now at the Centerport Hospital.

They put pies and poetry, and even Purt Sweet, aside, to discuss Laura's idea. Each member of the informal committee meeting in the Beldings' kitchen was given his or her part to do.

Laura herself was to see Colonel Swayne, who was the president of the Light and Power Company and who was likewise Mother Wit's very good friend. Jess

agreed to interview the local chief of the Salvation Army. Chet would see the Chief of Police to get his permission. Each one had his or her work cut out.

"Every cat must catch mice," said Mother Wit.

Plans for Ember Night were swiftly made, and it was arranged to hold the fete the next Tuesday evening, providing the weather was clear. Jess, whose mother held a position on the Centerport _Clarion_, wrote a piece about this street carnival for the Sunday paper, and the idea was popular with nearly every one.

Exchange Place was the heart of the city--a wide square on which fronted the city hall, the court house, the railroad station, and several other of the more important buildings of the place.

In the center of the square a Red Cross booth was built and trimmed with Christmas greens, which had just come into market. Members of the several city chapters appeared in uniform to take part in the fete. There was a platform for speakers, and a bandstand, and before eight o'clock on Tuesday evening a great crowd had assembled to take part in the exercises.

That one of the Central High school girls had suggested and really planned the affair, made it all the more popular.

"What won't Laura Belding think of next?" asked those who knew her.

But Laura did not put herself forward in the affair. She presided over one of the red pots borrowed from the Salvation Army that were slung from their tripods at each intersecting corner of the streets radiating from Exchange Place, and for a half mile on all sides of the square.

Under each pot was a bundle of resinous and oil-soaked wood that would burn brightly for an hour. At the booth in Exchange Place fuel for a much larger bonfire was laid.

The crowd gathered more densely as nine o'clock drew near. The mayor himself stepped upon the speaker's platform. The police had roped off lanes through the crowd from the Red Cross booth to the nearest corners.

Janet Steele came late and she chanced to pass Laura's corner, which was in sight of the speaker's stand and the booth. She halted to speak with Laura a moment.

"Isn't it just fine?" she said. "I wish mother could see this crowd."

"I imagine you would like to have her see lots of things," returned Laura.

"Our friend at the hospital, for instance."

"Who--who do you mean?" gasped Janet, evidently disturbed.

"The man who was hurt, I mean."

"Oh! He is quite interesting," said the other girl and slipped away. Laura's suggestion had seemingly startled her.

The band played, and then the mayor stepped forward to make his speech. At just this moment a motor car moved quietly in beside the curb near which Laura Belding stood guarding her red pot. Somebody called her name in a low tone, and Laura turned to greet Prettyman Sweet's mother with a smile.

Mrs. Sweet was alone in the tonneau of her car, which Purt himself was driving. The school exquisite, who was so often the butt of the boys' jokes, but was just now an object of suspicion, admired Laura Belding immensely. He got out of the car to come and stand with her on the corner.

"Got your nonskid-chains on, Purt?" asked Laura.

"On the rear wheels? Surely," said Sweet, eyeing the girl in some surprise, because of her question.

"My dear Laura!" cried Mrs. Sweet "Won't you come and talk to me while we are waiting?"

"Can't now, Mrs. Sweet. I am on duty," laughed Laura.

They could not hear what the mayor said, for they were two blocks away. But they had an excellent view of the stand and the Red Cross booth, and the crowd that pressed close to the police ropes.

Suddenly the mayor threw up his hand in command, and almost instantly--as though he had himself switched off the light--all the street lamps in the business section of Centerport went out. The arc light over the spot where Laura stood blinked, glowed for a moment, and then subsided. Mrs. Sweet cried out in alarm.

"This is all right," Laura called to her. "Now watch."

The mayor, in the half-darkness, stepped down from the platform and threw into the heart of the big bonfire the combustibles that set it off. The flames leaped up, spreading rapidly. The crowd cheered as eight boys, dressed in the knee-length dominos they had worn on the night of the ice carnival, dashed into the ring with resinous torches. They thrust the torches into the flames and the instant the torches were alight, they wheeled and dashed away through the lanes the police had kept open.

The red flames dancing before the Red Cross booth, and the sparking, flaming torches which the boys swung above their heads as they ran through the crowd to the various corners where the red pots hung, made an inspiring picture in the unwonted gloom of the streets.

"See how the Red Cross spreads!" cried Laura. "There's Nellie's fire going."

They could see the spark of new fire under the pot a block away. A short figure with flaming torch was approaching Laura's corner at high speed.

"Here comes Short and Long, I do believe," drawled Prettyman Sweet.

"My pot will soon be boiling," laughed Laura. "What are you going to throw in, Purt? And you, Mrs. Sweet? Give all you can--and as often as you can."

"Oh, I'll start you off, Laura," declared Purt, pulling out a handful of coins that rang the next moment in the bottom of the iron pot.

"Here's my purse, Prettyman!" called his mother, leaning from the car. "You put in my offering."

The few bystanders around Laura's corner began laughingly to contribute before the torch reached the spot. But Short and Long arrived the next moment. He stooped, thrust the blazing torch into the middle of the fuel under Laura's pot, and wheeled to run to his next comer.

The flames crackled, springing up ravenously. The boy's cotton gown flapped across the fire and before he could leap away the flames had seized upon the domino!

"Oh, Billy!" shrieked Laura Belding. "You are on fire!"

The short boy leaped away; but he could not leave the flames behind him. He threw down the torch and tried to tear off the domino. In a moment he was a pillar of flame!

"A blanket! A robe! Quick, Purt!" cried Laura, and started toward the victim of the accident, bare-handed.

For once Purt Sweet did as he was told, and did it quickly. He ran with the robe from the front seat of the automobile. Laura grabbed one end and together they wrapped their schoolmate in the heavy folds.

Short and Long was cast to the street and they rolled him in the blanket. The fire was smothered, but what injury had it done to the boy?

He was unconscious; for in falling he had struck his head, and the wound was bleeding. Mrs. Sweet was crying and wringing her hands.

"Oh, it's awful! Purt! Purt! Take me home!" she sobbed.

"No, Purt!" exclaimed Laura. "Take him to the hospital!"

"Of course we will," gasped the youth. "Help me lift him, Laura. Oh, the poor kid!"

Only the few people near by had seen the accident. Not even a policeman came. Laura and Purt staggered to the car with the wrapped-up body of the smaller lad. His face was horribly blackened, but that might be nothing but smoke. Just how badly Billy Long was injured they could not guess.

Mrs. Sweet shrank back into the corner of the tonneau seat and begged Laura

to get in with the injured boy.

"I can't! I can't touch him!" wailed the woman. "It's awful! Suppose he should be dead?"

"He's not dead," declared Purt. "We won't let him die--the poor kid! Here, mother, you hold his head and we'll lay him down on the seat. Let his head and shoulders lie right in your lap."

"Oh, Laura! Do come!" cried the woman.

"I can't, Mrs. Sweet!" returned Laura, sobbing. "I've got to stay and watch my pot boil. Do be quick, Purt!"

She stepped out of the car. Purt slammed the tonneau door and leaped to the steering wheel. In a moment the self-starter sputtered, and then the car wheels began to roll.

Mrs. Sweet was actually forced to do something that she had never done before--personally help somebody in trouble. Perhaps the experience would do her good, Laura thought.

In tears the latter returned to the corner. The fire was brightly blazing underneath her swinging pot. There was already quite a collection of coins and a few bills in the bottom of the receptacle. But although Laura stuck to the post of duty, her heart was no longer in the ceremonies of Ember Night. She wished heartily that she had never suggested the entertainment, even if it did benefit the Red Cross.

CHAPTER XVII

A STARTLING ANNOUNCEMENT

It did really prove to be one of the most successful forms of money-raising for the Red Cross that had been attempted in Centerport. And later they tried Ember Night in Lumberport and Keyport.

Laura Belding was not proud of her success, however, for poor Short and Long had been badly burned. Fortunately his face was only blackened, and the doctors decided that he had not inhaled any of the scorching flame.

Laura and Purt had wrapped him in the blanket so quickly that the fire was smothered almost at once. Yet there were bad burns on his arms and body--burns that would leave ineffaceable scars.

The girls of Central High had two interests now to take them to the hospital. The stranger who did not know his name and Short and Long both came in for a lot of attention.

The latter had never known before how popular with his schoolmates he was. Fruit, flowers, candy and the nicest confections from the Hill kitchens found their way in profusion to Billy's bedside.

After a day or two the doctors let him see whoever came, and he could talk all right. It made him forget the smart of his burns.

Of course his sister Alice came frequently, and she had to bring Tommy, the irrepressible, along. Tommy was more interested in the good things to eat at his brother's bedside, however, than he was in Billy's bodily condition.

There was so much jelly, and blanc-mange, and other goodies that the invalid could not possibly consume all. Tommy sat and ate, and ate, until the nurse said:

"Tommy, don't you know that you are distending your stomach with all those sweets? It is not good for you."

When Tommy learned that "distending" meant that his stomach was being stretched, he was delighted.

"Gimme some more, Allie," he begged his sister. "Please do, Allie dear. I want to stwetch my 'tomach. It's never been big 'nough to hold all I want to eat."

The interest of Laura and her close friends in the strange man with the broken leg did not lag. He talked freely with his visitors; but mostly about Alaska and his adventures in the gold mines.

As near as he could guess, he must have come out of the mines with his "pile," as he expressed it, almost ten years before.

"What under the canopy I have been doing since, I don't know. But if I've got down to two thousand dollars capital, I must have been having an awfully good time spending money; for I know I had a poke full of gold dust when I struck the coast and went over to Sitka."

"More likely he was robbed," said Chet.

"He looks about as much like a miner as Pa Belding," Laura declared.

There was too much going on just then, however, for Mother Wit to try out the thought that had come to her mind regarding this man. All these interests had to be sidetracked for school and lessons. And just at this time recitations seemed to be particularly hard. With rehearsals for the play, and all, mere knowledge was very difficult to acquire.

"I know I'm not half prepared in physics," wailed Nellie Agnew, as she and other juniors trooped into school one day, two weeks before Christmas.

"And I," said Jess Morse, "know about as much regarding this political economy as I do about sweeping up the Milky Way with a star brush."

"How poetic!" cried Laura, laughing. "I wonder if we all are as well prepared?"

"They expect too much of us," declared Dora Lockwood.

"Much too much!" echoed her sister.

"I wonder," said Laura, "if we don't expect too much of the teachers?"

In the physics recitation Nellie Agnew, as she prophesied, came to grief.

Miss Carrington seemed to have an uncanny knowledge of whom to call on at such times. She seemed aware that Nellie had not prepared her lesson properly. It might be that the wary teacher read her pupils' faces. Nellie's was so woebegone that it was scarcely possible to overlook the fact that she probably felt her shortcomings in the task at hand.

Miss Carrington called on the doctor's daughter almost the first one in physics. To say "unprepared!" to Miss Carrington was to bring upon one's head the shattered vials of her wrath. There was no excuse for not trying, that strict instructor considered.

So Nellie tried. She stumbled along in her first answer "like a blind man in a blind alley," so Jess Morse declared. It was pitiful, and all the class sympathized. The gentle Nellie was led to make the most ridiculous statements by the silky-voiced teacher.

"And you are a physician's daughter!" Miss Carrington burst out at last. "For shame!"

"If I were Nell," said Dora Lockwood to her twin, "I'd cut pills altogether after this. I'd rather take math with Mr. Sharp himself."

Miss Grace G. Carrington was never content to let a pupil fail and sit down. She nagged and browbeat poor Nellie until the girl lost her nerve and began to cry. By that time the other girls were all angry and upset, and that physics recitation was bound to go badly.

When Jess was called on she rose with blazing cheeks and angry eyes to face their tormentor. Miss Carrington saw antagonism writ large upon Jess Morse's face.

"I presume, Miss Morse, you think I cannot puzzle you?" said Miss Carrington in her very nastiest way.

"You can doubtless puzzle me," said Jess sharply. "But you cannot make me cry, Miss Carrington."

"Sit down!" ejaculated the angry teacher. "That goes for a demerit."

"And it is about as fair as your demerits usually are," cried Jess.

"Two, Miss Morse," said the teacher. "One more and you will not act in that

play next week."

"If I'd been born dumb," sighed Jess afterward, "it would have been money in my pocket. I almost had to bite the tip of my tongue off to keep from saying something more."

"And so ruin the whole play?" said Laura softly.

"Huh! I guess Hester Grimes will do that," declared Jess. "She moves about the stage like an automaton. She is going to get us a big laugh, but in the wrong place. Now, you see."

The girls rehearsed every afternoon, and the athletic work was neglected. Mrs. Case excused those who were engaged in producing the play. "The Rose Garden" was not such an easily acted play as they had at first supposed. Mr. Mann was patient with them; but in Hester Grimes' case he could not help the feeling of annoyance that took possession of him.

Hester Grimes took offence so easily.

"Every rehearsal I look for her to cut up rusty," Jess cried. "And somebody has got to play the part of the dark lady! It is not a part that can be cut out of the cast, although it is not a speaking part."

Hester had begun to complain, too, because she had no lines. She considered that she was being deprived of her rights, and was of less importance than the other girls, because she was dumb on the stage.

"Why! even Bobby Hargrew," she complained, "with her silly sailor part, has lines to repeat, besides that sailor's hornpipe in the first act. Of course, you girls would wish the least important part onto me."

"What nonsense, Hester!" cried Jess. "If you really understood the play and the significance of your part, you would not say such a thing. And do, do be less like a wooden image."

"Humph! I guess I know my part, Jess Morse," snapped Hester. "It doesn't matter at all what I do on the stage."

"What did I tell you?" groaned Bobby. "'Double! Double!' and-so-forth. There is trouble brewing. If we all had measles or chicken-pox, and so couldn't give the play, we'd be in luck, I verily believe."

"Oh, don't, Bobby!" begged Dora Lockwood. "You are so reckless."

"Just the same, I feel it in my bones that Hester is going to kick over the traces," said Bobby grimly.

"If only Margit Salgo had been allowed to have the part," groaned Dorothy.

"It's Gee Gee's fault if the play is a failure," snapped Bobby.

Never had the disagreeable teacher at Central High been so little liked as

at this time. They blamed Miss Carrington more than they did Hester.

As the party of troubled girls left the school-house on this particular afternoon, Lily Pendleton ran after them.

"What do you think has happened?" she cried.

"It's something bad, of course," groaned Nellie Agnew.

"Who is hurt?" asked Laura.

"It isn't that," said Lily. "But poor Purt Sweet!"

"Now what has he done?" asked Jess.

"It is what they say he has done, not what he really has done," wailed Lily. "The police have been to his house. And what do you think?"

"I bet his mother's had a fit!" exclaimed Bobby, in an undertone.

"The police accuse Purt of running down that man on Market Street the other Saturday night," said Lily warmly. "And Purt doesn't know anything more about it than a baby! Isn't it awful, girls?"

CHAPTER XVIII

WHERE WAS PURT?

The police examination of Purt Sweet was no light matter. Two of Centerport's detective force had been working on the case ever since the stranger had been knocked down on Market Street, and, like Chet Belding and his friends, the detectives finally had come to the conclusion that Prettyman Sweet's automobile was the only Perriton car in the city that had not been in storage on that night.

The detectives' visit to the Sweet residence, and Purt's later call upon the Chief of Police at his command, were dreadfully shocking to the boy's mother. Purt had to reassure her and insist that he was not going to be arrested and sent to jail at once; so he had not much time to be frightened himself. Indeed, he came out in rather good colors on this particular occasion.

The boy's father had long since died. Purt had been indulged by his mother to a ridiculous degree, and as a usual thing Purt's conversation and his activities were ridiculed by his schoolmates.

"This disgrace will kill me, Prettyman!" wailed Mrs. Sweet.

"Where does the disgrace come in," pleaded poor Purt, "when I haven't

really done anything?"

"But they say you have!"

"I can't help what they say."

"You were out that evening with the car. I remember it very well," his mother declared.

"What of it? I wasn't on Market Street the whole evening," grumbled the boy.

"Where were you then?" she demanded.

It seemed as though everybody else asked Purt Sweet that question, from the Chief of Police down; and it was the one question the boy would not answer.

He grew red, and sputtered, and begged the question, every time anybody sought to discover just where he was with the automobile on that Saturday evening after dinner. Even when Chief Donovan threatened him with arrest, Purt said:

"If I should tell you it wouldn't do any good. It would not relieve me of suspicion and would maybe only make trouble for other people. I was out with our car, and that is all there is to it. But I did not run that man down. I was not on Market Street."

He stuck to this. And his honest manner impressed the head of the police force. Besides, Mrs. Sweet was very wealthy, and if Purt was arrested she would immediately bail him and would engage the best counsel in the county to defend her son. It is one thing to accuse a person of a fault. As Chief Donovan very well knew, it is an entirely different matter to prove such accusation.

The news of Purt's trouble was not long in getting to Short and Long in the hospital. Chet and Lance really thought the smaller boy would express some satisfaction over Purt's trouble. But to their surprise Billy took up cudgels for the dandy as soon as he was told that the police suspected him of the offense.

"What's the matter with you, Short?" demanded the big fellow. "You've been sure Purt was guilty all the time."

"I don't care!" declared Billy. "He's one of us fellows, isn't he?"

"Admitted he goes to Central High," Chet said.

"But he isn't one of our gang," Lance added.

"I don't care! The police are always too fresh," said Billy, who had reason for believing that the Centerport police sometimes made serious mistakes. Billy had had his own experience, as related in "The Girls of Central High on Lake Luna."

"Then you don't believe Purt did it?" demanded Lance.

"No, I don't. I was mistaken," declared Short and Long. "Purt's all right"

"Wow! Wow!" murmured Chet.

"See how he brought me here in his car when I was hurt. And look at the stuff Purt's given me while I've been here," said Billy excitedly. "He'd never have hurt that man and run away without seeing what he'd done. No, sir!"

"Crackey, Billy!" said Chet, "you've turned square around."

"I know I have. And I ought to be ashamed of myself for ever distrusting Purt," said the invalid vigorously.

"Then why won't Purt tell where he was?" demanded Lance doubtfully.

"I don't care where he was," said Billy. "If he says he didn't hit the man, he didn't. That's all. And we've got to prove it, boys."

"Some job you suggest," said Chet slowly. "It looks to me as though Pretty Sweet was in a bad hole, and no mistake."

Even the most charitable of his schoolmates took this view of Purt Sweet's trouble. His denial of guilt did not establish the fact of his innocence. His inability, or refusal, to explain where he was at the time of the accident on Market Street in front of Mr. Belding's jewelry store made the situation very difficult indeed.

"If he could only put forward an alibi," Lance Darby said, when the Hill crowd of Central High boys and girls discussed the matter.

"But he won't say a word!" cried Nellie. "I believe he is innocent."

"Then why doesn't he tell where he was at the time?" demanded Laura sternly.

"Is he scared to tell the truth?" asked Jess.

"I don't think he is," Chet observed thoughtfully. "Somehow he acts differently from usual."

"You're right," Bobby declared, with frank approval of one of whom she had never approved before. "I believe there's a big change in old Purt."

"Well, it's strange," Laura remarked. "He never showed such obstinacy before."

"He's never shown any particular courage before, either," said her brother.

"That's what gets me!"

"Where does the courage come in?" demanded Lance.

"I believe Chet is right," Jess said. "Purt is trying to shield somebody."

"From what?" and "Who?" were the chorused demands.

"I don't know," Jess told them. "There is somebody else mixed up in this trouble. It stands to reason Purt would not be so obstinate if he had nothing to hide. And we are pretty much of the opinion--all of us--that he really did not run that man down. Therefore, if he is not shielding some other person, what is he about?"

"I've asked him frankly," Chet said, "and all I could get out of him was that he 'couldn't tell.' No sense to that," growled the big fellow.

It seemed that Purt Sweet had pretty well succeeded in puzzling his friends as well as the police. The latter were evidently waiting to get something provable on poor Purt. Then a warrant would be issued for his arrest.

By this time the stranger who had been the start of all the trouble and mystery--the man from Alaska, as the hospital force called him--was able to be up and wheeled in a chair, although his leg was not yet out of plaster.

Billy Long heard of this, and he grew very anxious to see the man whose accident was the beginning of Purt's trouble. Billy had quickly become a favorite with both the nurses and doctors of the Centerport Hospital. He was brave in bearing pain, and he was as generous as he could be with the goodies and fruit and flowers that were brought to him. He divided these with the other patients in his ward, and cheered his mates with his lively chatter.

At first, however, there had been an hour or so every other day when a screen was placed about Billy's bed and the doctor and nurse had a very bad time, indeed, dressing the dreadful burns the boy had sustained.

Short and Long could not help screaming at times, and when he did not really scream the others in the ward could hear his half-stifled moans and sobs. These experiences were hard to bear.

When the dressings were over and his courage was restored the screen was removed from about Billy's cot and he would grin ruefully enough at his nearer neighbors.

"I'm an awful baby. Too tender-hearted--that's me all over," he said once. "I never could stand seeing anybody hurt--and I can see just what they are doing to me all the time!"

Billy knew that the man from Alaska was being wheeled up and down the corridor, and he begged so hard to speak with him that the nurse went out and asked the orderly to wheel the chair in to Billy's cot.

"So you are the brave boy I've heard about, are you?" said the stranger, smiling at the bandaged boy from Central High.

"I know how brave you've heard me," said Billy soberly. "I do a lot of hollering when they are plastering me up."

The man laughed and said: "Just the same I am glad to know you. My name seems to have got away from me for the time being. My mind's slipped a cog, as you might say. What do they call you, son?"

Billy told him his name. "And," he added, "I was right there in front of Chet Belding's father's jewelry store when that automobile knocked you down."

"You don't mean it?"

"Yes, sir. I saw the machine. It was a Perriton car all right. It might even have been Pretty Sweet's car. But it wasn't Pretty Sweet driving it, I am sure."

The boy's earnestness caught the man's full attention. "I guess this Sweet boy they tell about is a friend of yours, son?" he said.

"He is a friend all right, all right," said Billy Long. "And I never knew it till right here when I got hurt. Purt--that's what we call him--is a good fellow. And I am sure he wouldn't do such a thing as to knock you down and then run away without finding out if he had hurt you."

"I don't know how that may be," said the man seriously. "But whoever it was that ran me down did me a bad turn. I can't find my name--or who I am--or where I belong. I tell you what it is, Billy Long, that is a serious condition for anybody to be in."

"I guess that's so," admitted the boy. "And you got your leg broken, too, in two places."

"I don't mind much about the broken leg," said the man who had lost his name. "What I am sore about, Billy Long, is not having any name to use. It--it is awfully embarrassing."

"Yes, sir, I guess it is."

"So, you see, I don't feel very kindly toward this Sweet boy, if he was the one who knocked me down."

"Oh, but I'm sure he isn't the one."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Because he wouldn't be so mean about it, and lie, and all, if he had done it. You see, a boy who has been so nice to me as he has, couldn't really be so mean as all that to anybody else."

"Not conclusive," said the man. "You only make a statement. You don't offer proof."

"But I--Well!" ejaculated Billy, "I'd do most anything to make you see that Purl _couldn't_ be guilty of knocking you down."

"I'll tell you," said the man without a name, smiling again, "I haven't any particular hard feelings against your friend. Or I wouldn't have if I could get my name and memory back. So you find out some way of helping me recover my memory--you and your young friends, Billy Long--and I'll forgive the Sweet boy, whether he hurt me or not"

"Suppose the cops arrest him?" asked Billy worriedly.

"I'll do all I can to keep them from annoying Sweet if you boys and girls can find out who I am and where I belong," declared the man, laughing somewhat ruefully.

And Billy shook hands on that To his mind the task was not impossible.

CHAPTER XIX

LAURA LISTENS

Laura Belding had evolved an idea regarding "Mr. Nemo of Nowhere," as Bobby dubbed the stranger at the hospital. In fact, she had two ideas which were entwined in her thought. But up to this point she had found no time to work out either.

She had taken nobody into her confidence; for Mother Wit was not one to "tell all she knew in a minute." On both points Laura desired to consider her way with caution.

She went shopping with her mother to several stores on Market Street one afternoon, skipping the rehearsal of "The Rose Garden" for this purpose. The Christmas crowds were greater than she had ever seen them before. But the enthusiasm for the Red Cross drive had by no means faltered in spite of the season.

Ember Night had gathered nearly five thousand dollars for the cause. Laura treasured a very nicely worded letter of appreciation from the mayor's secretary, thanking the Central High girl for her suggestion, which had proved so efficacious in money-raising. Laura was not exhibiting this letter to very many people, but she was secretly proud of it.

In every store she entered Laura saw a Red Cross booth, while collectors with padlocked boxes were weaving in and out among the shoppers.

"Give Again! Warranted Not to Hurt You!" was the slogan. Wearing a Red Cross button did not absolve one from being solicited.

And she saw that the people were giving with a smile. Centerport was still enthusiastic over the drive. Laura seriously considered what she and her Central High girl friends were trying to do for the fund. Would the play be a success? If they only gave one performance and the audience was not enthusiastic enough to warrant a second, and then a third, she would consider that they had failed.

All of a sudden, while she was thinking of this very serious fact, Laura came face to face with Janet Steele.

"You are just the girl I wished most to see, Janet!" cried the Central High girl.

"I always want to see you, Laura Belding," declared the Red Cross girl, who was evidently off duty and homeward bound.

"Thank you, dear," Laura said. "You must prove that. I want you to do me a favor."

"What can I possibly do for you?" laughed Janet. "Hurry and tell me."

"You may not be so willing after you hear what it is."

"You doubt my willingness to prove my friendship?" demanded Janet soberly.

"Not a bit of it! But, listen here." She told Janet swiftly what she desired, and from the sparkle in her eyes and the rising flush in her face it was easily seen that Laura had not asked a favor that Janet would not willingly give.

"Oh, but my dear!" she cried, "I shall have to ask mother."

"I presume you will," said Laura, smiling. "Shall I go along with you and see what she says?"

"Can you?"

"I have done all my mother's errands--look at these bundles," said Laura.

"We might as well have this matter settled at once. Your mother won't mind my coming in this way, will she?"

"You may come in any way you wish, and any time you wish, my dear," said Janet warmly. "Mother very much approves of you."

"It is sweet of you to say so," returned the girl of Central High. "I shall be quite sure she approves of me if she lets you do what I want in this case, Janet," and she laughed again as they turned off the busy main street into a quieter one.

The invalid was at the long window, and beckoned to Laura to come in before she saw that that was the visitor's intention.

"I cannot begin to tell you how delighted we are to have you girls call,"

Mrs. Steele said, when she had greeted both her daughter and Laura with a kiss. "It would be so nice if Janet could go to school; then she might bring home a crowd of young folks every afternoon," and the invalid laughed.

"But, you see, Miss Belding, I am so trying in the morning. It does seem that it is all Aunt Jinny and Janet can do to get me out of my bed, and dressed, and fed, and seated here on my throne for the day."

"It seems too bad that the weather is not so you can go out," Laura said.

"Oh, I almost never go out," Mrs. Steele replied. "Though I tell Janet that when spring comes, if we can only get the agent to repair that porch, she can wheel me back and forth on it in my chair."

"Better than that, dear Mrs. Steele," Laura promised, "we will come with our car and take you for a ride all over Centerport, and along the Lakeside Drive. It is beautiful in the spring."

"How nice of you!" cried the invalid. "But that, of course, depends upon whether we are in Centerport when the pleasant weather comes," said Mrs. Steele sadly.

"Oh, my dear!" exclaimed Laura, "do you mean that you think of going away?"

"Now, Mother!" murmured Janet, as though the thought was repugnant to her, too.

"How can we tell?" cried the invalid, just a little excitedly. "You know, Janet, if we should hear of your uncle----"

"Oh, Mother!" sighed the girl, "I do wish you would give up hope of Uncle Jack's ever turning up again."

"Don't talk that way," said her mother sharply. "You do not know Jack as I do. He was only my half brother, but the very nicest boy who ever lived. Why, he gave up all his share of the income from my father's estate to me, and went off to the wilds to seek his own fortune.

"How was he to know that some of the investments poor father made would turn out badly, and that our income would be reduced to a mere pittance? For I tell you, Miss Belding," added the invalid less vehemently, "that we have almost nothing, divided by three, to live on. That is, an income for one must support us three. Aunt Jinny is one of us, you know."

"Now, Mother!" begged Janet "Sha'n't I get tea for us?"

"Of course! What am I thinking of?" returned her mother. "Tell Aunt Jinny to make it in the flowered teapot I fancy the flowered teapot to-day--and the blue-striped cups and saucers.

"Do you know, Miss Belding, what the complete delight of wealth is? It is an ability to see variety about one in the home. You need not use the same

old cups and saucers every day! If I were rich I would have the furniture changed in my room every few days. Sameness is my _bete noire_."

"It must be very hard for you, shut in so much," said Laura quietly.

"And poor Janet is shut in a good deal of the time with me, and suffers because of my crotchets. Ah, if we could only find Jack Weld--my half brother, you know, Miss Belding. He went away to make his fortune, and I believe he made it. He has probably settled down somewhere, in good health and with plenty, and without an idea as to our situation. He never was a letter writer. And he had every reason to suppose that we were well fixed for life. Then, we have moved about so much----"

Janet came back with the tea things. Mrs. Steele left the subject of her brother, and Laura found opportunity of broaching the matter on which she had come. What she wished Janet to do pleased the latter's mother immensely. She was, in fact, delighted.

"How nice of you to suggest it, Miss Belding," said Mrs. Steele. "I know Janet will be glad to do it. Will you not, Janet?"

"I--I'll try," said her daughter, flushed and excited at the prospect Laura's suggestion opened before her.

CHAPTER XX

TWO THINGS ABOUT HESTER

Scarcely was Bobby Hargrew of a happier disposition and of more volatile temperament than the Lockwood twins. Dora and Dorothy, while still chubby denizens of the nursery, saw that the world was bound to be full of fun for them if they attacked it in the right spirit.

Dora and Dorothy's mother had died when they were very small, and the twins had been left to the mercy of relatives and servants, some of whom did not understand the needs of the growing girls as their mother would have done. Much of this is told in "The Girls of Central High on Lake Luna."

Almost as soon as the twins could stagger about in infant explorations of the house and grounds, they were wont to exchange the red and blue ribbons tied on their dimpled wrists by their nurse to tell them apart. For never were two creatures so entirely alike as Dora and Dorothy Lockwood.

And they had grown to maidenhood with, seemingly, the same features, the same voices, the same tastes, and with an unbounded love for and confidence in each other. As they always dressed alike nobody could be sure which was Dora and which Dorothy.

Now that they were well along in high school, the twins had been put on

their honor not to recite for each other or to help each other in any unfair way. There really was a very close tie between them--almost an uncanny chord of harmony. Indeed, if one was punished the other wept!

The teachers of Central High were fond of the twins--all save Miss Carrington. Her attitude of considering the pupils her deadly enemies extended to the happy-go-lucky sisters. She did not believe there was such a thing as "school-girl honor." That is why she had such a hard time with her pupils.

In the play the girls of Central High were rehearsing, Dora and Dorothy played two distinct characters. Makeup and costume made this possible. But at the first dress rehearsal the twins pretty nearly broke up the scene in which they both appeared on the stage, by reciting each other's parts.

Dora was an old, old woman--a village witch with a cane--while Dorothy was a frisky young matron from the city. When they met by the rustic well in the rose garden, haunted by that "dark lady" who was giving Mr. Mann so much trouble, Dora uttered the sprightly lines of her blooming sister, while the latter mouthed the old hag's prophecies.

It was ridiculous, of course, and the girls could not go on with the rehearsal for some minutes because of their laughter. But Mr. Mann was not so well pleased. Dora and Dorothy promised not to do it again.

"If I'd done anything like that, you'd all have jumped on me," Hester Grimes declared with a sniff. "It wouldn't have been considered funny at all."

"And it wouldn't have been," murmured Jess to Laura.

"There is one thing about you, Hessie," said Bobby, in her most honeyed tone, "that 'precludes,' as Gee Gee would say, your doing such a thing."

"What's that, Miss Smarty?"

"You are not twins," declared Bobby, with gravity. "So you could not very well play that trick."

"Oh, my!" murmured Nellie, "what would we do if Hester were twins?"

"Don't mention it!" begged Jess. "The thought is terrifying."

But there proved to be a second thing about Hester which came out prominently within the week. This was something that not many of the girls of Central High had suspected before the moment of revelation.

The first performance of "The Rose Garden" was set for Friday night. There would follow a matinee and evening performance on Saturday--provided, of course, the first performance encouraged the managers to go on with the production.

"It all depends," sighed Jess, bearing a deal of the responsibility for the

success of the piece on her young shoulders. "If we are punk, then nobody will come back to see the show a second time, or advise other folks to see it. And if we don't make a heap of money for the Red Cross, after all the advertising we've had, what will folks think of us?"

They were really all worried by the fear of failure. All but Hester. She did not appear to care. And it did seem as though every time she rehearsed she made the "dark lady" of the rose garden more wooden and impossible than before.

At length Mr. Mann had given her up as hopeless. It seemed impossible to make Hester act like a human being even, let alone like a graceful lady.

"So you see, now that he lets me alone, I do very well," asserted Hester, with vast assurance and a characteristic toss of her head. "I knew I was right all the time. Now, finally, Mr. Mann admits it."

When she said this to Lily, even Lily had her doubts. When Bobby heard her say it, she fairly hooted her scorn.

Of course, Hester instantly flew into a rage with Bobby. This was only two days before the fateful Friday and before recitations in the morning. The girls had gathered in the main lower corridor of Central High. The bell for classes had not yet rung.

"I'll show you how smart you are, Clara Hargrew!" Hester almost screamed. "I've a good mind to slap you!"

"That might make me smart, Hess," drawled the smaller girl coolly. "But it would not change the facts in the case at all. You are spoiling the whole play--the most effective scenes in it, too--by your obstinacy. Mr. Mann has given you up as a bad egg, that's all. If the play is a failure, it will be your fault."

And for once Laura Belding did not interfere to stop Bobby's tart tongue. Perhaps the bell for assembly rang too quickly for Mother Wit to interfere. At any rate, before Hester could make any rejoinder, they were hurrying in to their seats.

But the big girl was in a towering rage. She was fairly pale, she was so angry. Her teeth were clenched. Her eyes sparkled wrathfully. She was in no mood to face Miss Grace G. Harrington, who chanced to have the juniors before her for mediaeval history during the first period on this Wednesday morning.

Naturally, with the first performance of the play but two days away, those girls who were to act in it could not give their undivided attention to recitations. But Miss Carrington had determined to make no concessions.

She was firmly convinced that Central High should support no such farcical production as "The Rose Garden." Anything classical--especially if it were beyond the acting ability of the girls--would have pleased the obstinate woman.

"Something," as Nellie said, "in which we would all be draped in Greek style, in sheets, and wear sandals and flesh colored hose, covered from neck to instep, and with long speeches in blank verse to mouth. That is the sort of a performance to satisfy Miss Carrington."

"Amen!" agreed Bobby.

"Wait till she sees Bobby's knickers," chuckled Dora Lockwood. "You know Gee Gee always looks as though she wanted to put on blinders when she comes into the girls' gym."

Of course, these remarks were not passed in history class. But Dora was somehow inattentive just the same on this morning. She sat on one side of Hester Grimes and Dorothy on the other. The angry girl between the twins looked like a vengeful high priestess of Trouble--and Trouble appeared.

Miss Carrington asked Dora a direct question, speaking her name as she always did, and glaring at the twin in question near-sightedly, in an endeavor to see the girl's lips move when she answered. She was sure of Dora's seat; but, of course, she could not be sure whether Dora or Dorothy was sitting in it. Her refusal to accept the fact that the twins were on their honor kept Miss Carrington in doubt.

"Relate some incident, with date, in the life of Saladin, Dora," the teacher commanded.

Dora hesitated. This was a "jump question," as the pupils called it. Miss Carrington, as she frequently did, had gone back several lessons for this query, and Dora was hazy about Saladin.

"Come, Dora!" ejaculated the teacher harshly. "Have you no answer?"

Dorothy leaned forward to look across Hester's desk at her sister. She was anxious that Dora should not fail. She would have imparted, could she have done so, her knowledge of Saladin to her twin. But there was only nervous anxiety in her look and manner.

The moment Dora's lips opened and she began her reply, Hester turned sharply and stared at Dorothy. It was a despicable trick--a mean and contemptible attempt to get the twins into trouble. And Hester did it deliberately.

She knew that Miss Carrington was much more near-sighted than she was willing to acknowledge. Seeing Hester look at Dorothy caused the teacher to believe that Dorothy was answering for her sister.

"Stop!" commanded Miss Carrington, rising quickly from her seat on the platform.

Dora, who had begun very well at last, halted in her answer and looked surprised. Miss Carrington was glaring now at Dorothy.

"How dare you, Dorothy Lockwood?" she demanded, her face quite red with anger. "There is no trusting any of you girls. Cheat!"

There was a sudden intake of breath all over the room. Some of the girls looked positively horror-stricken. For the teacher to use such an expression shocked Laura, and Jess, and Nellie for an instant, as though the word had been addressed to them personally.

"Oh!" gasped Jess.

The teacher flashed her a glance. "Silence, Miss Morse!"

Dorothy had risen slowly to her feet. "What--what do you mean, Miss Carrington?" she whispered. "Do you say I--I have _cheated?" _

"Cheat!" repeated the teacher, with an index finger pointing Dorothy down. "I saw you. I heard you. You started to answer for your sister."

"I did not!" cried the accused girl.

"She certainly did not, Miss Carrington!" repeated Dora, rising likewise.

"Silence!" exclaimed Miss Carrington. "I would not believe either of you. You are both disgracing your classmates and Central High."

A sibilant hiss rose in the back of the room. The girls were more angry at this outburst of the teacher than all of them dared show.

Dorothy burst into a fit of weeping. She covered her face with her hands and ran out of the room. Dora, defying Miss Carrington, muttered:

"Ugly, mean thing!"

Then she ran after her sister. The room was in tense excitement. Miss Carrington saw suddenly that she positively had nobody on her side. She began to question the girls immediately surrounding the twins' seats.

"You saw her answer for her sister, Miss Morse?"

"I did not," declared Jess icily.

"Were you not looking at Dorothy, Laura?" asked the teacher.

"No, Miss Carrington. I was looking at Dora."

"And Dora answered!" cried the usually gentle and retiring Nellie Agnew.

"Why---Miss Grimes!" exclaimed the disturbed teacher. "You know that Dorothy was answering for her sister?"

"Oh, no, Miss Carrington," denied Hester.

"But you looked at her?"

"Yes."

"What for?" snapped the teacher.

"Why," drawled Hester, "that pin Dorothy wears in her blouse was on crooked and it attracted my attention."

That was the second thing about Hester Grimes. She was not alone a dunce when it came to acting, she was a prevaricator as well.

CHAPTER XXI

AND A THIRD THING

What might have happened following this explosion of bad temper and ill-feeling, had Mr. Sharp himself not entered the room, nobody will ever know. Miss Carrington had been led into a most unjust and unkind criticism of the Lockwood twins. She had been deliberately led into it by Hester Grimes. She knew Hester had done this.

The other girls knew it, too; and they all, the young folks, believed that the teacher had been most cruel and unfair.

Mr. Sharp could not have failed to appreciate the fact that there was a tense feeling in the room that never arose from an ordinary recitation in mediaeval history. But he smilingly overlooked anything of the kind.

"Pardon me, Miss Carrington--and you, young ladies," he said, bowing and smiling. "I have been in the senior classes, and now I am here to make the same statement I made there, and that I shall make to the sophomores later. May I speak to your class, Miss Carrington?"

Miss Carrington could not find her voice, but she bowed her permission for the principal to go on.

"Several of you young ladies," said Mr. Sharp, "are to take part in the play on Friday evening. Your work, in school, I fear, is being scamped a bit. Do the best you can; give your interest and attention as well as you may to the recitations.

"But I wish to announce that, until after this week, we teachers will excuse such failures as you may make in your work; only, of course, all faults will have to be made up after the holidays. We want you to give the play in a way to bring honor upon the school as a whole.

"I have enjoyed your last two rehearsals, and feel confident that, with a few raw spots smoothed over, you will produce 'The Rose Garden' in a way to please your friends and satisfy your critics. The faculty as a whole feel

as I do about it. Go in and win!"

The little speech cleared the atmosphere of the class-room immediately. It did not please Miss Carrington, of course; but the girls felt that they could even forgive her after what Mr. Sharp had said.

Dora and Dorothy Lockwood had been insulted and maligned. They did not appear again at that recitation.

"But do you think old Gee Gee would say that she was wrong, and beg their pardon?" demanded Bobby, at recess. "Not on your life!"

"I don't know that a teacher in her situation could publicly acknowledge she was utterly in the wrong," Laura observed thoughtfully.

"I would like to know why not?" demanded Jess Morse.

"Why, you see, the fault really lies upon the conscience of one of us girls," said Laura, looking significantly at Hester.

The latter turned furiously, as though she had been waiting for and expecting just this criticism. But surely she had not expected it from this source. All the girls were amazed to hear Laura speak so harshly.

"Oh, Laura!" murmured Jess. "Now you have done it! She's going to blow up!"

"And she'll leave us flat on the play business," groaned Bobby.

Hester came across the reception room to Laura with flashing eyes and her face mottled with rage.

"What is that you say, Laura Belding?" she demanded.

"I will repeat it," said Laura firmly. "The whole trouble is on your conscience. You deliberately led Miss Carrington astray."

"Oh! I did, did I?"

"You most certainly did. Miss Carrington was both cruel to Dora and Dorothy and unfair. But you knew her failing, and you led her to believe that Dorothy was answering the question she put to Dora. No wonder Miss Carrington was angered."

"Is that so?" sneered Hester. "And who are you, to tell me when I'm wrong?"

"Somebody has to tell you, Hester," said Jess sweetly, for she was bound to take up cudgels for her chum.

"And you can mind your business, too, Jess Morse!" snarled Hester.

"Dear, dear!" Nellie begged. "Let us not quarrel."

Yet for once Mother Wit seemed determined upon making trouble. Usually

acting as peacemaker, the girls around her were amazed to hear her say:

"You are quite in the wrong, Hester. And you know it. You should beg Miss Carrington's pardon; and you should ask pardon of all of us, as well as of Dora and Dorothy, for disgracing the class."

"What do you mean?" screamed Hester Grimes. "Do you suppose I would tell old Gee Gee that it was my fault?"

"You deliberately prevaricated--to her and to us," said Laura calmly.

"Call me a story-teller, do you?" cried the butcher's daughter. "How dare you! I'll get even with you, Laura Belding!"

"It is the truth," Laura said, slowly and firmly.

"I'll fix you for this, Laura Belding!" pursued Hester, trembling with rage. She turned to sweep them all with her angry glance. "I'll fix you all! I won't have anything to do with any of you out of school--so there! And I won't act in your hateful old play!"

She ran out of the room as she said this and left the girls--at least, most of them--in a state of blank despair. The bell rang for the next session before anybody could speak.

Laura seemed quite calm and unruffled. The others got through their recitations as best they could until lunch hour. Jess and Bobby caught up with Laura on the street when the latter went out for her customary walk.

"Oh, Laura! What shall we do?" almost wept Jess. "Only two days! Nobody can learn that part--not even as good as Hester knew it--before Friday night."

At that moment Chet Belding appeared from around the corner. He was red and almost breathless--in a high state of excitement, and no mistake.

"What do you think, girls?" he cried, "We got a line on Purt Sweet's automobile and why he has been hiding about where it was that Saturday night the man from Alaska was hurt."

"What is it? Tell us?" asked Laura.

"I met Dan Smith. He goes to the East High, you know, and he lives across the street from the Grimes' place. You know?"

"Hester Grimes?" cried Jess.

"Yes. Your dear friend. Well, Dan was up all night that night with a raging toothache. He said the Grimes' had a party. Purt was there with his car. Dan knows the car was taken away from the house and was gone more than an hour that evening, and that Purt did not go with the car.

"See? He's shielding somebody--the poor fish!" added Chet. "That is what Short and Long has been saying. Now, what do you know about that?"

CHAPTER XXII

THE CASE FOR AND AGAINST PURT

The news Chet had divulged was so exciting that the girls quite forgot for the time being the wreck that Hester Grimes seemed to have made of the forthcoming performance of "The Rose Garden."

Their chattering tongues mentioned Hester more than once, however, as they discussed Chet's news. Whether Purt Sweet's car had run down the man from Alaska or not, what did Hester know about it?

"Can it be possible that Purt is shielding Hester in this matter?" Laura queried gravely.

"Oh, it couldn't be! She wasn't in that car that knocked down Mr. Nemo of Nowhere," Bobby declared emphatically;

"He has always favored Hester and Lil," Jess

"Pooh!" again put in the irrepressible. "That's only because Pretty Sweet thinks there is nothing in this world so good or great as money; and both the Grimes and the Pendleton families have got oodles of it."

"I don't know about that," Chet said quite as thoughtfully as his sister. "It may not be their folks' money that attracts Purt to those two girls."

"What then?" demanded Bobby.

"They flatter him. He can lap that up like our cat laps cream."

"That is true," agreed Jess Morse.

"Certainly we don't flatter, him," Bobby said bluntly.

"It may be that we have never given Purt a fair deal," Laura observed. "Hester and Lil do not make fun of him."

"And is he paying Hester back by shouldering something for her?" Jess asked.

"Oh, she never was in that car when it was taken away from where Purt had it parked before the Grimes' house," Chet hastened to declare with assurance. "I got all the facts from Dan Smith. He'd swear to them."

"Let us hear the particulars," begged Laura.

"Why, Dan says he was up at his window on the third floor of their house

watching the lights in the Grimes' house. It was a big party. Dancing on the lower floor, and a crowd of folks. He saw two men--or maybe boys--run out of the side door and down to the gate, as though they were sneaking away from some of the others, you know."

"Well?" his sister responded. "Go on."

"Dan didn't know the fellows. Fact was, he couldn't see their faces very well, and so he could not be sure of their identity in any case."

"The street is pretty wide there, it's a fact," murmured Bobby.

"Those two fellows looked back as though they expected to be spied upon. But they went to the car, found it was all right (Purt had the radiator blanketed) and got in. The starter worked, and she got into action as slick as a whistle, Dan said. He thought it was all right or he would have raised the window and halloaed at 'em. There were no girls with them. The two fellows went off alone in the car."

"There were two men in the car that struck Mr. Nemo of Nowhere," murmured Bobby.

"Purt appeared, Dan says, after a little while and looked for the car. He got quite excited. Asked everybody that came along if they had seen it. He was in a stew for fair. And while he was running up and down, popping off like an engine exhaust, back came the car with only one of the fellows in it."

"Ha! The mystery deepens," said Jess, in mock tragic tones. "What became of the other villain?"

"You answer that question," grinned Chet. "You asked it!"

"But what happened then?" asked Laura interestedly.

"There was a row between Purst and the fellow who brought back the car. Purst pointed to the mudguard on the off side, as though it had been bent, or scraped in some way----"

"That's what struck the man as he fell on Market Street," interrupted Bobby with confidence. "I saw it hit him."

"It was blood on the guard," said Laura.

"Oh, my!" gasped Jess. "Do you suppose so?"

"Like enough," Chet agreed. "But it was too far away for Dan to see. And finally Purst drove off without returning to the house with the other fellow."

"But who was he?" Jess asked.

"Who?"

"The fellow Purt quarreled with for taking the car."

"Give it up," said Chet, shaking his head.

"And what became of the other man?" Laura queried.

"There were two in the car when it hit the man from Alaska," Jess declared.

"Gee!" ejaculated Bobby. "There's the nine-ten express west"

"Who----What do you mean, young one?" demanded Chet.

"'Young one' yourself!" snapped Clara Hargrew, immediately on her dignity.

"There are no medals on you for age, Chet Belding."

"Or whiskers, either," laughed Laura, slyly eyeing her brother, for she was aware that he had a safety razor hidden away in his bureau drawer.

"Come, come!" said Jess, "What about this nine-ten express Bobby spoke of?"

"Why," said the younger girl, "I noticed Mr. Belding's clock--the big chronometer in the show window--as we came out of the store that Saturday evening. It was just nine o'clock when we stood there and saw Mr. Nemo of Nowhere run down by the car. Anybody driving that car could have made the railroad station just about in time for the ten minutes' past nine express--the Cannon Ball, don't they call it?"

"That is the train," admitted Laura. "But why----"

"Just wait a minute. Give me time," advised Bobby. "That car that did the damage was headed for the station."

"True," murmured Jess. "At least, it was going in that direction."

"And when Purt's car came back to the Grimes' house after those two fellows Dan Smith saw run away with it, there was only one person in the car. The second individual had been dropped."

"At the station!" exclaimed Chet, catching the idea. "That is why they stole Purt's car."

"I declare," Laura said. "Your idea sounds very reasonable, Bobby."

"Bobby is right there with the brainworks," said Chet, with admiration.

"Oh," said Bobby, "I'm not altogether 'non compos mend-us,' as the fellow said."

Chet was very serious, after all. "I tell you what," he blurted out, "if Purt won't help himself with the police, maybe we can get him out of the muss in spite of all."

"Why does he want to act the donkey?" demanded Jess.

"Are you sure he is?" asked Laura thoughtfully.

"I tell you," said the excited Chet, "we can find out who had to leave Hester Grimes' party to catch that express. It ought to be a good lead. What do you think, Laura?"

"I am wondering," said Mother Wit, "if we have always been fair to Prettyman Sweet? Of course, he is silly in some ways, and dresses ridiculously, and is not much of a sport. But if he is keeping still about this matter so as not to make trouble for Hester, or any of her folks, there is something fine in his action, don't you think?"

"Well--yes," admitted Jess. "It would seem so."

"I never thought of poor Purt as a chivalrous knight," said Bobby.

"Maybe Laura is right," remarked Chet, rather grudgingly.

"He is much more of a gentleman, perhaps, than we have given him credit for being," Laura concluded. "I hope it is proved so in the end."

CHAPTER XXIII

THE LAST REHEARSAL

That afternoon, when the girls gathered for rehearsal, Hester, nor anybody else, appeared to play "the dark lady of the roses." Mr. Mann made no comment upon this fact, but he looked very serious, indeed.

The play was acted from the first entrance to the final curtain. The other characters had to speak of, and even to, the important and missing character, and it was plain to all as the play progressed that the absence of "the dark lady" was going to be a fatal hindrance to the success of the piece.

Even Lily Pendleton, Hester's last lingering friend, showed a good deal of spleen at Hester's action.

"I never will forgive Hessie," Lily said, almost in tears. And the other girls had to urge her over and over again to be sure and come herself on Thursday for the last dress rehearsal.

"If the piece is wrecked, let us be castaways together," begged Jess. "Don't anybody else fail. Promise, girls!"

They promised sadly. Mr. Mann had hurried away as soon as the last words were said.

"Too disgusted to even speak to us," Nellie said sadly. "I am real sorry for him, girls. He has tried so hard."

"He deserves a leather medal," said Bobby emphatically.

"And what do we deserve?" demanded one of the twins.

"I know what Hester Grimes deserves," said Bobby darkly.

It was not likely, however, that Hester Grimes would get her deserts. They were all agreed on that point, if on no other.

That Wednesday afternoon when the girls separated it was with drooping spirits--all but Laura Belding, at least. Perhaps it was because she always had so many irons in the fire that trouble seemed to roll off her young shoulders like rainwater off a duck's feathers.

At least, when she started for the street car that took her to the hospital before she went home, she was cheerful of countenance and smiling. She carried that same cheerfulness into the hospital itself and to Billy Long's ward.

The active Billy was, as he himself expressed it, "fed up" on the hospital by now. He was grateful for what they had done for him there and the way in which they treated him in every way, but confinement was beginning to wear on his spirits.

"Gee, Laura Belding!" ejaculated the young patient, seizing her hand with both his own when she appeared, "a sight of you is just a stop-station this side of eternity. Have they changed the hours? Aren't they twice as long as they used to be?"

"No, indeed, my poor boy," Laura said. "There are only sixty minutes in each. I wish I could shorten the time for you."

"Take it from me," growled Short and Long, having hard work to keep back the tears, "this being in bed is the bunk. Don't let anybody tell you different."

But Laura caught his attention the next moment with Purl Sweet's trouble. What Chet had found out from Dan Smith, Hester Grimes' neighbor, interested the quick mind of Billy Long immensely.

"Gee! I knew it must be something like that. Sure! Purl is shielding somebody for Hester. That's it!"

"Have you no idea who it can be? The man who drove the car, I mean, or the one who possibly took the nine-ten express out of town that night? Hester has no brothers----"

"Say!" exclaimed Billy, "there is somebody who will know. If Purl was there at the party, so was Lil Pendleton."

"Lily!" exclaimed Laura. "I never thought of her."

"And if she is likely to be sore on Hester now, as you say you all are," Billy continued, "she won't be for shielding Hester or any of her friends or relatives. Let me tell you that!"

"I believe she must have been at the party. Hester invites her to everything of the kind she has; although she seldom invites any of the other girls of Central High."

"Go to it!" urged the patient "Ask Lil Pendleton. I'd like to have Purt cleared of this. I told that man from Alaska so. But, gee, Laura! I wish we could find some way of giving him the right steer."

"You mean you would like to help him find his name and identity?"

"Yep. He says sometimes he feels that he is just going to remember--then it all dissipates in his mind like a cloud. He's bad off, he is!"

"I am going to see him now. I have an idea, Billy."

"You're always full of ideas, Laura," the boy said admiringly. "I've been raking my poor nut back and forth and crossways, without getting a glimmer of an idea how to help him. He says if we can show him how to find his memory, he'll do all he can for Purt," Billy added wistfully.

"You are very anxious to help Prettyman Sweet, aren't you, Billy?" suggested the girl of Central High as she rose to go.

"You bet I am."

"Why? You boys never thought much of him before, you know."

Billy flushed, but he stuck to his guns. "I tell you," he said, "we never gave Purt a fair deal, I guess. He's all right. He isn't like Chet, or Lance, or Reddy Butts, or the rest of the fellows, but there's good parts to Purt."

"You think he has proved himself a better fellow than you thought before?"

"You bet!" said Billy vigorously. "He's been mighty nice to me; and I always was playing jokes on him, and--Aw! when a fellow lies like I do in bed and has so much time to think, he gets on to himself," added the boy gruffly. "Sending dead fish to other fellows isn't such a smart joke after all."

"I am going to see your friend, the Alaskan miner, now," the girl said, squeezing the boy's hand understandingly.

"If you find out some way of jogging his memory, I'd like to be in on it," Billy cried.

"You shall," promised Laura, as she tripped away.

By this time Laura was so well known at the hospital that nobody stopped her from going to the unknown man's private room where he was now established with his particular nurse. He hailed the girl's appearance almost as gladly as Billy Long had done.

"Your bright young faces make you high-school girls--and the boys, of course--as welcome as can be," he said. "I'd like to do something when I get out of this hospital in return for all your kindness to me. But if I can't get a grip on what and who I am----"

"I have thought of a way by which we may help you to that," interjected Laura. "You know, you must have been doing something all these years since you won your fortune in Alaska."

"Surely! But what became of my wealth? That is a hard question."

"Perhaps we can help you find out what you have been doing. Then you will gradually remember it all. Have you those bank-notes they say you carried in your pocket when you were brought in?"

"Why, they are in the hospital safe. I haven't had to use much of my money yet," he said, puzzled.

"I want to look at that money--all of it," said Laura. "It is too late to-night, but to-morrow afternoon I will come with my brother, and I wish you would have those bank-notes here. I have an idea."

"I'll do just as you say, Miss Laura," said the man. "But I don't understand----"

"You will," she told him, laughing, as she hurried away.

There was, therefore, much puzzlement of mind in several quarters that night--and Laura Belding was partly at fault. She retained all her usual placidity, and even on the morrow, when she went to school and found the other girls so very despondent about the play, she refused to join in their prophecies of ill.

This was the day of the last rehearsal. Mr. Mann had told them that he wished the actors to rest between this dress rehearsal and the first public performance of "The Rose Garden" on the following evening.

"I just know it will be a dreadful fizzle," wailed Jess, before Mr. Mann called the rise of the curtain.

Everything was in readiness, however, for a perfect rehearsal. The curtain was properly manipulated and the scene shifters, the light man, and all the other helpers were at their stations, as well as the orchestra in the pit.

The girls had been excused from studies at one o'clock--of course, greatly to Miss Carrington's disapproval. Since her "run-in" with the Lockwood

twins, as Bobby inelegantly called it, the teacher had been less exacting, although quite as stern-looking as ever.

Dora and Dorothy, being cheerful souls, had recovered from their excitement over the incident in history class, and were so much interested in their parts in the play now that they forgot all about Gee Gee's ill treatment.

Indeed, when the curtain was rung up every girl in the piece was in a state of excitement. Although they felt that the failure of the part of "the dark lady of the roses" would utterly ruin some of the best lines and most telling points in the play, they were all ready to act their own parts with vigor and a real appreciation of what those parts meant.

Bobby, as the sailor lad, came on with a rolling gait that would have done credit to any "garby" in the Navy. Jess, as the swashbuckling hero, swaggered about the stage in a delightful burlesque of such a character, as the author intended the part to be played.

Then the lights were lowered for the evening glow and "Adrian" turned to point out the "dark lady"--that mysterious figure supposed to haunt the rose garden and for weal or woe influence the hero's house and his affairs.

Jess recited her lines roundly, pointing the while to the garden along the shadowy paths of which the dark lady of the roses was supposed to wander. With incredible amazement--a shock that was more real than Jess could possibly have expressed in any feigned surprise--she beheld the dark lady as the book read, moving quietly across the garden, gracefully swaying as she lightly trod the fictitious sod, stooping to pluck and then kissing the rose, and finally disappearing into the wings with a flash of brilliant eyes and the revelation of a charming countenance for the audience.

It was lucky that this signaled the curtain's fall on the first act, or Jess Morse would have spoiled her own good work by the expression of her amazement.

CHAPTER XXIV

MR. NEMO, OF NOWHERE

"Who is it?"

"Can it be Margit Salgo?"

"How very, very wonderful!"

These were some of the ejaculations of the girls behind the scenes.

At just the right moment the figure of the dark lady had glided from the dressing-rooms to the wings and gone on at the cue. Her acting gave just

the needed touch to the pretty scene. Her appearance had been most charming. And, above all, the surprise had been "such a relief!"

"I'm so glad Hester got mad with us and refused to act," sighed Bessie Yeager. "Whoever this girl is, she is fine."

"Is it a professional Mr. Mann has engaged?" somebody wanted to know.

"Laura Belding! Laura Belding!" cried Dora. "What do you know about it?"

"I warrant Laura knows all about it," said Jess, recovered from her amazement. "It is just like Mother Wit to have saved us. And I believe I recognize that very charming Lady Mystery--do I not?"

"Isn't she splendid?" cried Laura, enthusiastically, "I knew she could do it. And Mr. Mann has been giving her an hour's training every day for a week."

"Goodness!" drawled Lily Pendleton, "how did you know Hester would cut up so mean?"

"Doesn't she always do something to queer us if she can?" snapped Bobby. "Laura, you are a wonder!"

"It is Janet Steele," declared Jess. "Of course! I should have thought of her myself. She is all right--just the one we needed."

And it took some courage on Jess' part for her to say this, for she knew that Chet Belding had expressed very warm admiration indeed of Janet Steele.

The rehearsal went off splendidly after that. Everybody was encouraged. The rotund little Mr. Mann beamed--"more than ever like a cherub," Bobby declared. They came to the final curtain with tremendous applause from the back benches where some of the faculty sat in the dark.

"And I do believe," said Nellie Agnew, in almost a scared voice, "that Gee Gee applauded! Can it be possible, girls? Do you suppose that for once she gives us credit for knowing a little something?"

"If she applauded, her hands slipped by mistake!" grumbled Bobby. "You know very well that nothing would change Gee Gee's opinion. Not even an earthquake."

It was late when the rehearsal was over, and Laura knew that Chet would be waiting outside with their car. She hurried Jess and Bobby, and even Janet, into their outer wraps as quickly as possible.

"For you might as well go along with us, Janet," Laura said to the new girl "We're going to the hospital first, but we'll drop you at your home coming back."

Just what they were to do at the hospital nobody knew save Laura and Chet,

and they refused to explain. When they arrived at the institution they went directly to the private room now occupied by Mr. Nemo of Nowhere.

Billy Long, up in a chair for the first time, was present to greet the girls of Central High. And the man from Alaska seemed particularly glad to see them.

"Here is the money, Miss Laura," he said, producing a packet of crisp bank-notes. "I'd give it all to know just who I am. I seem to be right on the verge of discovering it to-day; yet something balks me."

"Oh, look at all that money!" crowed Billy, as Laura accepted the bills, while Chet, with the help of the interested nurse, arranged the bed-table and gave the man a pad and a fountain pen.

The head surgeon, who had taken a great interest in the case and with whom Laura had already conferred, tiptoed into the room and stood to look on.

"You bankers," said Laura, laughing, and speaking to the patient, "are always so much better off than ordinary folks. You pass out any old kind of money to your customers; but you never see a banker with anything but new bank-notes in his pocket."

The man listened to her sharply. A sudden quickened interest appeared in his countenance. The others heard Mother Wit's speech with growing excitement.

"See," said the girl of Central High, extracting one of the bank-notes from the packet "Here is another bill on the Drovers' Levee Bank, of Osage, Ohio. Did you notice that? Doesn't it sound familiar to you?"

She repeated the name of the bank and its locality slowly. "You have more bills of that same bank. But none like the one you gave Chet when you bought that lavalliere for 'the nice little girl' you told him you expected to give it to."

The man stared at her. He seemed enthralled by what she said. Laura proceeded in her quiet way:

"Just write this name, please: 'Bedford Knox.' Thanks. Now write it again. He is cashier of your bank in Osage, Ohio."

Jess barely stifled a cry with her handkerchief. But everybody else was silent, watching the man laboriously writing the name as requested by Laura.

It was a disappointment. No doubt of that The man did not write the name as though he were familiar with it at all. But Laura was still smiling when he looked up at her, almost childishly, for further directions.

"Now try this other, please," said the girl firmly. "Two men always sign bank-notes to make them legal tender. The cashier and the president The president of the Drovers' Levee Bank, of Osage, Ohio, is----"

She hesitated. The man poised his pen over the paper expectantly. Said Laura, briskly:

"Write 'Peyton J. Weld.'"

At her words Janet Steele uttered a startled exclamation. The man did not notice this. He wrote the name as Laura requested. Chet, looking over his shoulder and with one of the Osage bank-notes in his hand for comparison, watched the signature dashed off in almost perfect imitation of that upon the bank-note.

"You guessed it, Mother Wit!" the big boy cried. "Write it again, Mr. Weld. That is your name as sure as you live!"

The surgeon stepped quickly to the bedside and his sharp eyes darted from the bank-note in the boy's hand to the signature his patient had written. The man looked wonderingly about the room, his puzzled gaze drifting from one to another of his visitors until it finally fastened upon the pale countenance of Janet Steele.

Catching his eye, the girl stepped forward impulsively, her hands clasped.

"Uncle Jack!" she breathed.

"You--you look quite like your mother used to, my dear," the man in bed said in rather a strange voice.

The surgeon eased him back upon the pillows, and at a nod the nurse sent the visitors out of the room. In the corridor they all stood amazed, staring at Janet.

CHAPTER XXV

IT IS ALL ROUNDED UP

"Of course," Lily Pendleton confessed, "I was at Hester's party,"

"And Purl Sweet was there?" queried Laura earnestly.

"Mr. Sweet certainly was present, too," said the other girl. "You girls need not be so jealous if we are the only two from Central High that got invited,"

"You can have my share and welcome," said Bobby.

"And mine, too," confessed Jess.

"These interrogations are not inspired by jealousy," laughed Mother Wit.

It was on Friday as the girls gathered for recitations that this conversation occurred. Lily Pendleton was inclined to object to having her intimacy with Hester Grimes inquired into.

"Do you remember what night that party was held, Lily?" asked Laura.

"Why, no. On a Saturday night, I believe."

"Quite so. And on a particular Saturday night," said Laura.

"You said it!" murmured Bobby.

"I don't know what you mean!" cried Lily Pendleton.

"But you will before I get through with you," said Laura. "Now, listen! You know about that man who had his leg broken on Market Street?"

"The one the police say Purt ran down with his car?"

"The same."

"Of course I do," Lily cried. "And Purt is as innocent as you are!"

"Granted," said Laura. "Therefore you will help us explain the mystery, and so relieve Purt Sweet of suspicion. For he refuses to say anything himself to the police."

"Why--why----What do I know about it?" demanded Lily.

"Do you know that the party was held the very Saturday night the man was hurt?"

"No! Was it?"

"It was. And Purt had his car up there at the Grimes' house."

"Did he? I didn't know. He went away early, I believe."

"And earlier still a couple of boys, or men, borrowed Purt's car without his knowing it--until afterward," Laura declared earnestly. "One of those fellows had to catch a train."

"Why, that was Hester's cousin, Jeff Rounds! He lives at Norridge. Don't you know?"

"Who was the other fellow?" asked Laura sharply.

"Why--I----Oh! it must have been Tom Langley. He lives next door to Hester. Do you know," said Lily, preening a little, "I think Tom is kind of sweet on Hessie."

"Good night!" moaned Bobby. "What is the matter with him? Is he blind?"

"He must have had very bad eyesight or he would not have run down that poor Mr. Weld on Market Street!" exclaimed Jess tartly.

"What do you mean?" gasped Lily. "Tom Langley has gone away for the winter anyway. He went suddenly----"

"Right after that party, I bet a cooky," cried Bobby.

"Well--ye-es," admitted Lily.

"Scared!" exclaimed Jess.

"The coward!" cried Laura.

"And left poor Purt to face the music," Bobby observed. "Well, old Purt is better than we ever gave him credit for. Now we'll make him square himself with the police."

It was Mr. Nemo of Nowhere, now Mr. Peyton J. Weld, who had the most to do with settling the police end of Purt Sweet's trouble. It was some weeks before he could do this, for the shock of his mental recovery racked the man greatly. For some days the surgeon would not let the young folk see their friend whose mind had been so twisted.

"I don't know but we did more harm than good, Laura," Chet Belding said anxiously, when they discussed Mr. Weld's condition.

"I don't believe so," his sister said. "At any rate, we revealed him as Janet's Uncle Jack, and the discovery has done Mrs. Steele a world of good already."

That the man who, for a time, had forgotten who he was and had forgotten a number of years of his life, finally recovered completely, can safely be stated. His very first outing from the hospital was in Purt Sweet's car, and the boy drove him first of all to the office of the Chief of Police.

Purt had refused utterly to make trouble for either Hester Grimes' cousin Jeff or for Tom Langley. Mr. Weld assured the Chief of Police that, although it was Purt's car that had struck him down on the icy street, Purt had not been in the car at the time.

Nor did the boy of Central High have anything to do with the accident. His car had been borrowed without permission by "parties unknown," as far as Mr. Weld was concerned, and to this day the police of Centerport are rather hazy as to just who it was that stole Purt Sweet's car and committed the assault.

"And I feel sort of hazy myself," Jess Morse said, when they were all talking it over at one time. "Mostly hazy about this Man from Nowhere. How did he so suddenly become Janet Steele's Uncle Jack?"

"And his name 'Peyton'?" added Nellie Agnew.

"Why, his middle name was John--they always called him by it at home," explained Laura Belding. "And, of course, Janet and her mother knew nothing about the name written on those Osage bank bills. I didn't suspect the relationship myself.

"But I began to be quite sure that he must have had something to do with the bank for which those bills were issued. And it seemed probable that, as he had so much money with him when he landed in Centerport, that he must be somebody in Osage of wealth and prominence. I wrote secretly to the postmaster at Osage and learned that the president of the Drovers' Levee Bank had gone East on a vacation--presumably to hunt up some relatives that he had not seen for some time."

"Sly Mother Wit!" cried Jess.

"Not such a wonderful thing to do," laughed Laura.

"Not half so wonderful," put in the irrepressible Bobby Hargrew, "as it seemed to the countryman who came to town and stood gazing up at the tall steeple of the cathedral. As he gazed the bell began to toll. The hick stopped a passer-by and said:

"'Tell me, why does the bell ring at this time of day?'

"The other man studied the hick for a moment and then said: 'That's easy. There's somebody pulling on the rope.'"

"Well," said Nellie, when the laugh had subsided, "I guess Janet and her mother are glad our Laura had such a bright idea."

"Of course! They are going back to Osage with Mr. Weld when he has fully recovered. And so we shall lose an awfully nice girl friend," Laura declared.

"Gee!" sighed Chet. "And such a pretty girl!"

Jess said not a word.

* * * * *

Of course, all twisted threads must be straightened out at the end of the story; but our tale really ends with the performance of "The Rose Garden." That on Friday night was most enthusiastically received by the friends and parents of the girls of Central High.

It was a worthy production, and the girls deserved all the applause they received. It encouraged them to give two further performances, and altogether the three netted a large sum for the Red Cross. The play, in fact, was the means of raising more money for the fund than any other single method used for that object in Centerport.

The city "went over the top" in its quota of both memberships and funds,

and that before Christmas. The girls of Central High could rest on their laurels over the holidays, knowing that they had done well.

"But wait till Gee Gee gets after us after New Year's," prophesied Bobby.

"Don't be so pessimistic," said Jess. "Maybe she won't."

"Why won't she?" demanded Dora Lockwood.

"Nothing will change her," sighed Dora's twin.

"Say!" gasped Bobby, stricken with a sudden thought, "maybe she'll get the pip, or something, and not be able to teach. That is our only hope!"

"Suppose we turn over a new leaf, as Miss Carrington won't," suggested Laura in her placid way.

"What's that?" demanded Bobby suspiciously.

"Suppose we agree not to annoy her any more than we can help for the rest of the school year?"

"There! Isn't that just like you, Laura Belding?" demanded Jess.

"Suggesting the impossible."

This was said in the wings of the school stage during the last performance of "The Rose Garden." The curtain went up on the last act and the girls became quiet. They watched Janet Steele, as the dark lady of the roses, move again across the stage. She was very graceful and very pretty. The boys out front applauded her enthusiastically.

Laura pinched Jess's arm. "Janet certainly has made a hit," she whispered.

"Well," admitted Jess, "she deserves their applause. And she just about saved our play, Laura. There is no getting around that."

THE END

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