

An Adventure Story for Girls

The
Thirteenth Ring

Roy J. Snell

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Mystery Stories for Girls

The Thirteenth Ring

By
ROY J. SNELL



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THE THIRTEENTH RING

CHAPTER I A PLUNGE IN THE DARK

The hour was nearing midnight. A misty moon shone down between the brick walls of skyscrapers to paint a wavering golden glimmer on the surface of the river.

Well back in the shadows at the foot of the bridge a flat-bottomed boat, dragged at by the river's restless tugging, bumped against a stone wall. In the boat sat a slim, black-haired girl—Betty Bronson.

Betty was seventeen. Her home was right there by the river, in the restless business center of a great metropolis. If she climbed up from the boat, walked along the breakwater twenty paces, then crossed a six foot strip of grass that grew at the water's edge, she would come to the door of her home. As far back as she could remember her home had been there. In winter she wakened to watch ice floating by; in summer there was only the milky-gray sweep of water. It was summer now.

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The boat in which she sat had been placed there by the city police department. There was one at every bridge. They were left there all the time. If some one fell off the bridge, or in a fit of despondency jumped off, this boat was to be used in the rescue. Twice Betty had assisted in such work. The last time it had been a boy who fell off the breakwater, and a grateful father had given her ten dollars.

Betty was not hoping to rescue anyone now. The city streets were all but deserted then. She sat out there because the water, coming directly from the lake, cooled the air. It was a glorious place to think, and she loved this old river of her early childhood dreams.

The street along the river front was not wholly deserted on this night. Near the street car track two blocks away, another girl, a year or two older than Betty, stood waiting for a car. This was Florence Huyler. Florence was large and very strong. As summer playground director for one of the west side parks, she had to keep physically fit. Even in summer she kept up her gymnasium work, and was returning from a night class now.

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As her gaze swept the empty street a wrinkle of anxiety appeared upon her brow. Early that morning a rather disturbing

thing had happened to her.

She put one hand over an inner pocket of her blouse, to murmur,

“Yes, they’re there.”

A second later her hand dropped to her side as a little gasp escaped her lips.

A short, brown faced Chinaman with high brow and beetle-like eyes had suddenly appeared from nowhere. Not twenty paces away he was walking rapidly toward her.

“It’s the very same man,” she whispered.

With a sudden move that betrayed great agitation, she turned and walked rapidly west toward the bridge. And still, beneath that bridge, the flat-bottomed boat bumped the wall; still in the center of it the black-eyed girl sat hugging her knees, breathing the cool damp river air of night, and thinking of many things.

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Florence had not gone far before, without really willing to do so, she broke into a run. A glance over her shoulder told her that the little yellow man was running too.

This set her heart beating wildly. So he was really following her, would catch up with her if he could! Why? This she could not tell. She could guess. It had something to do with the rings. Even now she fancied she caught low hissed words from him:

“The ring! The ring!”

Well, he shouldn’t catch her! She’d escape him. Her gym training would count now. A cool head and physical skill, that was enough. She was strong. She would keep her head.

While she was thinking this she was racing forward. She was near the bridge. She tried to think of a way out. Beyond the bridge was a viaduct, a dark cave-like affair that ran for a whole block beneath railway tracks. She shuddered at thought of that.

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“Not there if I can help it!” she breathed. “But where?”

To her right along the street the perpendicular wall of a seven story building reared itself to the sky. No chance there.

Across the street the steel skeleton of a tall building in process of construction loomed in the dark. She had a good heart and a clear head. She was not afraid to climb.

Like a flash she was across the street and on the nearest steel girder.

Having come from the gym, without a complete change, she

still wore her rubber soled gym shoes, and beneath a broad skirt, her bloomers. She could climb unhandicapped.

“Should lose him in a minute now,” she told herself.

But she did not. The man seemed desperately in earnest. Though she repeatedly risked her life by climbing the posts that led from girder to girder, though her head swam and her heart beat wildly as she paused for a second to gaze into the dark dizzy depths below, she found him always but a few feet beneath or behind her. And as she paused, panting, before another desperate endeavor, she caught the hissed words:

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“The ring! The ring!”

“The ring!” she thought desperately. “There is no one ring. There are thirteen; thirteen used wedding rings. What would he want of them? Is he a criminal? No, no. They would not bring ten dollars in a pawn shop. He must be mad!” Again she climbed, climbed up and struggled on until at last she found herself in a corner.

To her right towered a brick wall. Behind her was the mysterious Chinaman, and far beneath her lay the glimmering surface of the river.

In the boat, among the shadows by the bridge, Betty Bronson still sat, half asleep, dreaming of adventure and romance.

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A car rumbled across the bridge.

“Probably a taxi bound for the depot,” she told herself dreamily. “Must be near midnight.”

A rippling breeze sped across the water. The river tugged vainly at her boat’s mooring.

“Like a puppy pulling at a stick,” she thought, “only you’re no puppy of a river. You’re old and, in a way, dignified.”

Betty loved the river. Somehow she always expected it to bring her romance and adventure. A queer thing to expect. But then the river had seen adventure—Marquette, Joliet, LaSalle, they had all paddled silently up this river to explore lands that no white man had ever seen. Tall grass had waved on its banks then; deer and buffalo had waded belly deep in its clear waters.

It was different now. The very course of it had been changed. Where it had flowed north it now flowed south. Its waters now moved between walls, a stone and brick canyon. But what of that? You can’t take romance out of a river by putting walls around it, and turning its course end for end.

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Most certainly not. Anyway that’s the way Betty thought of it. Yes, she was sure romance and adventure would come to her

from that river; sure as her love for it was constant, it would come, come as the sword Excaliber came mysteriously to King Arthur.

Betty was tall, slender, black-eyed, black-haired and quite fearless. Living in the heart of a great city had made her fearless. She longed for adventure. Mystery, too, she loved, the right kind of mystery—not trumped up mystery, but real mystery.

She longed to solve the many mysteries that had passed up and down the river at night; the small, silent boats that hugged the shadows, the larger boats that drifted down the river without a sound. Ah yes, there were mysteries here, but not such mysteries that one slender girl might solve.

She loved adventure. That was why she had found a position on a great city newspaper during her summer vacation. Had she found adventure there? Hardly. They had made her office girl to the Children's Editor. No great adventure in that. Yet within the walls of that dingy old newspaper building adventure had come to many. Would it come to her? Who could say? In the meantime surprise and adventure were preparing to leap at her from the dark shadows above the bridge.

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Hardly had Florence, on the steel frame, found herself in a corner with a mysterious Chinaman at her heels than she saw a possible means of escape. A great steel crane, more than forty feet long, rising at an angle from the very top of the steel structure, hung far out over the river. A heavy rope, extending from the outer end of this crane, had been brought in and tied to a steel girder not twenty feet from the point where she stood. In a moment her keen mind took in all the possibilities of that rope.

“If I were there; if I loosened the rope, if I threw a loop into it; if I stepped off, let myself go,” she thought breathlessly, “I would swing like a great pendulum across the river, and I would—perhaps I would, land on the roof of that building on the other side.”

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Fear of the unknown spurred her on. With a leap and a flying swing she was at the spot where the rope was tied. Ten seconds of suspense while her practiced fingers worked with the rope; a sudden step forward, a gripping of the rope, a quick prayer for protection. Just as the Chinaman reached out to seize her, she was away.

There followed a breath taking swing over the river.

“Like clinging to the tail of a comet,” her keen mind flashed.

Her eyes were upon the roof across the river. As with one foot extended for a leap she waited, seconds seemed broken up into infinite periods of time, yet the passage was swift as the flight

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of a bird. One second found her speeding, the next found her slowing up, nearing her goal. An instant more and—She ceased breathing, her heart seemed to pause. Now—now for the briefest period of time she hung motionless in space, so close to that roof, and yet so far. Could she have made it? No one will ever know. She did not dare try. An instant of hesitation, and all was lost. She was going back, would not swing so far next time, would never touch that roof.

What now? Her heart beat wildly. As she looked back to the spot she had left she saw the Chinaman. He was standing there with both arms outstretched, like a baseball catcher waiting a ball. Would he catch her? Undoubtedly he would if she swung all the way back. But would she? In a flash a bold plan presented itself. Beneath her was the river. It was deep. Great ships were brought down that river. She was a skillful diver. She had never dived from a rope. But—

With a quick intake of breath, she gripped the rope, loosed her foot, twisted herself about the rope, then leaped up and out. The next instant her body executed a graceful circle to go darting through the dark to gleaming depths below.

Below, and a little farther up the river, a slim, dark-haired girl still sat dreaming of mystery, adventure and romance.

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CHAPTER II

THIRTEEN USED WEDDING RINGS

The girl in the boat half rose from her seat. It was time to go in, past time, yet she dearly loved to sit out here and think. There was something inspiring in the slow, sturdy sweep of the river. For a moment she hesitated, then sank back into her place. The clock in some distant tower would soon strike the dreamy hour of midnight. When the first stroke sounded she would go. Until then she would sit and think.

With her chin cupped in her hands, she sat and dreamed. Her work as secretary to the Children's Editor had not provided her with many thrills, yet she planned to stay with the paper. Every vacation she would work there. When school was over she would try for a permanent position. Many women went in for newspaper work these days. Made good, too. Look at the Children's Editor. She was well paid. The Society Editor, too, and Miss Mansfield, the Radio Editor. Everyone knew that Miss Mansfield's salary was very large. And her influence! It reached to every far corner of the country.

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Yes, running errands, typing letters, copying stories, going to the composing room for proofs, entertaining callers until the Children's Editor could see them, all this in a way was drudgery, but glorious drudgery, since it led to something higher.

There had been thrills as well, at least one or two. If she found a story for the paper all by herself she was permitted to write it up. Her high school was large. She had many friends there. Once one of these, a girl, had rescued a child from drowning. She had discovered this story, and had written it. At another time a childhood playmate had come near being burned to death in a tenement house. That had been her story too. Only tomorrow she planned to go hunting for a story after hours. One of her classmates was a Chinese girl, Niesiana. She sold orange crush and lemonade at a little stand down in Chinatown during the summer. There had been trouble down there. A tong war had been started. Some Chinese had been shot. Betty was not afraid. She would go down there. Perhaps Niesiana would give her a story, a thrilling front page story, a—

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“What was that!” A mysterious shadow swept across the gleaming waters of the river. Now, like the shadow of a pendulum, it came swinging back. At the same instant the distant clock began to sound the hour of midnight. It was spooky. The girl caught her breath.

Of a sudden the swinging shadow shot into a hundred wavering images and, with a splash that sent a shower of great drops

over the girl, some dark object fell into the river.

“Oh-o-o,” with a shudder. “Who threw that?”

The next instant in her imagination she saw herself a flattened mass floating down this river of her dreams.

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“If they throw again and aim more accurately,” her mind told her, “that’s what will come of me.”

She had risen in the boat, had seized a paddle and was frantically forcing her boat to shore when with a sudden start she paused to stare, then to make a mad dash for the boat’s mooring.

“Suicide!” she thought. “Have to try to save him.”

Where the splash had come, a head had appeared above the water.

“A story!” she whispered. “What do you know about that! A story for me right out of the old river!”

Standing up and paddling furiously, she at last came alongside.

“Of all things!” she exclaimed. “It’s a girl!”

“And such a big girl,” she thought without saying it.

With her help, in imminent danger of swamping the boat, the big girl climbed aboard. Then she dropped limply into the stern seat.

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“Suicide,” Betty thought again. “What do you know about that? A girl. Not twenty, I know. Midnight! The river! What a story. Ought to have a picture. Get it, too. Get her story.”

“How? How did she?” She looked up. “The middle of the river, thirty feet from the bridge. Where’d she jump from?”

She began studying the other girl’s face. Her bobbed hair was plastered over it. Like one drawing away a curtain from a valuable painting, she parted the damp hair and pressed it to one side. The other girl did not move. She appeared to be in a daze.

“Drugs,” thought Betty.

Suddenly, yet slowly, as if speaking in her sleep, the other girl began to talk.

“I—I’ve still got them.”

“Got what?” Betty asked quickly.

“The—the rings.”

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“Oh!”

That was all that was said. Betty was beginning to understand, or thought she was. There had been trouble somewhere, perhaps a quarrel. The girl couldn't stand it, had tried the river. Water had brought her back to her senses.

“Well, she'll have to stand it,” Betty said fiercely. “Such a fine big girl. What a lot of good she could do!”

She took a good look at the girl's face. One look was a revelation. The cheeks were round. Good eyes, too, and not sunken in; good healthy eyes. There was color in the cheeks, too, real color, not the kind that wears off.

Well, perhaps here was romance, romance from the river. She'd see. But first for this suicide business. She'd take that out of her. She'd lecture her right here and now, wet clothes and all. She was shivering. Well, let her shiver. Do her good.

Betty had splendid ideas about life, and there was a lot of warmth in the way she expressed them. One of her very biggest ideas was that, come what might, life was well worth living. A beggar could look at a sunrise or listen to the thunder of the storm on the lake, couldn't he? All of beauty, all demonstrations of the Creator's might and power were to be seen and felt by the poorest comer. These alone made life well worth living, and there was always more, a great deal more than this.

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All this she told to the girl who, save for an occasional shudder, sat motionless in the boat. Betty had tied the boat to the bridge again.

“You ought to be ashamed,” her voice was low and tense, “to want to blot out the sunshine from those eyes of yours forever, to try to say good-bye forever to the sunrise and the sunset, to songs of birds and blush of flowers, to shirk the duty of living!”

Betty broke off suddenly. Had there been a flicker of a smile about the corners of the other's mouth? She thought so; was sure of it. The thing was incongruous, disconcerting. Here was a girl who, but for her timely aid, might now be dead. Here she was sitting there calmly smiling at her. It—why, it was ghastly, like being smiled at by a corpse. She had meant to tell her about the river, about Joliet, Marquette and LaSalle, about the tall grass, the buffalo, and the deer. Somehow she couldn't now.

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Suddenly she saw that the other girl's lips were turning blue.

“Have to get her in. Get dry clothes on her.”

Fortunate that she had access to the boiler room back of their apartment. The boiler was hot, too; for it provided steam for machinery in the day time. There they could dry her clothes in a

hurry. The girl would have to undress in the little back room and hand her things out.

“C’mon,” Betty said a bit huskily. “Got to get you dried out.”

“In there,” she said a moment later as she pushed the big girl through the door to her small room. “Blankets in there. Hand me out your clothes, all of them.”

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Five minutes later she looked at the door. Outside of it was a soggy heap of water soaked garments.

“Her outfit,” she told herself as she wrung out each garment separately and hung it up back of the furnace on a line, “is of good serviceable material, and quite complete; and—and gym bloomers. How queer!

“Getting late,” she told herself. “Have to get the story before she goes. Have to—”

Her thoughts broke short off. Was there to be a story? It would make a peach of a story. She saw it all on the front page:

“BEAUTIFUL GIRL TRIES SUICIDE.”

“And yet,” she sighed, “supposing it were Betty Bronson whose picture was to be printed above such a story? What then? How would Betty like it?” No, she could not be sure there would be a story.

This mystery girl, as you have doubtless guessed, was not a would be suicide, but was Florence Huyler, who, attempting to escape from the unknown terror that lurked there among the steel girders, had been obliged to take a flying dive from the swinging rope into the river.

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The distance she fell was greater than she had expected. Her dive had been a successful one, but as she rose to the surface she found herself stunned and in a daze. Had she not been a splendid swimmer she might have been drowned. As it was, even though her mind was a blank, her well trained muscles did the work of keeping her upon the surface.

She did not speak at once upon being dragged into the boat. That was because she was still in a daze. As she slowly came to her senses to find herself being lectured for an attempt at suicide by a girl younger and much smaller than herself, she thought it amusing. The idea that she might attempt suicide was beyond possibility. There were few people in that great city who loved life as she loved it. She had a passionate love for just the things Betty talked of. A sunset, flowers, the songs of birds, a storm on lands or sea, all these brought joy to her heart. Only one was different; Chicago River had never impressed her as being an object for romance.

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She had not spoken at first because she was dazed, and at last

because she wished to hear what the other girl would say. Now, as she sat in Betty's little room waiting for her clothes to dry, she smilingly said to herself:

"I must not lose track of her. She'd make a grand little pal. I must know her better. Sooner or later, I must tell her the whole truth."

As she said this she put out a hand to remove the blankets that covered a small water soaked box.

She removed the cover to look within. In the box were thirteen gold and platinum rings.

"Thirteen used rings," she whispered to herself. And, a moment later, "He did not say 'rings.' That mysterious beetle-eyed Chinaman said, 'the ring.' I wonder what he could have meant? Which ring?" She examined them closely, but discovered nothing unusual about any of them. They were just such weddings rings as the average woman wears. Some were smooth, some of fancy design, most of them initialed within, but after all, one looked as unimportant as another. She had bought the lot of them for \$11.50. She blushed a little at the thought, "Thirteen used wedding rings for \$11.50." But here was Betty with her clothes.

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The two girls talked little that night. The hour was late. Tomorrow was another day of work. Although Florence did not tell her experience as it really was, Betty gave up the notion of a sensational newspaper story. She hadn't the heart to do it. She told Florence where she might be found, and urged her to call if she were in need.

Florence, with a little smile in the corners of her mouth, promised she would come, then turning, climbed the iron stairs to the bridge and was soon lost in the night.

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The next evening, just before dark, Florence climbed the second floor stair that led to the editorial rooms of the Mid-City Times, Betty's paper.

As she reached the top step she paused to pat the front of her blouse. The wrinkle on her brow cleared. The rings were still there, thirteen used wedding rings. At once her brow clouded again. What was she to do about the rings? And then again, why do anything? They were her rings. She had bought them. It had been a legitimate sale. She had the signed bill of sale. No one ever questioned the word of the one who had signed that bill. And yet these rings had been lost by some one. Every one of the thirteen had been lost. There were rings in that collection that had been priceless possessions, wedding rings that stood for romance and for years of hallowed associations.

"Thing is to find the persons who lost them," she whispered to herself as she started down a dimly lighted hall. She had

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thought of a possible way.

“It might work,” she told herself. Just now she was looking for Betty Bronson.

Presently she came to a door marked “Children’s Editor.” Timidly she knocked.

The door swung open, a head was thrust out. It was Betty.

“Oh, hello!” she exclaimed. “Come in. I’m alone. Doing the tag end of some work. Meant to get out to Chinatown, but couldn’t make it, not to-night.”

The office Florence entered was small and crowded, scarcely room to turn about. Betty cleared a chair and told her to sit down.

Without a word regarding the experience of the previous night, Florence first laid the thirteen used wedding rings before her new found friend, then launched at once upon her project.

Betty listened with absorbed attention. From time to time she gave vent to such exclamations as “That would be wonderful!” ... “I’m sure it could be done!” ... “It would make a wonderful human interest story!” ... “Sure we could follow it up!” ... “That would be great, if only we could!”

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She had just ended one of these exclamations when, after a glance upward, her face became transfixed with horror.

“C’mon,” she whispered, “we must get out of here!”

Gripping Florence by the arm, she dragged her into the outer darkness of endless corridors. At the same time a particularly terrible face, the face of a Chinaman with a lofty forehead and small black eyes set close together like a beetle’s, disappeared from a small square opening between that narrow room and the one next to them. Ten seconds later he was on their trail.

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CHAPTER III IN HIDING

“This way!” Florence caught the words whispered in her ear. The next instant she was speeding down a narrow corridor. Was there the sound of footsteps behind them? She was sure of it.

“The Chinaman!” she thought as her heart became a throbbing dynamo.

“The ring! The ring!” The words, singing in her ears like the hiss of a whip, served to urge her on.

“This way!” It was Betty’s whisper. An open window loomed before them. Betty disappeared. She had gone over the sill. Florence hesitated for a second. They were on the third floor of a city office building. A second only, then over she went. Her feet touched a solid surface. To her surprise she found the window opened upon an air shaft.

Along the bottom of this shaft they sped; then through another window; down an iron stairway; across a great room filled with gigantic presses; then into a room completely dark. Florence bumped into Betty. For a second they paused to listen. First they heard only the sound of their own breathing; then came the pat-pat of soft footsteps.

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“He—he’s coming!” Betty panted in a whisper. “This way!”

They crept forward in the dark. Coming to some obstacle, Betty mounted it. Florence followed. A second and higher object lay before them, a circular affair. This, too, they mounted. Then began a slow and stealthy forward movement until with an all but inaudible sigh, Betty whispered:

“Down here.”

Gripped by the feet, Florence felt herself being pulled down into a hole some six or seven feet deep. Finding herself at last upon a solid surface, which appeared to be a floor, she crouched low to await further developments.

“It’s like playing hide-and-seek,” she told herself, “only one would hate dreadfully to be caught.”

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“Caught?” At once her mind was busy with the problem of the rings. There was time now to think the whole affair through. And think it through she did.

It had been strange, interesting, and in the end quite mysterious and startling. She had come upon the beginning of this

adventure quite by chance. The small park where, eight hours each day she supervised children's play, was in the center of the city's most congested district. Though only one block square, this city playground was a boon indeed to the countless hundreds of children who swarmed there daily. To have a part in this, to bind up the hurts of the little ones, to settle the quarrels of the big ones, to keep things safe for everyone, to add encouragement here, to teach some new stunt there, all this was her great privilege and duty.

But it was tiring. When the noon hour came Florence always found herself ready for a quiet stroll all alone. It was during one of these wandering trips on little frequented streets that a high pitched voice had caught her ear.

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"How much am I bid?" The words came to her distinctly.

"An auction," she had told herself. "Wonder what kind?"

She had stepped within. To her surprise she had found herself in a vast room lined about on every side by wire netting. Behind the screen were all manner of boxes and bundles. In one corner were boxes and baskets of silverware, watches and jewelry; in another bales of suits, coats and sheets. Here was a box of shoes and there a heap of blacksmith's tools. From one corner a skull in a box grinned at her, and in another a stuffed alligator showed his gleaming rows of teeth.

"How strange!" she had said to herself.

It had all been quite confusing until she had learned that this was the Postoffice Department's quarterly sale of unclaimed parcel post. Here all the articles lost in the mails during the past three months were being sold.

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She had been handed a booklet which gave a description of the lots to be sold. The lots were numbered. They were sold by number.

As she glanced down the list one item appeared to leap at her from the printed page: "Thirteen used wedding rings."

"Thirteen used wedding rings," she had said to herself. "How could thirteen used wedding rings have been lost in the mail?" At once her mind was rife with speculation. There were many ways in which wedding rings might be lost. A mother has died. An attempt is made to send her wedding ring to a bereaved daughter. It is lost. Again, there is a family quarrel. The wife leaves home. In a fit of anger she tears her wedding ring from her finger and mails it to her husband. She may be sorry now. It is too late. The ring is lost in the mail. Here it is, ready to be sold at auction. Once more, a thief has stolen many things, among them a wedding ring. He repents, tries to return the ring. He has the wrong address. The ring is lost. Here it is, ready to be sold to the highest bidder.

Drawn on further by curiosity and a feeling she could not quite understand, Florence had sought out the box of used wedding rings and had stared at them through the wire screen.

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There they were, thirteen used wedding rings. Some were plain gold bands. Some were engraved. Some seemed almost new. Some had been worn thin—on the washboard, perhaps.

“You poor things,” she had whispered through the netting. “There you are, like so many lost kittens which some child loves. Somewhere perhaps,” she whispered, looking at a slender ring, “in this broad land there is a woman who would give her all to feel you on her finger once again. Yet here you are, lost to the ones to whom you have brought romance. Here you are, ready to be sold to the highest bidder, for—well, probably for a very few dollars. And after that? Who knows?”

As she had spoken so to the ring, she had been surprised to feel a tear splash down upon her cheek. Surprised. Well, yes, of course. And yet, was it not pathetic that so many used wedding rings should have been lost, lost perhaps forever?

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Quite suddenly a strange resolve had taken possession of her. She would bid in those rings. Her heart had beat madly at the thought. Why? Perhaps she had a premonition of the adventures that would come to her through this apparently quite unromantic venture.

Let that be as it may. She had bid in the rings. And here they were in her blouse above her heart. They were her rings, at least hers in a way, for she had bought them. And yet, in a deeper, truer sense, each ring belonged to another. It was her hope that in the editorial rooms of this great newspaper she might find some one who could help her to search out these other owners. It was this hope that had brought her here tonight.

“And here I am,” she whispered, smiling in spite of herself. “I come trying to do good, only to find myself hiding in a hole.”

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She put out a hand to feel the object that for a moment formed her place of hiding. They were large, solid cylinders standing on end. She knew in an instant where they were.

“The print paper storage room,” she thought to herself.

She had seen these great cylinders of print paper being unloaded before the office. They had been rolled upon an elevator that rose up from beneath the sidewalk, then were lowered into the basement. Once she had asked a workman about them. “Seventy-five inches long. Weigh about 1,600 pounds,” he had told her.

“Tomorrow,” she told herself, “this paper will be flying over the presses to be sent to all parts of the land. And tomorrow, if

we escape in time, perhaps those newspapers will be telling a million people the story of the ‘Thirteen used wedding rings.’”

In that small office she had confided in Betty. She had told her the strange story of those rings.

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Betty, who also was endowed by nature with a deeply romantic nature, had been greatly interested.

“Tell you what,” she had exclaimed, “we’ll make it a news story! It’ll be a great one for human interest. We’ll have Mr. Brown, one of the staff photographers, photograph the rings and make a large print of it, showing all the engravings, initials and everything. Then I’ll write a story telling all about it, how you discovered the rings, how they came to be there, and how you bought them. Our paper goes into so many homes that some of the readers are sure to recognize their lost ring or their friend’s ring.”

“And won’t it be splendid to return some of the rings to their rightful owners!” Florence had put in. “Won’t it be wonderful!”

“It will be spiffy!” Betty had agreed.

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“The ring,” Florence whispered to herself as she listened breathlessly to a scratching sound that might be rats and might be the Chinaman climbing over the rolls of paper in search of them. “The ring! That was what he always said. There must be a ring, one of the thirteen, which he wants. I wonder why? And which one could it be?”

She closed her eyes that she might recall her mental image of those thirteen rings. Three of them came to her out of the dark. There was a thin, delicate ring, very small and very elaborately carved, a platinum ring. There was a gold ring carved in a peculiar way, showing some Oriental flower; inside it were strange marks, not initials unless they were in a strange, foreign language.

“Must be that one,” she thought to herself. “Oriental design. Oriental letters inside probably. He wants that. And yet, I wonder why he would risk so much for it? Orientals are not sentimental.”

There was still a third ring that rose up before her. An extraordinary broad and thick gold band, it was perfectly plain and almost too large to belong on any woman’s hand. She gave this ring little thought. The time was coming, however—

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Thoughts of the rings were driven from her mind as her ear caught a shuffling sound off to the left which certainly could not have been caused by rats. Gripping at her breast in a mad attempt to still her heart’s wild beating, she crouched low to the floor and waited.

CHAPTER IV

A DANGEROUS MYSTERY

As the moments dragged by, the silence in the paper room grew oppressive. No place in the world can seem quite so still as the press rooms and store rooms of a great evening daily after the last edition has gone off the press. With the rattle, bang and thunder of presses working at top speed gone, with the thump of bundles and the throb of labor over, the place grows so suddenly silent that a single mouse, searching a forgotten lunch box for a morsel of bread, appears to set up a prodigious racket.

It was so now. A tomb-like silence hung over the spot where the girls lay in hiding. To Betty it was most oppressive. Slight of build, vivacious, born for action, the slightest check to the course she ran threatened disaster. Besides, in her soul was registered the contrast. She had heard the bang and boom of it all when some great extra was coming off the press. To her this silence was like the sudden cessation of life itself.

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“C’mon!” Her voice was tense. “We’ll risk it. Door over here; goes up and out. Who is that Chinaman, anyway?”

“Wish I knew,” the other girl whispered back. “Wish I knew the whole of it. I don’t. I’ll tell you when—”

She caught her breath to listen sharply. From the way they had come there had sounded a shuffling step.

“C’mon!” Betty’s whispers became insistent. “I know a secret passage. He’ll never follow.”

Gripping Florence’s hand, she led on. Florence could never in a hundred trials have retraced the way. Up over bales of paper, down a narrow passage way dark as night, through another passage way, up a narrow iron stairway, through a door into an alley, into the street, then straight away.

“C’mon!” urged Betty. “Might as well make a clean break of it. We’ll go to my room by the river. He’ll never find us there.”

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“Now!” she sighed as she dropped upon her bed close to the window that overlooked the river and motioned her new-found friend to a chair. “Now tell me all about that queer Chinaman.”

“I’ll have to tell you something else first,” Florence smiled. “I wasn’t attempting suicide when I jumped into the river. I—I’m afraid I deceived you.”

“You did at first,” said Betty soberly. “But I thought it was queer. You didn’t seem to be that kind. You seem the sort of

person who looks life in the face and says to the present and the future, 'Come on future, come on fate, come on joy and sorrow, pain and trouble, dreams and hopes, I'll take you all and fight my way through. I am not afraid to live. I shall glory in life all the way.'"

Betty paused for breath, then laughed. "Well, anyway," she half apologized, "that's the way I feel about it, and it's the way I like my friends to feel."

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"That little speech," said Florence, "is worth putting into your paper."

"Yes, meebby. But they wouldn't print it," said Betty. "It's not news. It must be news. You have to have a nose for news if you're going to be on a paper. The Chinaman—please tell me. Why did you jump into the river?"

"That," said Florence, leaning forward in her chair, "is part of the story."

"I have already told you," she went on, "how I happened into that curious sale of unclaimed parcel post and how I bid in those thirteen used wedding rings." As she said this she patted her breast. The rings were still there. "Well, you know it is one of the rules of the sale that nothing can be claimed and taken away the day of the sale. You must return next day for your purchases.

"I went back for my rings at noon the day after the sale. I found quite a group of people standing before the counter waiting for their goods. When I had received my receipt I walked over and joined them. This queer Chinaman was there. He didn't seem to have any receipt, but he crowded up like the rest. He stared at the parcels that were given out, especially at boxes of jewelry. I thought one old Jewish woman was going to strike him when he thrust his beady eyes into her box of white stone rings.

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"It's queer though. By the time it came my turn to receive a package, I had entirely forgotten him. I remembered soon enough!" She took a deep breath. "And I've been remembering ever since."

"Why? What did he do?" asked Betty eagerly, her eyes shining with excitement.

"He stared at my box, which was half open. I thought those queer eyes of his would come out of his head. Then he plunged square into me. If it hadn't been for my gym work, basket ball and all that, I am sure I should have gone flat. As it was, three of my rings flew out of the box.

"I'm quick." She paused for another breath. "Quicker than you think I am. In my work I have to be. I had those three rings scooped up and was out of the building before that Chinaman

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could turn around, but not before I heard those two words he's been haunting me with ever since, 'The ring!' That's all he says, 'The ring!' Just like that."

"What ring?" asked Betty, leaning far forward.

"I wish I knew!" said the other girl soberly. "It must be one of the thirteen. But which one? Why should he, a Chinaman, want the ring?"

"It's a mystery," said Betty. Her tone was low and solemn. "A deep, deep mystery. We must solve it."

"It is more than that," said Florence soberly. "It's a dangerous mystery."

"So it is," said Betty. "Shall we share mystery and perils together?"

She put out a hand. Florence grasped it. That instant a new secret society was formed.

CHAPTER V

SO BEGINS ADVENTURE

Since the hour was very late when the two girls had completed their plans regarding the thirteen wedding rings, Florence consented to share her new-found friend's bed for the night.

"How is it that you live here by the river?" she asked as she prepared to disrobe.

"Father is the engineer here. The rooms go with the job," replied Betty. "But that's not the only reason. He is a fine engineer. He could get a position in another part of the city. We could have other rooms. But Father likes the river. So do I. He used to be on boats. He says the river gives him the feel of water under him. Many times I've seen him sitting before his boilers and swaying gently back and forth as if he were on a ship in motion.

"I wouldn't want to live anywhere else," she went on quickly. "Not I. I love the old river too much."

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"Surely," thought Florence as she crept beneath the covers and glanced through the open window at the broad sullen sweep of the river, "surely it's a strange place to live."

Across the river, a dark skeleton against the sky, the unfinished building stood. She shuddered as she thought of her wild race across those iron beams, of the swing and the drop. She thought of the beady-eyed Chinaman, and shuddered again. What was to come of this affair? Would their story be published? Would the pictures of the rings be printed? If so, what would follow?

"Perhaps nothing," she told herself. "People easily drop from sight in this great sea we call the world. Perhaps the owners of those rings have dropped from sight. They may be dead. Besides, the paper only reaches a million people. There are a hundred million in this great country of ours."

As she attempted to imagine the vastness of the land in which she lived, she felt, as she had many times before, her insignificance.

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"I don't count," she told herself, "don't count at all.

"And yet I do!" she insisted a moment later. "I count with the boys and girls at the playground. I count with my mother, my father and my cousins. And I count with this strange little Betty Bronson. Great God in your high Heavens, help me to forget the millions who do not know me and help me to always be true to the ones with whom I really count." With this little prayer she fell asleep.

As for Betty, she did not fall asleep at once. Her head was awchirl with plans. She believed in the story of the thirteen used wedding rings, believed that it contained the human interest appeal that goes far toward making a newspaper story.

“But can I make some one else see it?” she asked herself. “I’ve got to find some one, just the right person.”

“It’s strange,” she mused, “the way people think of a newspaper. They don’t think of it as if it were human. They think of it as if it were a machine. It is human, every bit human. If I have a story I don’t run with it to the City Editor, who doesn’t know me at all. I sit down and think, ‘Whom do I know? Who will help me get the story across? Who is my friend?’ Friends, that’s what they are. Human friends.

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“This time it can’t be Mrs. Brookins. She’s not in the big news room.”

As she closed her eyes a thrill ran up her spine. It was always so when she thought of the big room upstairs where all the news stories were written. At the head of the room sat the City News Editor, a short, gray-haired man with quick, dreamy eyes. Back of him was a small room. That was the great Editor’s room. At times he stepped through the door, but generally he sent for people. But the City Editor was always calling men to his desk to start them hurrying away. There were other desks in the room, desks without end and typewriters clicking in every corner.

Out of all this confused, blurred impression of something big and rather terrifying, one image stood clear. A pair of smiling eyes, hid by thick glasses. The eyes belonged to Terry Brown. Terry was short, very short, and seemed a bit dried up for twenty, but his eyes shone.

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“Like a light burning from within,” she told herself. “Terry will understand. He will see my story, the story of the thirteen rings. He’ll help me put it across, too, for Terry is my friend.

“It’s strange about friends, especially the friends of a newspaper. It seems sort of——”

Just then she fell asleep.

Terry Brown—some called him Terrier because he had such a way of digging out hidden mysteries—turned sleepy eyes on Betty next morning at nine. He had been out late the night before on a strange robbery that baffled the police. The case had provided material of unusual interest. Providence had given Terry an unusually large part in the final solution. Little wonder then that he turned a half attentive ear to a story of wedding rings and an auction sale. Weren’t there weddings, a

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thousand of them, every day? And auction sales every day in the week? What of wedding rings and auctions? He was sorry that he couldn't see it.

"But there's the Chinaman, that mysterious Chinaman!" Betty exclaimed in despair. "Sure there——"

"What mysterious Chinaman?" Terry's eyes were bright now. "You haven't told me anything about a Chinaman. Go on. Tell me."

"Ah, a spark!" thought Betty as a thrill of hope trembled through her being. At once, with the mysterious Chinaman as the central figure, she told her story anew. This time it carried interest and conviction.

Terry was all ears. "He did! She did! By Jove! There's something to it. Makes a capital mystery. Wants the ring. Which ring? Why? Something about Tongs, I'll bet. Some hidden secret. Terrible secret societies, those Chinese Tongs. Kill a man soon as look at him."

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"No, he didn't!" he exclaimed. "Followed her right out on the steel frame? And she? Jumped from a rope forty feet into the river? Good for her! Sure, there's a story. Have a picture. See!" He sketched roughly a steel frame, a man leaning over, a moon, a swinging rope, a leaping girl.

"Dots show where she went down," he added.

"But you'll have to see her first," Betty expostulated. "She—she might not like——"

"See your friend Miss Huyler? You bet we'll see her. Make a great story." Terry raced for the locker. "Where will I find her? Wait till I get my coat. Where'd you say?"

"You—you'll use a picture of the rings and their story?"

"Yes, the rings. Sure, you do that. See Blair. Get the picture. You write the story. I'll work it over. Sure! The rings, that's it. A picture of the rings. We'll use them as a decoy. Your Chinaman will see the picture. Sure to. I want to have a look at him. Trail him. We'll get his story. Promise the public a revelation. Tong war secret and all that. Nothing like a revelation. See you in an hour. Thanks for letting me in."

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Terry went racing away. Betty, with fear in her heart, fear that she had lost a valuable friendship by talking too much, whistling to keep up courage, and hoping for a wonderful story and other strange and mysterious ones to come, made her way to the art department where photographs of the rings, entrusted to her care, were made. Then she sat down to type her story of Thirteen Used Wedding Rings.

When the weary throng of city dwellers crowding the street

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cars and jamming elevated trains opened their evening papers that night they were greeted by a startling picture of a girl in bloomers leaping from a great height into the river. The hour, so the caption told them, was midnight.

Some read the story of Florence's daring leap and the thirteen used wedding rings and smilingly said, "It's only a newspaper story. It never happened. Thirteen used wedding rings lost in the mail! It would not happen in a million years."

Others saw the photograph of the thirteen rings and were convinced. Some of these spent an interesting half hour attempting to remember the designs of all the used wedding rings they had known, comparing each of these with those shown in the picture. For some others, a very few, the affair held a tremendously vital interest. In a very expensive apartment, or rather house, at the top of the city's most fashionable hotel, a very beautiful woman, dressed in a clinging silk gown and gorgeous satin slippers, received the paper from the hand of her maid.

At first, with a slightly amused expression on her face, she read the account of a midnight adventure. Having arrived at the part telling of the thirteen rings, she glanced at the picture of the rings.

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Then, like a flash, her expression changed. Her gaze became fixed. She was staring with all her eyes at a picture, at one of the thirteen rings.

For four full minutes by the ancient Italian clock on the mantel, her eyes did not waver. Then, of a sudden, she threw the paper on the floor, to turn and gaze moodily at the wood fire that burned on the grate.

"The ring!" she murmured. "The ring!"

It is strange that her words should have been exactly those of the mysterious Chinaman. Yet such they were.

On the veranda of a very comfortable suburban home, a man in a long black coat adjusted pince-nez glasses to his eyes and as the others had done, began reading the story. Like the others, he turned at last to the picture of the rings. Then he, too, started up in surprise. Unlike the others, he went into immediate action. To all appearances the pictures of a ring had loosened a spring that set him going. Having made three hasty telephone calls, he banged down the receiver, dragged on his hat and dashed from the house.

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Down at the heart of the city is a very long, very high and very dingy office building. In the smallest and dingiest office of them all there sat a little dried up man with pin point eyes. He, too, read the story. He, too, registered increasing interest. At last as the story was finished he, too, stared at the rings. At last

he muttered:

“That’s Chow Ming. Can’t be another. And that’s the ring.” As he said this a vision floated before his eyes, a vision of dollars, many, many Chinese dollars.

So the story of Thirteen Used Wedding Rings went its rounds, and twilight deepened into night. The city slept, but not quite all.

CHAPTER VI

A SUDDEN PLUNGE

We say that a city sleeps, yet it never truly sleeps. Like the great immovable ocean, it is in constant motion. It only seems to rest. Here a police wagon, there an ambulance and here a motor bus rattles over midnight streets. There are silent workers in every one of those great buildings where during the busy daylight hours men labor to serve humankind or to cheat and defeat them. Ten thousand scrub women work on hands and knees. Ten thousand watchmen walk their weary rounds. The city does not sleep. Nor did Betty sleep.

At midnight she stood on one of the bridges spanning the river. Her mind was filled with many thoughts. She had read with much pride her story of the thirteen rings. They had run it almost word for word as she had written it.

“And now,” she thought with a little shudder half fear and half joy, “what will come of it? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps something wonderful, or—or terrible.” She thought of the pop-eyed Chinaman, then sent a hurried glance down the bridge.

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The bridge at that moment was deserted. The river swept on in silence. There is nothing so ghost-like as a bridge on a great river at midnight. Then all the millions who have hurried across that bridge, eager for the day, all those who have crept slowly, broken and weary at night, all the joyous ones, all the sad ones, come trooping back to haunt you. All the ships, too, that have ever passed out of that river into the great waters, come gliding silently back. Birch-bark canoes, sailing boats, steam boats, puffing tugs, silent gliding barks with destination unknown, sweep on and on.

It was such pictures as these that kept Betty charmed and tied by invisible bonds on the bridge until long after the midnight hour.

Of a sudden, wakened to reality by the thud of a distant footstep on the bridge, she started and stared. She thought of the rings. She did not have them now. She had returned them to Florence. She would have them tomorrow, Florence had promised. Claimants might arrive.

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Had she but known it, the sleepy night telegraph operator at the newspaper office had just received the second caller interested in those rings. One was a tall thin man in a long black coat. The other a short man with pin point eyes. Each, upon learning that Betty was not there, demanded to know her address. Each went away disappointed. One must give a very good reason if he is to receive a newspaper person's address at midnight. They

gave none.

So Betty stood on the bridge and missed two very interesting and mystifying interviews. Yet the night held something in store for her.

As she glanced in the direction of the approaching footsteps, she gave forth an inaudible cry, "The Chinaman!" and vanished.

It is not always, after all, the things we see that frighten us, but the things we think we see. It was so with Betty. As you will see later, the mysterious Chinaman could not at that moment have been upon the bridge, yet fancy and fear lent wings to the girl's feet. Ten seconds had scarcely elapsed before she hung by her hands to a cement wall. She was prepared for a drop, a drop into the police boat that always bumped there. It was a short drop. She could accomplish it without a sound. Chances were, the man she feared would not discover her. If he did, he'd have to swim for it. He'd lose, too, for Betty pulled a strong oar.

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The girl had miscalculated in only one small detail. The boat was not there. Where was it? That does not really matter. The fact is that she dropped and went to the bottom of the river like a plummet, then came to the top like a corked bottle.

She struck out with both hands. No danger. She was a strong swimmer. Blank walls stared at her on either side, walls she could not scale. Yet there was somewhere a painter, a landyard, a guy rope of anchored craft that she could climb. Silently she swam with the current, keeping a sharp lookout for a place to make her exit from the river.

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CHAPTER VII

A MYSTERIOUS GATHERING

Who can say how he will act when he comes face to face with a ghost in the night? One will scream, another run away. Still another will walk straight on in defiance of any real or imagined peril. Florence Huyler was of this last sort. She feared the mysterious Chinaman who had been dogging her footsteps, yet she was determined that this fear should not dominate her actions. She would walk straight on, at least until real danger threatened. Like a ghost, the Chinaman might prove to be only an imaginary evil.

It was with this resolve firmly fixed in her mind that she agreed, on the night of Betty's river adventure, to go down into Chinatown to assist in some welfare work.

Shortly after dark she found herself on a street car riding through one of the dark and dingy sections of the city. As the car carried her deeper and deeper into the city's dark heart it may be confessed that she experienced some misgivings as to the outcome of this new adventure. Yet it was too late to turn back. Nor did she wish to turn back. Welfare work offered an opportunity for service. She could not remember the time when she had not wished to be of service to others; but the passing of one very near and dear to her had brought home to her in a new and forceful way the fact that life in this world is not long, that it is in many cases very short, that we are here but once, and that while we are here we find our greatest joy in being of the greatest possible service to others.

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Service. So imbedded in her nature had that will for service become that once she was asked to do something for others she asked but one question: "Have I the time and strength?" If the answer to this was in the affirmative she always replied:

"Yes, I will go."

As the car jolted on into the night, thought of the beetle-eyed Chinaman who had haunted her path entered her mind. Truth was, she had all but forgotten him.

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"And yet," she told herself, "he must live down here in Chinatown."

Involuntarily she put her hand to her breast. "The rings!" she thought. Their story in the paper, that story entitled "Thirteen Used Wedding Rings," what had come of it? She could not so much as guess, yet she feared much. "Might better have kept them in peace," she told herself. "And yet——"

She sprang from her seat. The conductor had called her station. The next moment found her standing in a dark corner of Chinatown, fumbling in her pockets.

“Pshaw!” she exclaimed at last. “I’ve lost it, or left it behind.”

The thing she had lost or misplaced was an address book, and in that book was the address of the place she was to visit that night.

“Could anything be worse?” she thought. “I can’t go back for it. There isn’t time. Yet I must be there. It’s important. Somehow I must find the place.”

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At that she turned and walked down the street that seemed as strange to her as it might had it been in Shanghai. Strange Chinese watermelons, dried fish and shrimp in jars were hid away in the shadows of one window, while from another faces that were either gods or vases grinned horribly at her.

As she moved on her apprehension increased. Did she hear a step behind her? Had a shadow darted down that narrow alley? She closed her eyes for an instant, and before her mental vision there appeared a large-headed Chinaman with beetle-like eyes and of a sudden, as if by magic, those two eyes moved together and became one.

“Chinatown,” she murmured as she opened her eyes quickly, “I—I wish I hadn’t come!”

She did wish this with all her heart. Yet, having come, she must find the hall where classes for instruction in English were held.

“Haven’t the address,” she told herself. “Have to watch along. I’ll see them going in, perhaps.”

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Presently she found herself at the head of a flight of stone steps leading to a basement.

“Six have gone down,” she told herself. “If three others enter I will follow. It must be the place.”

Three others did go down, and after that four more, and Florence followed.

She found herself in a large room dimly lighted by strange tapers. The place was full of seats. The Chinamen already present were strangely silent. They looked straight ahead, did not see her.

“Superintendent is not here yet,” she told herself. “I’ll just sit in this dark corner.” She sat down to wait.

As she sat there, hidden by the shadows that hung over her like a shroud, she found herself intrigued and in the end a little startled by the appearance and actions of the Chinamen who

continued to drift into the room.

“They don’t say a word. Not a whisper escapes their lips,” she told herself. “They glide in and take a seat, that’s all. How strange! How secretive and uncanny it all is.”

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At that moment, for the first time she noticed that the table, which was covered by a white linen cloth, bulged at the center.

“Something beneath the cloth,” she thought. “It’s as if this were a church and they were about to break bread and drink wine.” She shuddered a little. Ceremonies made her feel creepy.

“What nonsense!” she thought a moment later, shaking herself free from the spell. “The superintendent of the night school will be here soon. Then work will begin.”

Work. Already she was weary. She would close her eyes and rest a little. Time enough to come forward and make herself known when she caught the sound of the superintendent’s voice.

The room continued to fill. One by one strange Orientals, some richly dressed, with polished faces, some in rough garments and with villainous looking unshaven faces, continued to file in. Not one cast a glance to the girl in the corner. Each pair of eyes was turned sooner or later upon the table and its mysteriously bulging cover.

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A quarter of an hour passed. The seats were taken one by one. The air of the room filled with strong odors, became oppressive. A half hour passed. The girl did not move. Her eyes had remained closed too long. Long hours in the open, followed by the close air of the room, had drugged her senses. She had fallen asleep. And in such a place. Chinatown!

For three-quarters of an hour she sat there slumped down in her chair, motionless. Then, with a sudden start she awoke, awoke to a scene so strange and weird that it might well have stepped forth from Arabian Nights.

Such a thrill ran up her spine as she had never known before.

What was this? A strange night school indeed! The lights were out. No, not all. Forward, turning the white table covering a blood red hue, a single red light gleamed. Beneath the light, arrayed in robes of richest silk, stood a single Chinaman. In one hand he held aloft a strangely carved dagger. With the other hand he was in the act of lifting the cloth.

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The girl’s heart stood still, then pounded like a hammer within her breast.

“Where am I? What is this?” These were silent questions. She started noiselessly from her seat.

The cloth lifted, disclosing beneath a great glass bowl, and in the bowl something indescribably horrible.

Like a flash the truth came to her. She was not in a night school. By mistake she had entered the meeting place of some mysterious and terrible Chinese Tong.

At that moment her tense nerves snapped. A piercing scream escaped her lips. Then, with a mad rush she made for the door. Not, however, before a pop-eyed Chinaman made a lunge at her with his claw-like hands. At once pandemonium broke loose. There was no mistaking that scream. It was feminine and American. An American girl in the secret meeting place of a Tong! Who can say what thoughts lent action to that band of Orientals?

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The claw-like hand held the muscular girl but for a second. The cloth of her blouse gave way and she was free.

Somehow, under the cover of darkness, fighting, trampling, she fought her way to the open air.

Then, with a wild dash she was away to the river. A mad, screaming mob followed. She was well in the lead, and increased the gap by every leap.

“There’s a bridge and perhaps a boat,” she told herself in wild excitement. “God grant there may be a boat!”

There was a boat. She went over the stone abutment and into the boat. Tearing away the mooring, she seized the oars.

With a powerful stroke she sent the flat-bottomed emergency boat upstream toward protecting shadows. A shot rang out. A bullet splashed uncomfortably near. She hugged the shore. Another shot, a second splash, then a third. Sound of running footsteps. Pulling hard, she reached the shadows, then a protecting curve.

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For a quarter of an hour, with her splendid muscles doing their utmost, she kept at the task of putting distance between herself and the terror behind.

At the end of that time she allowed herself a few moments of quiet thought as to how this adventure was likely to end.

With her boat now adrift, she glided beneath a massive iron bridge. She passed a looming warehouse from whose very crest, like an evil eye, a single light gleamed. Off to the left of her lay a barge. To the right she saw a red fire boat lying at anchor.

Allowing the boat to take its own course, drifting lazily down the river, she gave herself over to the task of thinking things through. She was not one of those indifferent young persons who think only of their own convenience and never of the

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convenience of others. The boat she now drifted in had served her purpose admirably. It had, perhaps, saved her life. It belonged back there at the bridge. There was such a boat at every bridge on the river. They were left there to be used in cases of emergency. If she tied this one up any place but at the spot where it belonged it would cause trouble for some one. What was more, while it was away from its post an emergency might arise, some one might count on that boat. For want of it a life might be lost.

“I don’t believe there are any of those Chinamen down there at the bridge now,” she told herself. “They wouldn’t expect me to come back.” She laughed at the thought. “If I drift down the river in the shadows and tie the boat up where it belongs nothing will happen. I am sure of that.”

She was not sure of it, but her sense of duty led her to risk it. So, after drawing the boat over into the shadows, she began the backward drift, and as she drifted she thought rather dreamily of her recent adventures and of others that might be impending.

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It was strange to be drifting thus alone, strange and a little spooky. As she rounded a curve in the river she found herself abreast of a lot that was piled high with junk. Here a great heap of scrap iron loomed. Bent and twisted into fantastic forms, it seemed in the indistinct moonlight a mass of writhing serpents. Still farther on she passed three dilapidated carts. While the world and the river moved on they were fast falling into decay.

Of a sudden, from off somewhere in that labyrinth of junk a dog howled dismally. From farther away a clock slowly tolled the hour. A dark cloud sweeping over the moon covered all with inky blackness.

Florence shivered. She was beginning to repent of her resolve to return the boat to its proper place of mooring. That she might forget the junk yard, the night and the evil ones who should chance to be lurking in the shadows along the breakwater, she brought her mind back to the rings.

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“The end is not yet,” she told herself. She warmed at the thought of the pleasant adventures that might await her; then a sudden shudder shook her. She had thought again of the beetle-eyed Chinaman.

“Which ring can *he* want?” she asked herself. “It is strange. Had he come to me as others may come, he might have had the ring he wants. But he does not trust me. He would take it by force. But he will not!” She clinched her fists tight.

“And yet,” she sighed, “it may once have been legally his. He may have lost it in the mail. Which one can it be? Not likely that it is the delicately carved one. More probable that it is the one with the Oriental design.”

This seemed a plausible conclusion. And yet, strangely enough, there came bobbing into her mind a mental image of the thirteenth ring, the broad thick band of gold that was large for a woman's hand.

"Might not have been a wedding ring at all," she thought with a sudden start. "What do postal clerks know about wedding rings? Might have been a man's, might have been a Chinaman's ring." She was surprised and startled at the thought. Did Chinamen wear rings? She could not tell.

"Have another look at that ring when I get back to my room," she told herself.

Suddenly she started. The moon had come out from behind the clouds. A shadow was passing over her.

"The bridge," she whispered, "the bridge at the edge of Chinatown."

Breathlessly she paddled the boat to its mooring place. With fingers that trembled a little, she tied the rope. A minute later she might have been seen nimbly speeding down the street that led away from Chinatown.

CHAPTER VIII

FLOATING AT MIDNIGHT

To be swimming on a broad river, alone at midnight, might seem a terrifying experience. Yet for Betty the situation was not alarming.

One fears what he does not know. A child of the city, a friend of the river, Betty knew them both as the cowboy knows his prairie and the sailor his sea. The dark old river and the black looming walls meant little to her. As she swam steadily along, her breath came and went as smoothly as a child's in his mother's arms. Yet the time was to come, and that not far away, when that breast would heave with terror as never before.

A great black cloud went over the moon. As if some magic spell had been cast upon it, the scene changed. Turning to a steel blue, the river seemed to do battle with the walls that held it prisoner. The red lights of a vessel moored far down the right bank, gleamed like evil eyes. A hush fell upon the city. For a whole moment the rattling cars and the clanging gongs were still.

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Startled by the unusual silence, the girl turned over on her back and began swimming slowly.

She shuddered a little. "Boo! Cold! Have to get out of here. Have to find a ship."

A surprise awaited her. Just before her, moored close to the bridge, was a large black craft.

"That's strange!" she told herself. "Never saw that one before. Don't allow them to tie up there, yet here you are, old ship. And up I go."

A few stout strokes brought her to the ship's anchor rope. To go hand over hand up this rope was but the work of a moment, yet she did not go at once. She remained clinging to the rope and staring.

"It's strange," she murmured. "Never saw one like that before."

Indeed she had not. This ship, which carried no power save her own sails, built of such rough and massive timbers as one finds only in docks and breakwaters, seemed to have been hewn by hand from logs of such hard and enduring texture as would last forever.

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The port holes, too, were strange. "More like the loop holes of a fort," she told herself.

So strange and forbidding was the aspect of the craft that at first she considered dropping back into the water and swimming on to a craft of more familiar construction. Yet the hour was late; the river water was cold.

“It’s only a matter of moments,” she told herself stoutly. “Up the rope, across the deck, over the rail, and I am away. So up I go.” Nimble as a boy, she climbed the rope. Yet, even as her hand touched the heavy rough hewn gunwale of the ship, her heart failed her and she hung there for a full moment shuddering in the moonlight.

The shudder was due in part to unnamed fear. In part, too, it came from a real chill. Her garments clinging to her like a water soaked winding sheet, were rapidly cooled by the bleak wind that swept up the canyon-like walls of the river.

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“Have to get out of this. Here goes.” Over the rail she went.

Her damp shoes made no sound on the deck. As she turned to the right and sped down the uneven deck, she tripped and went sprawling. She was on her feet in an instant. But in that instant she had caught the sound of a heavy footstep.

“Night watch,” was her thought. “Won’t let him catch me. Want to know a lot of things. Keep me here shivering. Must get home and to bed. Work tomorrow.”

Dodging round the giant mainmast that loomed toward the skies, she rounded a corner which should bring her nearer the gangplank. The next instant she collided with some object that gave forth a metallic clang. That same instant, by the light of the forward lamp, she sighted the watch. He was nearer than she thought.

“Dodge down here and out at the other end.” She sped with silent tread down a steep flight of stairs.

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All this time questions were flitting through her mind. What sort of ancient craft was this? It was—why yes, it was like the ship Columbus used, only larger, she imagined. But what ship was it? Whence had it come? What was it doing here in the river?

At the foot of the stairs was a dim light. Beyond was another and yet another.

“Ah!” she breathed a sigh of relief. She had not been mistaken. There was a second flight of stairs at the other end. She’d soon be out of this.

But would she? As she listened, she caught the sound of two heavy pairs of footsteps.

“Two guards. Strange! How——”

It was at this instant that her eyes fell upon a small square window by the nearest light. At sight of it her heart stood still. The window, which was scarcely large enough to allow a man's head to protrude, was crossed barred with steel.

“What——” She did not finish the question that sprang to her lips, for back of that window she caught the dim outlines of a face. And such a face! Full bearded, tangle haired, pallid with the pallor of prison, it was such a face as one looks upon once and hopes never to see again.

This startling visage, together with the night, the uncanny light, the general air of mystery, the haunting ancient ship, was too much for her. Barely suppressing a scream, she sprang away toward the distant stairs.

Her speed was the speed of a wild deer surprised by the hunter, yet it was not enough. Before she reached the first step a pair of stout legs appeared moving down from the top.

By this time driven quite out of her normal senses, she was able to think of nothing better to do than to dart beyond and under the stairs, there to cower in the semi-darkness.

Nor did she find peace here, for scarcely had she gripped her wildly beating heart than her eyes fell upon a second small barred window, and behind its bars a face far more terrible than the first.

Begging description, this man's face, for he must have been a man, was such as would inspire terror in any heart. Deep set cruel eyes, the mouth of some wild beast, the tangled hair of a wild man.

Moving now by impulse rather than reason, the girl seized a bundle of white cotton cloth that chanced to be near her and, throwing it over her head to shut out the terrifying vision, stumbled toward the stairs.

The result was more than might reasonably have been expected. A pair of lusty lungs started bellowing, “Tom! Oh! Tom!” And a man went thundering down the deck.

Having felt her way trembling up the stairs, Betty threw the cloth aside, sped for the gangplank, crossed it at a speed no person had ever crossed it before, then raced for home.

CHAPTER IX

A NIGHT VISITOR

It was late when Florence reached the club house that night. Her's was a very large girls' resident club. Some one was always "on the door." She breathed a sigh of relief as she settled down in her own room. The night's adventure had shaken her nerves. At last there was some one now between her and all the outside world.

"Good old club," she thought, "a great big fine home."

She had left a fire of coke in the grate. It had burned down to a few embers. Soon she had its blue, smokeless blaze mounting toward the chimney.

She saw little enough of the fire. Instead she caught fleeting images of rings, of a great bowl of red fluid, of flickering lights, an angry mob of Orientals, a boat drifting on a river. At last her thoughts became focused upon the newspaper story of the thirteen rings.

She unrolled the rings. They were all fastened on a bit of purple velvet and numbered for identification. As she sat staring at them and thinking of the unusual and startling adventures they had brought to her, she was tempted to throw the whole lot of them upon the fire.

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"Would they melt? I wonder," she mused. "They'd be destroyed beyond identification, I'm sure. That would end it all."

Had she carried out this mad fancy she must certainly have been astonished at the effect of intense heat upon ring number 13. But, instead, she folded up the bit of velvet and thrust it beneath her bath robe, and so the revelation was indefinitely postponed.

"What will come of it all?" she asked herself. "Who will read the story? Who will recognize one of those rings? Will the Chinaman see it? What will he do about it? Perhaps nothing will come of it after all."

As if to give the lie to this last reflection, her telephone rattled.

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"A call! At this time of night!" She shuddered a little and her hand shook as she took down the receiver.

"Probably only Betty calling to tell about some fresh adventure," she thought more soberly.

It was not Betty. It was the house matron at the door.

“It’s a man to see you, Miss Huyler. A little man with smallish eyes. He says he wants to see you. Says it’s urgent. Shall I let him in?”

“Tell—tell him——” The girl’s hand was trembling again. “Tell him I’ll be down very soon.”

“Chapter Two,” she whispered as she struggled into a one-piece dress, stockings and shoes.

For a few seconds before descending, she hesitated before the packet of rings. In the end she thrust them deep into a secret pocket of her dress.

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* * * * *

Betty’s experience aboard the mysterious ancient ship shook her to the very depths of her being. She had seen much, had this little dark-eyed girl of the river front. She had seen men drown and had saved men from drowning. She knew the pit-pat-pat of the automatic; could distinguish the shrill police whistle from all other sounds; the police wagon and the ambulance held no terror for her. But this! Scarcely would her weak and trembling limbs support her in her mad rush for home.

Once there she flew into her room, closed and locked her door and barred the window; then throwing herself across her bed, gave herself over to a fit of hysterical weeping.

“A prison! A prison ship,” she thought, as calmer moments came to her. “In America! The home of the free and land of the brave! How—how terrible! And the faces! Those faces beyond the bars!” She put up her hands as if to shield her eyes from sight of them. “Good God in Heaven, help me forget!”

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Were it not for humor the world would go mad. Many a boy or girl, not to say man or woman, struggling with the tremendous problems of life, would lose all reason were it not for the funny side to all things. There was a funny side to Betty’s otherwise tragic adventure. When she threw the white cloth over her head and ran from the terrible vision her eyes had fallen upon, she must have looked very much like a ghost.

“And a ghost it was they took me for,” she told herself with a laugh that did much to relieve her pent up feelings. “Just think how those stout guards ran away.

“But I wonder,” she mused after a time, “I wonder why they should expect to discover a ghost where only living beings were?” She was puzzling over this problem when at last she fell asleep.

* * * * *

When Florence Huyler reached the club room parlor at the foot of the stairs she found a small, well dressed little dried up man

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sitting on the edge of a chair awaiting her arrival.

“Miss Huyler,” he began at once, “you recently purchased at an auction a ring?”

“Yes, thirteen rings.”

The man’s tone left her ill at ease. She wished she had not come down. The lateness of the hour would have warranted it.

“Ah yes.” The man’s tone was smooth. “Thirteen rings. But for us, only one of importance, the thirteenth, as you have them numbered. Have you them with you?”

Without knowing why she did it, the girl produced the rings. With a swift dart of thumb and forefinger, the man detached the thirteenth ring and held it up for inspection.

“The very ring,” he murmured, quite to himself. “Can’t be the shadow of a doubt.”

His next action left the girl breathless. His hand with the ring started to his pocket.

The girl’s mind worked like an electric alarm. The man was small. She was large, fit. What if he were a man!

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“If you dare!” She sprang at him like a tiger.

The hand came to an abrupt pause.

“Oh, I beg pardon!” The man’s tone was apologetic. “The move was quite involuntary. I am unnerved over the matter. Here, Miss Huyler, here is the ring. No one could regret the circumstance more than myself. Please be seated.”

Having recovered the ring, Florence’s first thought was that of dismissing the man and leaving the room. Curiosity got the better of fear. She stayed.

“Miss Huyler.” The man moved his chair a step closer. “What is it we want most?”

“Happiness and peace.”

“Ah, yes, perhaps. But what is it that brings us these?”

“Fresh air, proper food, plenty of sleep, and true friends.”

“Ah yes; but——” He was tugging at a large bundle in his right coat pocket. It came out at last. He held it up, a roll of bills.

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“Ah yes; but without this no one can have food, shelter, or friends, nor fine clothes, nor any other things.”

He placed the roll of bills on a small table at his side. “Miss Huyler,” he began quite solemnly, “I chance to be a lawyer,

and it happens that many of my clients are of that mistreated and often unjustly despised people, the Chinese.”

Florence started. So that was it! The thirteenth ring was the one sought by the big pop-eyed Chinaman. Why? Ah, now perhaps she was to know.

“You have heard of the Chinese Tongs, their secret societies?”

Florence nodded, then shook with a sudden tremor of fear.

“It happens,” the man went on, “that one of my clients was a few months ago made grand high master of the principal Tong in our city. The symbol of his office is a very curious and altogether priceless ring. The ring was sent to him from the Pacific Coast. It was lost in the mail. During the past six months he has overturned Heaven and earth to find it, but all in vain.

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“It turned up in the unclaimed parcel post sale. He learned of it too late. You had purchased it. He has endeavored in vain to get in touch with you. You have evaded him.”

“Your Chinese friend,” said Florence hotly, “is a great, ugly beast!”

“Now,” said the man, ignoring her remark, “now I have found you.”

“Yes,” said the girl in as steady a tone as she could command, “you have found me. What do you propose to do about it?”

“This!” He pointed at the roll of money, hundreds of dollars. “This is yours for the ring.”

“I think,” said Florence, rising, “that you must excuse me. The hour is late. I have food and shelter, fresh air and true friends. Your money can do nothing for me. Good night.”

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Before the lawyer could turn his astonished gaze upon her, she was gone.

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CHAPTER X

A FRESH MYSTERY

“Now why did I do that?”

In her fire on the grate Florence caught a picture of the lawyer’s roll of bank bills.

“I had only to take it. One is not under obligations to ask questions. It would have been a fair and honest sale. I bought the ring. The bill of sale for it is in my pocket. There’s not a court in the land but would hold the sale to be legitimate.”

She pondered long upon the subject. With her bare toes she traced the pattern on the rug. She gazed long at the fire. The blue flames seemed deep set eyes boring into her soul.

“Why? Why?” she asked herself. She had been very sure of herself down there, very abrupt in her manner. She did not need the money, true enough, yet there are always things to be bought with money, little luxuries one has longed for, small and great pleasures for others.

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“A long vacation by the lake among the pines,” she sighed. “How—how wonderful! Another term in school. All the clothes and trinkets one has longed for.” She sighed again.

“And yet——” Her sturdy shoulders stiffened. “I do not regret it. ‘There is a destiny that shapes our ends.’ There is more back of this than I know. I have not seen the last of the little lawyer and his big Chinaman. From now on, I must always be on guard.”

Indeed she must.

At that, she threw back her bath robe, turned out the light, did a few wild flings that left her rosy and tingling, then crept into her bed.

* * * * *

Betty awoke next morning with a headache. The night had been too much for her. The morning was gray. A dense, dripping fog was over all. She could not see across the river. The tiny clock at her bedside told her that she must hurry.

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“The cold, gray dawn of the morning after,” she murmured as she dragged herself from beneath the covers to a drab and weary world.

She thought of the night’s experience.

“Wish the rings were at the bottom of the river,” she grumbled. “Crazy Chinamen, bars, terrible faces in the dark. That’s what they bring me.” Her slight frame shook as with a chill.

A few flinging gestures, a dozen wild dancing steps, set her blood racing. A hot cup of coffee further revived her spirits. She was in quite a cheerful frame of mind when she reached the bridge.

Involuntarily her gaze wandered up the river.

“Too foggy. Can’t see. Get over there at noon. Drive away that ghost or show him up.” She was thinking of the mystery ship. Had she known it, the image of that strange and ancient craft was destined to haunt her for many days.

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“Oh Betty!” exclaimed the Children’s Editor, a kindly faced lady well past sixty with many gray hairs and a youthful heart. “You are wanted. Lots of people want you. Three urgent telephone calls at midnight. Two men have been here asking for you. A woman telephoned she’d be over in fifteen minutes. It’s that ring business. There may be something big in that. A real story. A seven days’ mystery. That’s what the paper is always looking for. It’s good for circulation. And circulation is everything.” She patted Betty on the shoulder, then went bounding out of the office, headed for the proof room. Her Saturday page was nearing the zero hour. The zero hour is the last possible moment at which corrected proofs may go up.

So drab and sordid had been the characters connected, directly or indirectly, with the ring adventure, that when a lady caller had been announced Betty looked to see some forlorn creature from back of the gas house or the stock yards. When she looked up she fairly gasped at the revelation of luxury and beauty that stood before her. A very beautiful face, wonderfully cared for, a lavender street costume direct from Paris, perfect shoes, the sheerest of stockings, a very chic and very expensive hat, smiling eyes, delicately gloved hands. This was what stood before her.

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“You have some unusual rings,” said the revelation of beauty, as the girl hurriedly cleared a chair for her. Holding out a clipping, she pointed a slender finger at the picture of the rings. “May I see them, please? One of them interests me exceedingly.”

“I—I’m sorry,” Betty stammered, “I—I haven’t the rings. My friend, Florence Huyler, who bought them, has them. But if you would tell me—perhaps——”

“Oh yes,” said the beautiful lips. The smiling eyes that never left Betty’s face were disturbing. “It is that one.” The glove was off now. Rings, diamond rings sparkled on the hand that pointed to the picture of the delicately carved wedding ring. “If it is the one, and I am quite sure it must be, if you get it for me

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you shall be handsomely rewarded.” She made a motion as if to remove a ring heavily set with diamonds from her finger, appeared to think better of it, then settled back in her chair.

“What time will you have it?” There was suppressed excitement in her tone.

“I—why I can’t quite tell. You see my friend—I—we haven’t been friends long. I don’t exactly know her hours. She may come here. I don’t know. I have work to do. But sometime today or this evening I will see her. I’m sure of that.”

“Perhaps you could bring the ring to me.” The eyes that had never left the girl’s face smiled. It was not a smile that made one feel happy and quite at ease. “It is really only a step. You know the Damond Hotel?”

Betty nodded.

“I have the house on the roof.”

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Betty gasped, then brightened. A visit to the “House on the Roof” would be an adventure in itself.

“Yes, yes,” she said quickly, “I can bring it.”

“As soon as you get it. Keep it quite safely.” The eyes expressed anxiety. “Telephone me before you come. The house on the roof—you won’t forget?”

“Well,” sighed Betty as the door closed behind her beautiful caller, “that is something like! Good old rings! I am glad they were lost and are being found again.”

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CHAPTER XI

THE MAN IN THE BLACK COAT

The beautiful lady from the House on the Roof was not the only caller Betty had that day. Mrs. Brookins was once more out of the office, and Betty's fingers were working industriously with filing cards and her brain laboring quite as industriously at the task of picturing for her the inside of the most wonderful suite of rooms in the city's most fashionable hotel, when a shadow crossed the threshold.

The person who stood there seemed indeed an animated shadow. Clad for the most part in a black Prince Albert coat that reached his knees, the man, whose sallow face was set with deep silent eyes, stood there wavering a little like the shadow of leaves on the ground.

"Miss Bronson?" he asked, removing his hat.

"I am Betty Bronson." The girl was on her guard. A man in a long Prince Albert coat had sold her father some medicine once. It had made him very sick.

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"May I?" The man motioned toward a chair, then sat down upon it. His actions were Pinocchio-like, as if his joints were of wood.

"You have—ah, some rings." He fumbled in his vest pocket. "Very peculiar—ah, yes, yes, here it is."

He drew forth a clipping of Betty's story.

Her heart swelled with pride. She had written a newspaper story. It had been published. Better than that, people were reading it.

"Were you interested?" Her tone was cheerful.

"In the incident? Oh yes, slightly, very slightly. Very sad that so many wedding rings are lost. It is part of the times. Very sad times, sad and sinful. It is but a sign, a sign of the end."

"The end of what?" Betty asked in astonishment.

"End of the world, of course, child. But the rings. One of them interested me very much. I am quite sure it was lost by a friend of mine, a Chinaman."

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"A—a China——"

"Why yes, my child. There is nothing so terrible about that. They, too, are God's children. They are destined—but the ring.

This appears to be the one.” He pointed to ring No. 13.

“You see that faint line running around it? That marks it. Yes, I am sure this must be the ring. And if it is, then matters of tremendous importance rest upon its return to the rightful owner.”

“The rightful owner,” said Betty, beginning to dislike the man, “is Florence Huyler. She has a bill of sale for the lot of them.”

“Ah yes, I dare say. That does not alter facts. Do you chance to have the rings with you?”

“No.”

“Ah—then your friend has them?”

“Yes.”

“It is all the same for the present. I am sure of the ring, quite sure.

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“You have guessed,” he hitched his chair a little closer, “that I am, ah—a man of the cloth.”

“The what?” Betty’s religious education was meager. Her father had in his possession an ancient Bible and a prayer book, taken when he was a lad from a sinking ship. Now and then, on a particularly dull Sunday morning, he boomed forth a service from them. She didn’t know what it was all about, but she rather liked it. At times, too, she went down the way to street meetings. Mostly she preferred soap box orators. They shouted louder.

“I,” said the man, “am a minister of the Gospel—in fact, a missionary.

“As such,” he went on, not allowing her to recover from the slight shock, “from time to time, strange confidences have been given to me. One of these, of the strangest nature, has to do with this ring we are speaking of.

“You will follow me closely, please. I am laying my case before you. You will then impart the knowledge to your—ah—friend. The facts will lead you, I am sure, to assist me in every way possible.

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“For forty years I was missionary to that benighted heathen nation, China. In my early ministry, a young man served in my household. He later came to America, went into the business of importing Oriental goods, and in time became quite rich, just how rich no one seems exactly to know.

“Recently he died. He left a will. Half his wealth is to go to his sons. There are two. The remainder of his fortune is to be used in establishing a home for Chinese orphans in America.

“This,” he paused impressively, “will be a great service. You have no notion of the number of these unfortunate children that are within our gates.

“Unfortunately, much of the wealth had been tied up, concealed, one does not know exactly how. Strangely enough, it would seem that the very ring you have been so fortunate to come upon is the key to the whole situation. It alone can unlock this great wealth and——”

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“How?” Betty was breathless with surprise.

“This secret has not been imparted to me. I have no reason to doubt the statement, however. The son who imparted it to me is an industrious and truthful man. He is also desirous of carrying out his father’s will to the letter.

“But here,” he laid an impressive finger on the girl’s hand, “here is the peril. The other son is of another sort. He cares nothing for orphans. He wants the wealth, all of it, for his own selfish ends. Should the ring fall into his hand——” He mopped his brow——“should he come into possession of the wealth, I am satisfied that not one cent would go to the great cause for which it was intended.

“So you see,” he said, settling back in his chair, “there rests upon you and upon your friend a grave responsibility. It is your duty to see that, through me, the ring reaches its proper destination.”

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“And yet,” said Betty, half inclined to be angry at the man’s insistence, and still mindful of the fact that a man in a black Prince Albert coat sold her father poisonous medicine, “and yet, the ring belongs to my friend, Florence Huyler.”

“Ah yes, we must not forget that. No doubt she will be recompensed. Might I—ah—ask you where she may be seen?”

“You might ask. I can’t tell you. I don’t know. If you will call me on the phone this afternoon or to-night, here, I may be able to tell you.”

“I shall call frequently until the matter is arranged. We must not lose the ring.”

In making this promise he was entering upon a larger contract than he knew. No matter, he made a strong start. All day, at regular intervals, the telephone rattled and Betty answered, “No sir, not yet.”

One call in between the hours was less monotonous and more deeply mysterious. Betty took down the receiver expecting to lend an ear to some child who wanted a club button or a climber whose picture had not yet appeared in the paper (and probably never would) when, of a sudden, she sat up, interest sparkling from her eyes.

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“Miss Bronson? Long distance, Buffalo, calling. Please hold the line.”

What a world of mystery in a long distance call from a city a thousand miles away! In all her young life Betty had not talked a hundred miles over the wire. She fairly held her breath until the magic word came:

“All right. Go ahead.”

“Miss Bronson?” It was a man’s voice. Slowly, steadily, yet a little eager was the tone.

“Y—yes.” Betty’s heart was in her mouth. What was coming? A sudden legacy, a tragedy? A——

“Miss Bronson, you—or rather your friend—purchased some rings at an auction sale.”

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“The rings again. And from such a distance!” The girl came near dropping the receiver.

“Y—yes, yes sir,” she managed to stammer.

“Miss Bronson, there is one—a platinum ring, very slender and delicately carved. It is important that you should not part with that ring until I have seen you. Important to me. Are you there? Do you hear me?”

“Yes sir. Perfectly.”

“Listen, then. It is important to you also. I will make it so. You hold that ring. Give it to no one. No one! Do you understand?” The man’s tone was low, deep, insistent.

“Yes—yes sir.”

“Promise me that you will not allow the ring out of your hands until I have seen you.”

Betty hesitated. She wanted time to think. But the clock was ticking off the seconds. She had heard that a call to Buffalo cost a dollar a minute.

“Dollar a minute. Dollar a minute,” her pumping heart repeated. She could not think. So she plunged.

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“All right, I promise.”

“Thanks. I will see you tomorrow.” The still small voice of destiny might have whispered, “Only you won’t.” If it did, then Betty’s brain was too much in a whirl to hear it.

“He’s gone. I promised,” she told herself, a bewildered expression taking possession of her face.

“Those rings!” she murmured. “How is it all to end?”

CHAPTER XII

THE NIGHT RAID

At six that night Florence thrust her head into the box-like office where Betty still toiled over files, buttons, children's letters, and proof-sheets.

"Come on out to dinner, can't you?" she invited. "There's a lot to tell, and—"

"Lot to tell is right. I'm about to explode. But there's all this stuff." Betty waved her hand at the littered desk. "The Ding Bat goes to press in the morning."

"What's the Ding Bat?"

"Oh, that's the edition that goes down-state. There's a lot of advertising and the like, city stuff, that's left out. But then," she added, "it can wait. It's never late till morning, then it's early," she laughed. "Mrs. Brookins will be here till ten. She always is on Friday. Might as well come back."

She made a grab for hat and coat. "I mustn't forget to call on the beautiful lady in the House On The Roof," she said with a sudden start. "And yet—" She suddenly remembered her promise over the long distance. It was the same ring, she was sure of that. "And yet, I wonder if I should, if I dare."

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"But then I haven't the ring," she added.

"Which ring?"

"Any of them."

"You are about to have all of them," said Florence. There was a touch of finality in her voice. "You are the one that started all this publicity stuff. It's getting too thick for me. 'Ring! Ring! Who's got the ring?'" she quoted. "Little Betty's got it from now on. But who's the beautiful lady? What's the House On The Roof?"

"Wait," said Betty. "I know a fine little place to get dinner. A bright little spot in a sort of cellar, where you can get way over in a corner by yourself."

"That's the place. Lead on."

"The House On The Roof," Betty explained a trifle breathlessly fifteen minutes later, "is a regular two story house built on top of an eighteen story hotel. It's not just an ordinary house, but a regular mansion. The interior decorations were all imported from abroad, panelled, and tiled kitchen walls with a

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great big fire place taken from Holland. That's the kitchen. The dining room came from France. The bedrooms are furnished from Italy. The furnishings are rare and costly. No one can live there unless he is very rich. This beautiful lady came from that house to my little office to see about the ring. I am to call upon her this evening and to show her the platinum ring. Won't I thrill? Is she very rich? Is she a famous actress? Or—"

"What is her name?"

"She—she didn't give it to me."

"Then who are you to call for?"

"Sure enough. Who am I?" Betty looked downcast.

"But then," she brightened, "there's always a way. No one has ever really stopped me yet. I'll smile at them every one. They'll say, 'Yes, Miss, this way please.' And up I'll go." She threw up her head and laughed.

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"In that case you'll need the rings," Florence thrust the velvet package into her hand.

She shuddered a little at the touch. But, gaining control of herself, she unwrapped the package, and under cover of the shadows, examined them carefully.

They were indeed an interesting collection. Little wonder that her cocoa grew cold as her keen eyes took them in one by one.

Like Florence, she found the delicately carved platinum ring, the one of Oriental design, and the broad No. 13 with the fine line running round it, most intriguing.

"That's not the only mysterious thing that has happened," she said, giving the platinum ring a final look. "There was a long distance call. And I made a promise."

"A promise?"

"I'll tell you."

Betty called for hot cocoa, then plunged into fresh narrative. When she had finished Florence was acquainted with all the happenings of the hours that had gone before.

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"Hm!" she mused. "It's strange about that ancient ship. You say it was a prison ship, and that there were prisoners aboard her. That can't be true."

"But I saw them! I saw them! Such horrible faces!" Betty began to tremble like a man with the ague.

Florence tactfully changed the subject. She, however, made a mental note of the matter and resolved to visit that spot on the

river at a very early date.

At ten that night, Betty rested a weary head on a well ordered desk. Having dozed for ten minutes, she sprang to her feet, patted her breast where the thirteen rings rested, then having drawn on her coat, started for the House On The Roof.

* * * * *

In the meantime Florence had entered upon one more surprising adventure. Upon leaving Betty, she experienced a sense of relief which surprised her. Nor could she account for it until she remembered that the thirteen rings no longer were with her.

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At once an overpowering sense of self reproach brought her up in her tracks.

“She is younger than I, and so slender; a mere child,” she told herself, “and I have thrown the burden upon her.”

She turned to retrace her steps. She had not gone half a block when she came once more to a stand still.

“No one will know she has them, unless she chooses to disclose the fact,” she reasoned. “Besides, she must have the platinum ring and the broad gold band if she is to fulfill her promises.”

After that she turned and walked rapidly forward. But where was she going? Surely not home. Home, for her, lay away to the south. She was walking west, toward the river.

As she walked, a half formed resolve took shape in her mind. She would walk to the river and have a look at the scene of Betty’s night adventure with the ancient ship.

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“Can’t be,” she told herself. “Utterly impossible. And yet, she said she saw them. Prisoners on board a ship, a very old ship.”

She was passing through dark, unfrequented streets now, yet she felt no fear. She no longer had the rings.

The moon went under a great black cloud. Dark alleys, opening into the street, gloomed at her. Here the night air was disturbed by an unusual whistle. Now there came the sound of running feet. Still she trudged straight on.

She reached the bridge at last, then the river. The moon was still obscure. The water, the brick and stone walls, the distant buildings all but blended into the night, seemed the ghosts of a passing world. They seemed to be saying to her: “Tomorrow we will all be gone.”

For all this, as her eyes became accustomed to the dim light, she made out the outlines of the next bridge, south two blocks away, and of two fishing boats tied up near it.

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“But the great ancient ship Betty saw,” she told herself with sudden surprise, “it’s not there! It’s not there! It’s gone!”

“Perhaps,” she thought quite soberly, “it never was there. Perhaps, like the Flying Dutchman, she is a phantom ship. Time was when there were prison ships, when men were put in solitary confinement in their holds for stealing a loaf of bread. Those were cruel times. Why should such a phantom ship wish to return? Why—”

Her meditations broke short off. She turned to make three silent strides to the right. Footsteps were approaching. At that instant, the moon coming out from behind a cloud, revealed two faces.

“The Chinaman and his lawyer,” she told herself. At the same instant they saw her. The next found her in full flight.

No steel skeleton of an unfinished building offered her an opportunity for escape this time. Pitiless walls of brick and stone loomed before her. The streets were deserted. The men who came after her were determined in their efforts to obtain the broad band ring.

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“But I haven’t the ring,” she told herself. “What of that?” came whirling back. “Will they believe you? And if not, what then?” The thought sent her speeding faster than ever.

Down a street to the right, doubling back to the left, across the street, down an alley, she sped. And still no one in sight save her pursuers.

Then of a sudden, she breathed a sigh of relief. As she rounded a corner she saw, on the sidewalk and overflowing into the street, a veritable crowd of people.

“Coming out of something. Safe enough now,” she thought.

“And yet, what can it be?”

Again her heart was in her mouth. There were no theatres nor open halls in this district.

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She was soon enough to know. As she slowed to a fast walk, she caught sight of a blue uniform, another and yet another. Then a patrol wagon loomed out of the dark.

“A raid!” she told herself. “I have come bounding right into a police raid.”

Her first feeling upon seeing the police was one of relief. If the Chinaman and his right hand man approached her she would have them arrested.

“But would I?” she asked herself. “What charge could I bring? Annoying a lady, perhaps. And if successful, there’d be the trial and more publicity. Bah! No. There must be another way.”

The other way suggested itself soon enough. As she neared the group of thirty or more people, some one held a police lantern high. It lighted up a face.

“Tim O’Mally!” she said with a little cry of surprise and joy. Tim O’Mally was the young policeman who was oftenest assigned to duty near her playground.

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At once a way of escape presented itself. She would mingle with the group of people who were quite evidently being arrested. The Chinaman and lawyer would not dare follow. She would accept a ride in an ambulance to the Police Station if necessary. She shuddered a little at that. Chuckled a little, too. A new experience! When the proper moment arrived she would present herself to Tim and tell him her story. Tim would see that she was properly released.

Without thinking the adventure through further than that, she suddenly slid into the closely packed group.

She was not seen by the police. If her followers were able to trace her movements they made no sign; but, having dropped to a walk, passed straight on.

It is barely possible that, at this particular moment, she might have slipped from her place unobserved and have gone on her way home. This did not suggest itself to her. Truth was, she had suddenly become so absorbed in her study of the group about her that she had ceased entirely to think of herself. Thereby she let herself in for considerable more of an adventure than she had bargained for in the beginning.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE HOUSE ON THE ROOF

Betty experienced no difficulty in gaining entrance to the House On The Roof. She had merely to give her name at the desk. The clerk telephoned. A moment later a bell boy in a suit richly trimmed with gold braid appeared. He beckoned. She followed across a marble floor, past stately pillars, down silent aisles, to the elevator.

A sudden shooting upward, up, up, up toward the sky, a gliding pause, and they were there. No, not quite there. A circular stair awaited them, then a door.

A maid in black opened the door and ushered her in. Once her simple wraps were removed she was taken immediately to a great room with high ceiling and panelled walls. In all her life Betty had not seen such a room.

“It—it’s like moving pictures,” she thought to herself. For a moment the whole of it, the shadowy walls, the dim light, the strangely magnificent furnishings, seemed so unreal that she was tempted to believe it a dream.

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She was wakened from the dream by a voice. The tone was low and melodious.

“How do you like it?” The voice came from the depths of a great chair close to a fireplace where a real wood fire burned brightly.

Betty turned to gaze upon a vision of perfect loveliness. The beautiful lady, ten times more beautiful now, was encircled with fold upon fold of such silken gauze as dreams are made of. When she sat in repose, it caught and reflected the light of the fire as the spray above a waterfall catches the hues of the rainbow. When she moved, as presently she did, extending a hand of welcome and pointing to a chair, it was as if a million pairs of dragonflies’ wings were fluttering through the air.

“I like a fire in the evening,” said this unusual hostess. “It is so like a life. It burns feebly at first. Perhaps it threatens to go out and leave you in the dark. But for the most part it survives. It rises high in the grate. It beams upon you. It laughs and cackles. It feels the force and power within it. It leaps and roars and laughs a wild, loud defiant laugh.

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“Time passes. The laugh is gone, yet it still shows a ruddy glow. After that comes its old age, a bit sad at times, at others tragic. It burns lower and lower until only gray ashes remain, or it breaks in the middle and comes crashing down in

smouldering ruins.”

Betty gave only half an ear to this strange speech. Her eyes, roving from corner to corner of the room of such magnificence, took in every detail. Strangely enough, little things caught and held her attention. A tiny chest of drawers not more than a foot in height that stood upon a table by the dimly burning lamp, a curiously twisted and elaborately carved golden candle stick, and a bronze monkey holding a bowl of candy. Such were the objects that interested her most.

“Ah yes,” said her hostess, “they will all seem unusual and interesting to you. They did to me once. Would that I were young as you and had your eyes for all that is strange and beautiful!”

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She sighed, but Betty wanted to laugh. Her hostess did not seem a day over twenty.

“So that’s the way you feel when you have everything,” thought Betty. “I’m glad I am poor.”

“Oh, I treasure them in a way,” said her hostess as if reading her thoughts. “The little chest of drawers is for my jewelry. It is made of inlaid mahogany and came from the Far East. The golden candle stick is from an East Indian temple. The monkey was found near the ruins of a Maya Indian palace. The chair yonder is a prayer chair from Rome.

“But you, dear—” she turned to smile sweetly, “you have the greatest treasure of them all. At least I believe you have. May I see them—the rings?”

With fingers that trembled Betty drew the velvet packet from her dress. Her lips would not form words. There was no need. Untying the silken cord, she unrolled the velvet and at once, in the uncertain light, the gold and platinum bands that had witnessed so much of life’s joys and sorrows lay spread out before the eager eyes of the lady of the House On The Roof.

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She took but one look. “Ah yes. Surely. It is the ring!”

She clutched at the filmy gauze that covered her heart. Then, springing to her feet, began to pace back and forth before the fire.

To Betty the whole affair was strange and a bit startling. The filmy drapery, fluttering after the lovely form of the unusual young lady, made the scene seem a hundred times more unreal.

When at last her hostess crossed quickly to the door and began fumbling with the key, Betty came to herself with a sudden and terrible jolt. Her mind whirled. A hundred questions shot through her brain.

Was she being locked in? She was in the House On The Roof.

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Far below was the city. She was alone with this strange young woman, far from the reach of human ear. What was to happen now?

Was it thought of the prison ship, of the unlimited power that wealth is supposed to bring? Was it loss of sleep and utter weariness? Who can say? The girl went into sudden, uncontrollable panic.

Gripping her rings in one hand, she sprang for a window, sent it up with a bang, then leaped full into the night.

CHAPTER XIV

A RIDE IN THE PATROL WAGON

Florence had never before witnessed a police raid. Now, in a way, she was experiencing one. A new set of thrills was running up and down her spine.

There was a strange ominous silence about it all. No one spoke. Had the crowd she had joined been ordered to keep silent? Had they been advised to do so by their leader? She could not tell.

The faces were interesting. It was strange. Now a police light would fall full upon a face. One was young, attractive in its way; another also young, but utterly repellent. Some showed traces of refinement. Some were young, some old. There were more women than men.

“What can it be?” she asked herself. “Is this a dope ring? Are they radicals plotting to overthrow the Government? Is it a raid on a gambling place?” She could not so much as guess, and no one volunteered to inform her. It was strange, being virtually under arrest without being able to so much as guess the reason.

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She fell to studying the faces again. Some wore the lines of defiance. Some seemed crushed, ready to weep; yet no tears came. Some were indifferent, while others appeared to think of the whole affair as a monstrous joke.

Two other police wagons came rumbling out of the night.

“Come on, now. In with you! Step lively!” The police Captain’s tone was gruff. There was a shade of kindness in it for all that.

The kindly note went to the girl’s heart. Then, of a sudden, she realized that she did not belong there, that it was time to get out.

“Please,” she said, touching the Captain’s arm, “I don’t belong here. I—”

“None of you do.” The kindly note was gone. “In with you!”

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“But I—I can explain.”

“They all can. They’ll have a chance at it, too—in the court room.”

Suddenly she went into a panic. She could see herself crowded between that much rouged girl at her right, and the tall black haired man with an evil eye at her left.

“Please!” she pleaded. “I know one of your men—Timothy—”

“Know a policeman, do you? They all do. Come on, now. In with you!”

“That’s right, Captain,” a voice spoke from behind. “She wasn’t with us.”

It was a woman with a rather haggard young-old face, who spoke.

“Then what’s she doing here?” snapped the officer. “In with you. It’s a blind. Probably she’s the worst of the lot. You’re trying to let her out. In with you, I say!”

He gave the girl a gentle push. She stumbled, turned an angry face toward him, realized the futility of it all, and turning as a hot tear splashed on her cheek, entered the wagon and took her place beside the dark man with the evil eye. Fortune favored her in one respect. The person at her right was her recent defender.

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The ambulances were soon filled, the doors slammed shut, then they rattled away into the night.

* * * * *

Betty’s leap from the topmost window of an eighteen story building was not the last of Betty’s strange adventures that night. The thrill came when her feet shot through space and she knew she was going down. It was brought to a sudden end when she struck rather solidly upon a sandy floor. She had dropped exactly six feet.

The House On The Roof occupied but a fraction of the great hotel’s roof. There was space at the right of it for an ample court yard. It was into this court that Betty had leaped.

Her keen mind took in the situation at a glance. Moonlight revealed a high, spear-pointed iron fence surrounding the court. This would have baffled a porch climber. But to the right, in a far corner, was a flight of iron steps.

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With one glance backward, and a sigh of relief at realization that she was not, as yet, being followed, she sprang away toward the iron steps.

With a few quick bounds she mounted them. Then, for a few brief seconds, like a statue, a thin frail child atop the world, her light skirts wound about her by the breeze, she stood motionless, scarcely breathing, taking in the great possibilities of the immediate future.

Far below her was the city. Away to the right the river, her river, gleamed in the moonlight. Down there somewhere in the maze of rooftops, she could not pick the exact spot, was a home

and a cozy bed. Her home, her bed. How foolish she had been to leave them!

And yet there was mystery and adventure and a possible big story for her paper. The thing must be gone through with. The next step must be taken.

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“The next step,” she told herself with a start, “is down.”

The iron stairs led to a fire escape and the fire escape, for all she knew, led to the ground.

“I have only to go down,” she told herself steadily. “But I must be careful.” For a moment all the rooftops swam in dizzy circles beneath her. At last her head cleared and down she went, step by step into the dim unknown, far below.

* * * * *

To Florence, riding through the night in a police wagon with persons of questionable character all about her, the immediate future held terrible possibilities. Brought up, as she had been, in a family of God fearing, law abiding people, she had not, up to that moment, been able to so much as guess the sensation that comes over one whose shoulder has been gripped by the iron hand of the law.

“I must get out of here,” she told herself. Yet she knew well enough it could not be done.

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“Don’t mind, dearie,” said a voice beside her, the voice of her former defender, the woman with the young-old face. “You’ll be out before noon. I know a lawyer who’s a wonder.”

“Noon!” Her heart sank to her very shoes.

“Noon!” By that time a trial, a story in the papers. Names would be given; her name. Her name? Should she give her name? Or another? Her name, it was an honorable one. She was proud of it. She had never given another in place of it. Could she do it now? She was afraid she could not.

She thought of Tim O’Mally, and her hopes rose. She would see him. Somehow she could find him. He would help her.

“But he may have been on detail only for the raid. May not be with the wagons at all.” Again her hopes dwindled.

She took to recalling the faces of those who rode with them. From them she endeavored to discover the cause of their clash with the law.

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“I can’t do it,” she told herself in despair. “There may have been a murder!” She shuddered. “Or only a card game, played for money, or an illegal meeting of some sort.”

That brought forth another question. What sort of crime was she to be charged with? And how was she to answer the charge?

“Not guilty, of course,” she smiled grimly. “How could I be?”

The wagons came to a jolting halt. They wheeled about, and backed to the curb.

“Here you are. All out!” came from the doorway. “Step lively, and no crooked stuff.”

Florence chilled at the words. It was as if an icicle had been thrust down her neck, yet she found herself moving mechanically forward with the rest.

CHAPTER XV

A STRANGE FAIRYLAND

Betty had descended so many flights of iron stairs that she was dizzy and heartsick when, of a sudden, while still four flights from the street, she came to the end of the iron trail. The way, if way there be, led at this point through a closed window. Above the window from within there came a feeble red light. Other than this there was no light. The entire floor was shrouded in darkness.

“Got to go in there, if I can,” she told herself. “Can’t stay out here all night. And yet, if I go in, where will I be?”

She put a trembling hand to the window. It lifted without a sound. She stepped within and immediately found herself in what appeared to be a dimly lighted night in Fairyland.

* * * * *

The group of men and women to which Florence had so strangely joined herself, had been herded into the narrow corridor of a police station. A sleepy sergeant was taking their names and addresses.

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To Florence it was no sleeping matter. She was never so much awake in all her life. For the last fifteen minutes her eyes had wandered from corner to corner of that room. They were searching for a pair of broad shoulders and a familiar face.

At the same time her brain was busy with a perplexing problem. When her turn came to appear at the Sergeant’s desk, what name, and what address should she give? Should it be her own name, her true address, or a fictitious one? She had read of raids on rich men’s gambling places, and had smiled at the number of Smiths and Jones there had been present. It had seemed a light matter that these men had given fictitious names.

But now it was her turn to decide. She had managed by skillful manipulation to get the place third from the last. This would delay action but a short time. It also prolonged her agony.

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To tell a deliberate falsehood with malice aforethought, this was a thing she had never done. Yet, as she thought of her relatives and friends, of her father, mother, brothers and sisters who would be shamed and hurt without cause, it seemed her duty to give a name other than her own.

Half unconsciously she was turning over in her mind Priscilla Dean, Marjory Martin and Prudence Swift as possible substitutes for her own name, when her gaze became fixed on a face in the doorway, and her lips framed the words:

“Tim! Oh, Tim!”

They were not spoken loudly. Evidently he did not hear, for the next instant the back of his square young shoulders blocked the door, then he was gone.

The girl’s eyes flashed to the line before her. To her consternation she saw that it had thinned, that she was fourth from the front.

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* * * * *

Had she found herself walking hand in hand with Alice in Wonderland, or had she met the Tin Woodman of Oz on the street, Betty could scarcely have been more astonished than she was at what she saw as she closed the window at the foot of the fire escape, then stared about her.

From without, the room had seemed completely enshrouded in darkness. Truth was, there was no light at all on the floor and very little above. Only here and there, at regular intervals, a dim reflected light, appearing to come from nowhere in particular, lighted up a spot some three feet across.

In each of these spots was to be seen a group of little people. Strangest of all, these odd little folks seemed quite alive, and most certainly were in motion. Here a queer little man not more than two feet tall, dressed in long coat and holding a high hat in his hand, was bowing to an exquisite little lady dressed in a gown of richest silk.

Betty stared. What strange place was this? She was, of course, too old to believe in fairies, but found herself tempted to believe all the same.

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As her gaze wandered from corner to corner, her astonishment grew. Here a very ordinary little woman rocked a tiny baby on her knee. There two small children, each a foot tall, leaped up and down, smiling in high glee all the time, while in a far corner a three foot policeman in blue uniform and brass buttons shook a diminutive club at them.

A slight purring sound pervaded the room. Other than this there was no sound until, with a suddenness that was startling, a banjo and saxophone began rattling and blaring the “Rhode Island Blues.”

At once, as the girl turned her eyes in the direction from which the sound came, she saw two diminutive musicians seated upon a box, patting time with their feet and apparently sending forth that loud blast of disharmony and wild cadence from their tiny instruments.

This lasted for two or three minutes. Then, of a sudden, the purring noise ceased, the music broke short off, the lights

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flashed out, and the room was left to darkness and to Betty.

The darkness was more haunting than the light. Betty's mind was in a whirl! What should she do? She could not go back. At the top of the fire escape in the House On The Roof the beautiful lady who had apparently intended locking her in was doubtless awaiting her.

“Why did she lock the door? What had she meant to do?”

As the girl asked herself these questions she began to wonder if she had not behaved rashly. Had the lady really meant any harm to her? Ought she not to go back? Well, she couldn't. The very thought of it set her slight frame shaking.

Then of a sudden she recalled another matter. She had made an appointment with the man in the long black coat who said he was a minister and a former missionary. She had forgotten. The man must be gone long since. She could not make herself regret this very much. She liked some people, others she did not. She did not like this man. Her likes and dislikes were not always based on reason and good sense, she knew that very well. This might be an exceedingly good man, she couldn't tell. Neither did she know why she disliked him.

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“He said the world was coming to an end,” she told herself. “I don't want that to happen. I like the good old world with its river and its sunset, its spring and its summer, its grass and its snow. How could anyone bear to think of its ceasing to exist, its not being at all?”

Shadowy forms began moving about the place. She felt rather than saw or heard them. They set her trembling again.

“Must get out of here. But how? Show me the way home.” She smiled at the thought.

A faint light, like the first blush of dawn, appeared far above her. The moving shadows showed more plainly now. They appeared to be men. The place was large, a hundred feet wide, perhaps, and considerably longer.

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Slinking back into the shadows, she discovered a heavy curtain. Back of the curtain was a narrow passageway. She followed this on tiptoe. It brought her to a spot where a roughly beamed place came down so close to the floor that she barely escaped bumping her head. Still in search of an exit, she was creeping along beneath this place when the light became suddenly brighter.

With the startled spring of a deer for cover, she leaped to the nearest place of concealment. This proved to be a narrow box-like enclosure. It was open on one side, the side away from the light. Strangely enough, it was furnished with two low stools and a number of pillows.

“Huh!” she whispered as she settled back among the pillows.
“I can wait here without being bothered.”

But she couldn't. Not for long.

CHAPTER XVI IN A STRANGE BOX

Hardly had Betty settled back against the cushions in her strange hiding place than she began to sense, rather than hear, a movement in the great room before her. At the same time a faint light came through a small opening in the cabinet.

Creeping to this peep hole, she peered forth. With difficulty suppressing a cry of surprise, she stared with all her eyes. Coming down the center of the waxed floor, which by now reflected a light from above, was the gayest, most beautiful, most gorgeously dressed company of people it had ever been her privilege to look upon. Men in dress suits with diamonds sparkling from their spotless shirt fronts. And the women! What gorgeous colors and such silks and satins. The spider could spin nothing finer. No butterflies' wings ever displayed a greater variety of color.

"And jewels!" she whispered. Shining with a white glow, gleaming red, burning blue, diamond and sapphire vied with one another for front rank.

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"They are real, too," she thought. "Real men, six feet tall. Real ladies, real gowns, real jewels, real—"

Her thoughts were broken short off by a movement behind her. Crowded tight into a corner, she waited breathless. Some one crept in beside her, and then someone else. She caught a silver gleam.

"Been robbing the tables," was her mental comment. "Came here to hide."

Her mind was in a whirl. On either side of the aisle down which the rich company was marching were small, square tables laden with faultless silver and cut glass. There was doubtless to be a banquet, and these two persons, so she believed, having taken advantage of the darkness of a few moments previous, had stolen some of the silver.

"Hist!" she exclaimed in a low tense whisper, "Git out! This is my place to hide!" She emphasized the remark by a vigorous thrust of her sharp elbow in the general direction of what she supposed to be the nearest intruder's ribs.

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Her aim had been true. The person doubled up with a groan. There came a metallic thud.

"I was right," she told herself. "He dropped the silver."

But now there came words, a tense angry whisper. "What in

thunder you doing in here?"

"Same as you are. Hiding. Get out, can't you?"

"You get out. Quick! We'll hand you over to the police."

"But Max, listen!" came a second voice. "It's a girl. Shove over in that corner," the second voice commanded Betty. "But one word from you, and out you go."

Betty found herself greatly bewildered. Who were these men? What had they brought here? Why were they in hiding?

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Evidently, since they were two to her one, and men at that, she would be obliged to await the answer.

"I must be wrong," she thought as she crowded herself in the smallest space possible. "They can't be thieves. Thieves don't turn people over to the police. They wouldn't dare."

She was still within range of a peep hole. Since there was nothing else to do, she set herself watching the gay company that by now was being seated by grave faced waiters.

Chancing to allow her eyes to stray upward, her eye caught a movement and, for the time being the banqueters were forgotten. The miniature figures in their tiny boxes along the wall were once more in full action. The comical little man with a stiff hat in his hand made his bow to the lady in silk; the mother rocked her baby on her knee; two small boys leaped up and down, and the policeman from his private box shook his stick at them.

There were many other interesting groups. Betty's eyes had not gone the rounds of them before she began to realize that these were small automatic figures, marionettes, that were worked by motors and had been placed there for the entertainment of the larger people of real flesh and blood who by now were seated around the tables.

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As she glanced at the real people, then glanced once more to the marionettes, she barely escaped laughing out loud. The actions of the highly dressed and much bejewelled company, their bowing and curtsying, their smiles and nods of the head, were so like those of the little wooden figures that she found it impossible to believe but that the little inanimate figures were imitating the larger living ones, or the other way round.

She was studying this engaging problem when, with a suddenness that was appalling, a saxophone blared out within a foot of her ear. At the same time a banjo began to thrum.

Then like a flash the whole thing came to her. She recalled the two marionettes seated on a cabinet playing a saxophone and a banjo. There had been music then. There was music now—the Baltimore Blues. The music was not furnished by the

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marionettes. It came from below, furnished by the two men close beside her.

“Of course they had to be in hiding to make the illusion complete,” she told herself. “And I thought they were robbers. What a ninny! What—”

Again her eyes had sought the peep hole. For a moment they were held there, fixed and staring.

Then, as there came a sudden lull in the music that in this small box was deafening, she leaned over to whisper:

“Hist! I’ve got to get out of here quick!”

“All right, sister,” the saxophone player whispered back as he crowded back to give her space to pass. “Sorry to lose you, but you know best. Here’s wishing you luck.”

The saxophone blared again, and Betty slipped into the darkness behind the scenes.

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* * * * *

Strange to say, Tim O’Mally had heard Florence’s call. He had caught a fleeting glimpse of her face as well; but a sudden sharp call from a fellow officer had compelled him to turn back. A slim and elusive member of the arrested band was making an attempt at escape.

With every hope gone, with at least one night in prison staring her in the face, Florence stepped grimly toward the recording sergeant. The last person before her had passed on. She was up.

“Next!” called the officer. “What name?”

“Why, I—er—” Words stuck in her throat.

“Name!” repeated the sergeant sharply.

Tears filled the girl’s eyes. She could not speak.

“Say, look here, sergeant! Just a moment!” It was Tim O’Mally who spoke. “There’s some mistake. Where’s the Captain? Here, Captain.” He beckoned to his superior officer.

“What’s this?” The captain’s tone was gruff. It told nothing of his nature or feelings.

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“This girl,” said the young officer, “She doesn’t belong to this.” Tim’s arms took in the band in the corner.

“She tell you?”

“Told me nothing. I know her. She works in the hardest public

park in the city and does the best job of them all. How could she—”

“Then what you got her for? What did you fellows do? Take in the whole street?”

“I don’t know, Captain,” Tim apologized. “It beats me. I—”

“I will explain!” exclaimed Florence.

“You don’t need to,” said Tim hotly. “You’ve got character, haven’t you? You don’t belong to—to them, do you?” Again his arms went wide.

Florence shook her head. At the same time she found herself feeling terribly sorry for “them.”

“Then,” said Tim, “why explain?”

“I tell you, Captain,” he went on, “she’s a real brick. I’ve seen her bind up a little red-headed scapegoat’s busted head as good as a surgeon could, and save some crazy girl from drownin’ in the pool a half hour after. When she comes down the street you’d think there was a fire, there’s so many kids trooping after. I tell you, Captain, she’s the big sister of Kosterman Alley.”

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“What’s all the fuss about, then?” rumbled the captain. “Beg pardon, Miss.” He turned to Florence. “No harm meant. You better hurry home. It’s a trifle late. If you’re not on hand in the morning the kids will miss you.

“No!” he exclaimed a moment later. “It’s no time of day for a girl of character to be on the street alone. Here you, Tim, I appoint you her bodyguard, and may God bless the Big Sister of Kosterman Alley!”

Florence’s throat filled. She could not speak. She bowed awkwardly, tried to smile, made a mess of it, then walked unsteadily toward the street.

“The captain,” said Tim a few moments later as they rattled along the deserted streets in a midnight car, “didn’t say how long my term of service as a bodyguard was to last. From the looks of things, I’d say it should be an indeterminate sentence, one day to life.”

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“It should,” said Florence emphatically. Then, because she was too full of thoughts to keep them back, she told him the whole story of the mysterious 13th ring.

“Fine!” said Tim when she had finished. “This is going to be the most interesting case I’ve ever been assigned to. Next time you choose to walk the streets at night to search out phantom ships or take a quiet plunge in the river, let me know. I’ll follow in plain clothes, a little way behind. Then if Mr. Chink

steps out from the shadows I'll trap him.”

“Thanks. That’s a go!” Florence put out her hand and met his with a man-like grip.

“Here’s my stop,” she said a moment later. “Thanks awfully, my bodyguard.”

She hurried up the club house steps.

CHAPTER XVII

LOST IN A LABYRINTH

It is well to put your thoughts to sleep before you go to bed. Many and strange were the thoughts that crowded through Florence's brain as, wrapped in a heavy blanket and seated before her burned out fire, she gave herself over to reflection.

First, most mysterious of all, was the problem of the thirteenth ring. It was strange. Two men had claimed an interest in it; one a lawyer, the other a clergyman.

"The lawyer," she told herself, "probably is a lawyer, but the other—well, many a man has put on the cloak of righteousness that he may cover his evil deeds. Who can say?"

The stories told by the two men were quite different. They could not both be true.

"Which is the true story?" she asked herself as she pictured in her mind the thirteenth ring. "Is that ring a symbol of authority in a Chinese Tong? Does it give its bearer unusual power—perhaps even the power of life or death? Or is it the key to a fortune amassed by a Chinese merchant?"

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"Seems absurd," she reflected. "How could a ring, a simple band ring unlock an iron door or reveal a secret hiding place of great wealth?"

"No, it can't be. The man in the long coat is an imposter. The lawyer backed his proposition up with money, a great deal of it. I wonder why I didn't sell him the ring? It is mine. I can sell it. Why not?"

"Time enough yet. I'll never get rid of him, nor his annoying Chinese companion, until the matter is disposed of. And yet?"

"At any rate," she concluded, "I now have a good strong bodyguard. Tim will see me through." There was comfort in that.

"I wonder how Betty is coming on with her lady in the House On The Roof. Wonder where she is now."

Had she known, doubtless she would have lost an hour or two of sleep over a thought that would not go to bed. As it was, she threw off her blanket, did a dozen handsprings and flip-flops about the room, turned out the light, threw up the window, gave the sleeping city one sweeping glance, crept under the covers and was soon fast asleep.

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Betty was still on the fourth floor of the great hotel. The face she had seen in the banquet hall was that of the beautiful lady from the House On The Roof. Fear of detection by her had driven her out of the musicians' hiding place into the obscure darkness of what she concluded must be the space underneath a small stage.

She had by this time guessed the true nature of the gathering into which she had come so near intruding herself. This novel hall with its bowing marionettes and its wooden musicians was a gathering place for a fashionable evening club. Here, amid the clink of glasses and the tinkle of silver, they would laugh and dine. After that the tables would be cleared away and, to the time of saxophone and banjo, they would dance, pink cheeked men and bright gowned ladies whirling round and round.

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"All of which does not interest me," Betty told herself. "Show me the way home. That's all I ask."

After bumping her head against a beam, and all but falling over a heap of stage property, she emerged into a long narrow space dimly lighted by windows very high up. She followed this to the right and came to a brick wall. She retraced her steps with better results. There was a door, and outside of that a fire escape.

"Going down! Glory be!" she exclaimed as, after filling her lungs with crisp outer air, she fairly raced down the iron steps.

The final flight was one of those balancing affairs which hang twenty feet in air and can only be brought down by a person creeping or walking out upon them.

Having moved her slight weight far out upon it, Betty experienced a breath-taking descent, only to arrive with a clanging jolt that was sure, she believed, to bring all the patrolmen within three squares on the run.

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"They won't get me!" She sped down an alley. Then, finding herself confronted by a labyrinth of wooden piles and timbers, she sprang into hiding.

"Couldn't find me here in a month," she told herself as, stepping gingerly to avoid possible holes, she penetrated farther and farther into the darkness.

What she had said was true enough. No one would find her there. A labyrinth, however, has its disadvantages. If no one can find you, it is equally true that you cannot find them; nor perhaps any other person or place you may wish to visit.

This thought for the moment did not trouble Betty. It had not so much as entered her mind. She was free from pursuit. There was comfort in this. Now she could think.

Think she did, and the thoughts were long, long thoughts. She felt the spot where the thirteen rings rested.

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“Still there, eh?” she muttered. “Well, you won’t be long—not longer than tomorrow.”

In this she was partly wrong.

“I wonder if she really meant to lock the door?” She was thinking now of the beautiful lady of the House On The Roof. “If she had, and if I had stayed, what then? Probably nothing terrible. But I didn’t, so that’s that.” She sighed.

She put out a hand to touch a rough pile. What sort of place was this? Suddenly she remembered. They were building a wide boulevard along the part of the river that runs east and west. Her home was on the part that runs north and south.

She could recall the time, not more than a year or two before, when the very place where she now sat was one of the busiest corners in all the great city. Trucks and wagons laden with bananas, potatoes, onions, chickens, dressed calves, watermelons, peaches and a hundred other varieties of produce fought for right-of-way down that street, while the foot passenger on the sidewalk was in constant danger of being run down by the swarming pushcarts.

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“Plenty of noise then.” She smiled. “Plenty to take home, too.” Many were the little cart loads of loose green bananas she had picked up here. Many, too, the crippled chicken or pigeon she had carried home to nurse back to life on the narrow grass spot that bordered the water front.

“It’s gone now. All gone.” Four story buildings had crumbled before the wrecking crews like ant hills before a plow. Now they were building a broad drive in the place where they had stood.

A fresh thought struck her all of a heap. The buildings along her portion of the river were no better than these others had been; some not so good. It was only a matter of time before the march of progress would demand that the building she had always known as home would be torn down to make way for another splendid drive.

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“My home! My river!” She was on her feet with a bound. She found herself hating this place, wanting with all her heart to get out of it.

“But the way out?” she whispered, fresh terror taking possession of her. “Which way is out?”

She could not tell. Peer into the darkness as she might—right, left, front, back, she could catch not one gleam of light. Weakly she sank back upon the rough section of a pile that had offered her a resting place.

CHAPTER XVIII

BETTY DISAPPEARS

It very often happens that problems which seem almost impossible in the beginning, after a few moments of quiet thought, become ridiculously simple. It was so with Betty's labyrinth.

"The piles," she told herself after a period of absolute composure, "are set in rows. It matters very little which way I go. So long as I move in a straight line I am sure to come out somewhere eventually."

She was right. After groping forward in the dark for some time, she at last caught a faint gleam of light. Ten minutes later found her standing on a stone ledge looking down upon the silent sweep of the river.

"Follow the ledge to the street; then two blocks to the left, three to the right, and I am back on my own bridge."

As she stood upon her own bridge once more, she saw the dark gleam of waters, caught the red and green reflections of light in the water, then threw back her shoulders and took in a great breath of air. Bad as the river was, she loved it. There was a suggestion of silent power about it that she could not resist.

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This thought brought back the dark forebodings of an hour before. Her home, lying in the way of the inevitable march of progress of a great and growing city, must go.

"And why?" she asked herself. "Because a thousand, ten thousand, perhaps a hundred thousand men must roll over the spot where that home stood. They must roll from their homes to the city in the morning in their automobiles. Big, fat, prosperous looking men, smoking black cigars. Slim men, little men, all sorts of men, they will come speeding in over the spot which was my home, beside the river that has always been my friend.

"And what will they do?" she asked herself angrily. "Talk of stocks and bonds, of mortgages and gold, sell automobiles and insurance, elect mayors and aldermen, dictate letters, order this done and that done, lunch with a client, smoke more cigars, then ride again over my home beside my river and never give a thought to either.

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"And yet," her mood became pensive, "almost all of them have children in their homes, bright, eager-eyed boys and girls. These must have shoes and stockings, dresses, apples, oatmeal, and custard pies. They're doing the things they know how to do

so their children will have all these things.

“So, roll on, you automobiles!” she exclaimed, “but don’t forget that you are rolling over somebody’s home beside a river that some one loved.”

For the first time in her life Betty longed for a home in open spaces, a cottage beside quiet waters, so far from the crowded city that no one would wish to take it from her and build in its place a highway or a skyscraper.

On holidays at different times she had made excursions to the open country. She fell to dreaming now of shady lanes and quiet waters.

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So deep were her thoughts, so real her dreams, that she failed to catch a hoarse hoot from the river or the answering jangle of a bell. A great dark bulk was creeping down the river. And as it came along, as if by magic the massive bridges spanning the river, lifted high in air to permit its passing.

In due course of time the dark gliding menace, which was none other than the lake freighter *Freda*, outward bound, came into proximity of Betty’s bridge, and that bridge began to lift its massive tons of steel toward the sky.

Not until the bridge began to rise did the girl realize her peril. She was in the very center. The bridge was rising rapidly, would rise to an all but perpendicular position and remain there until the freighter had passed.

Her head was in a whirl; her heart beat painfully. What was to be done? Retreat at this moment was impossible. All she could do was to cling to the side railing and hope for a safe upward journey. Up, up she went, while the waters of the river surged beneath her and the black freighter glided onward.

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Had some one been looking at the time that the freighter *Freda* reached the exact center of the space beneath Betty’s bridge, he might have seen a dark object hover at the very top of the bridge for a space of three seconds, to at last come shooting straight as a plummet to the mid-deck of the *Freda*. Since there was none to see, the matter went unnoticed, the ship passed on, the bridge came down, and night closed in over all. In due course of time the *Freda* reached open water and struck boldly out into the great lake. She was bound north with a ship load of mining machinery, and would return in a fortnight.

Next afternoon the Times published a sensational story. With infinite pains and a heavy heart the young reporter, Terry Brown, had dug it all out. He had gotten much of it from Florence Huyler. A little had come from Tim O’Mally, and more from the beautiful lady in the House On The Roof.

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The story had to do with two girls and thirteen used wedding

rings, a mysterious Chinaman, his lawyer and a man in a long black coat who had claimed to be a missionary. The striking climax of the story came when, after recounting the story of the unusual purchase of the rings and the two girls' adventures with Chinaman, lawyer, preacher and rich young lady, it was declared that Betty Bronson, "black-eyed and vivacious young newspaper lady," had completely disappeared. Her father knew nothing of her whereabouts. Florence Huyler had left her after dinner and had seen nothing of her since. Rather late in the evening she had visited the House On The Roof, but had left almost at once.

Had Betty been privileged to read the story she would have known that the rich young dweller in the House On The Roof had not told the whole truth.

"From the House On The Roof," so the story ran, "all trace of her has been lost. She is known to have been in possession of the wedding rings, including the mysterious 13th ring. It is feared that she has been kidnapped or slain. Early to-day a police squad headed by patrolman Tim O'Malley raided all the haunts of Chinamen of suspicious character; but up to a late hour nothing has been discovered that would seem to point the way to the missing young lady."

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So the day wore on. Newsboys cried their papers. Betty's name was often on their lips. They shouted it upon the very bridge she had called her own. Dusk deepened into night. Sweeping on, the silent river told no tales.

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CHAPTER XIX IN WHICH NOTHING IS LEARNED

“I’m afraid it won’t work. But you never can tell. We’ve tried everything else and we can’t find her.”

It was six in the evening. No trace of Betty had been discovered. Tim O’Mally was speaking to Florence.

“We’ll have to use you for a decoy,” he went on. “That’s bad. But no harm can come to you. I’ll not lose sight of you.”

“But after all, as I say, it don’t seem to be much use. The old Chink has what he’s after, I’ll wager.”

“The ring?”

“Yes, and he has your little pal Betty as well. He may turn her loose. Then again, you may never see her again. These Chinks are queer. He said it was connected with the Tongs, didn’t he?”

“The lawyer did.”

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“That makes it worse. Tongs are secret societies of the most deadly sort. They bump off a whole handful of their own people every year. Nobody knows why. Well, see you at eight. Good-bye.”

Tim was wrong. They had not seen the last of the pop-eyed Chinaman. That night, while Florence was walking the streets where she had seen him oftenest, she caught the familiar pit-pat of his soft padded shoes, and a moment later heard his low insistent cry:

“The ring! The ring!”

In spite of her efforts to remain calm, she found her heart beating violently and it was with the utmost difficulty that she resisted a desire to break into a run.

She did resist. She slowed down and allowed the man to come close to her; then, turning, suddenly, she exclaimed:

“What do you want?”

“The ring,” he repeated. “The ring.”

“Why do you want the ring?”

The man’s eyes seemed about to burst from their sockets as he made a wild gesture which to all appearance was meant to

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convey the impression that he was unable to express the reason in English.

For a moment he stood staring fixedly at her. Then, as a happy thought appeared to strike him, he dug down deep in his loose trousers to produce a fat roll of bills.

“You wanta. You hava. The ring. The ring!”

“No,” said Florence. “No! You may as well go away!”

He did not go away. Nor, in the end, did he leave that part of the city as quickly as he may have wished. Tim O’Mally put in his appearance. After fifteen minutes spent in a vain effort to extract from the Chinaman any information regarding Betty, he at last hurried him away to the police station.

At the station, even the interpreter who was called in, secured no information of value from the mysterious Oriental. He repeated over and over that the big American girl had a ring which was of great importance to him. He had lost it. She had found it. It was of little value to her. He had offered her a great price for it. She would not sell. Why?

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When, in the end, he was told that the “big American girl” was not now in possession of the ring, that another girl had it, and that both the girl and the ring had disappeared in the dead of night, he appeared at first greatly surprised, then completely crushed. This last emotion was replaced by an overpowering desire to be away.

“Might as well let him go,” said Tim. “He doesn’t know anything. If he had the ring he wouldn’t be here. That’s sure. Been double-crossed, like as not.” At that they allowed him to leave the station.

Had it occurred to Tim to follow the Chinaman he might have learned something of great interest and importance. It did not occur to him, so the Chinaman went unobserved on his way.

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CHAPTER XX

A STOW-AWAY

The *Freda*, the freighter that passed from the river when Betty took her unusual ride on the tilting bridge, was a long, low vessel with a small cabin forward and another aft. She was as unromantic a craft as one might come upon in a year's cruise. She carried no masts and no sails. No gale ever sang through her rigging. No watch ever shouted from her crow's nest. She had neither rigging nor crow's nest. At a distance she seemed a floating log with a dry goods box nailed on either end. The *Freda* was not a ship to dream of, yet aboard her that night as she headed northward over the blue-black waters there rode one of the most picturesque characters that has sailed the seven seas—Aunt Bobbie McPherson.

Aunt Bobbie had gone to sea as a cook on a wretched little fishing schooner when she was sixteen. She was sixty-three now, and still she sailed on. True, now she rode a great inland sea of fresh water, but that was all the same to her. The seamen who sailed on her craft were fortunate, for she mothered them.

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It was two by the great brass clock in the forward cabin when the night watch knocked loudly at Aunt Bobbie's door.

"Beggin' yer pardon, mam, but 'ere's somethin' you know more about nor I do."

"Bless me, Tompkins!" she exclaimed. "It's a slip of a girl. Where did she come from? Stow-away? How sort of unnatural."

"It's not for me to say, mam, but it don't seem just like she stowed away. It was this way. I was passin' aft when I 'eard a sort of groan, and I looked quick like I'd 'eard a bloomin' ghost. And sure enough, on that great 'eap of canvas what used to cover deck cargo I saw a black ghost, which was this."

He indicated the unconscious girl in his arms.

"A groan, did you say?"

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Aunt Bobbie bent low to peer into the girl's face.

"Is she hurt?"

"Hurt, er shammin', er drugged, er somethin'. She ain't moved nor spoke."

"Bring her in, Tompkins. There! Lay her in my berth. There now. Bring me a big bucket of fresh water."

Aunt Bobbie marveled at the strange ways of Providence as she undressed the girl who had been blown or thrown her way. She marveled still more when, on removing the girl's clothing, she found a package containing thirteen used wedding rings.

"You poor dear!" she sighed. "Thirteen! And you so young! And me never married at all.

"But then," she whispered after noting the size of the rings and the slender fingers of the girl, "she can't have worn them. Not hardly any of them."

With crude skill that had come from practice after many a bloody battle of her boys on land and sea, Aunt Bobbie felt over Betty's slight form from head to toe.

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"Not a bone broke," she sighed.

She sniffed at the girl's breath. "Sweet as violets. No drugs and no rum, so you'll be coming round shortly."

Tompkins put the bucket of water on the deck outside the cabin. A half hour later Betty sat up in Aunt Bobbie's berth and stared about her.

"That's fine, Miss. You'll be comin' round now, Miss. Don't get yourself all excited."

"Wha—where am I?"

"You're aboard the good old freighter *Freda*. Goin' north."

"On a ship?"

"A freighter."

"A big steamer?"

"A fair sized vessel as such go."

Betty closed her eyes and tried to think. As she did so it all came back, her visit to the House on the Roof, the strange dining hall of the marionettes, the return to the river, the rising bridge, then a sickening dizzy sensation and a terrible, breath-taking plunge.

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"Did I fall in the river?" she asked. "And did they pull me out?"

"You landed on the deck."

"Then why wasn't I smashed to bits?"

"God's Providence, child. He wouldn't let you get smashed. He looks after the sparrows, and the seagulls and all the other birds, and little girls like you. He dropped you on a six-foot

thick bale of canvas. It broke your fall.”

“God’s Providence,” whispered Betty. After that, for a long time there was silence in the cabin.

“When—when can I go home?” asked Betty at last.

“The *Freda*’s a slow boat. We’re headed due north and don’t touch land for five days.”

“Five days!” Betty closed her eyes and tried to think. She ended by trying to feel sorry the thing happened. In this she utterly failed. She was glad—couldn’t help being. She had always wanted to take a long trip on a big ship. And now she was assured that for at least five days she should see nothing of land, that only the ship’s deck and blue water should greet her gaze. What could be more perfect?

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“But the rings!” she thought suddenly. Then in a sort of panic she began to wonder where they were.

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CHAPTER XXI

AGAIN THE HOUSE ON THE ROOF

To Betty, the five days that followed were days of unalloyed bliss. True, she thought often of Florence, of Mrs. Brookins, and more than all others of her father. They would worry about her. She knew that well enough. But what was there to be done about it? The *Freda* carried no wireless equipment, and they would not touch land until they rounded Point Bokar.

“We’ll drop you at the Point,” the Captain promised. “There is a summer colony there. Some of them are rich, I guess. Anyway, they’ve got some mighty fine launches. They’ll take you over to Bressel where there’s a store and a telegraph station. I’d run you in there, but the water’s too shallow for a craft like the *Freda*.”

There was nothing to do but wait. And meantime there was the ship and the water. The quiet and order on board was like a dream to Betty. In the city, the only world she had really known, was noise and confusion. The newspaper office was worst of all. One moment there was calm; the next a great story burst like a bomb on the roof, and the wildest times were had by all. On board ship men washed down the deck, coiled rope, polished brass and went about their work with a quiet precision that to Betty seemed marvelous.

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Even when a storm came whirling down upon them, when winds sang round the cabins, spray wet her cheeks and waves came swirling over the deck, she saw the men going about their tasks as calmly as before.

The water charmed her most of all. Never did she tire of watching it. Not two hours of the day did it seem the same. Now it was a great gray plate of steel, now a glistening pane of glass and now, as the sun sank into its depths, it became a sheet of bronze, beaten and quivering from the eternal forge. Night came, and with it a sea as dark and blue as ancient jade.

So the days passed. Only now and again did the girl pause to ask herself the question, “Where are the rings?” Perhaps down deep in her heart there was a hope that they had somehow gotten themselves lost forever.

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* * * * *

Those five days remain in Florence’s memory as a bad dream. Driven almost frantic by the feeling that she was responsible for any ill fate that might have befallen Betty, she spent every available hour in vain search.

A visit to Betty's father brought her little comfort. The terrible calm of the man frightened her. Betty was all he had in the world. If Betty were gone for good! She shuddered and tried not to think of it.

In her search she put herself in peril many times. Having taken Tim O'Mally on wild fruitless trips until she was ashamed to call upon him again, she went alone at night into streets inhabited by Chinamen. She poked about in dark alleys, peering into strange windows and looking upon strange faces and stranger doings. Then, by way of contrast, she visited the House on the Roof. But the beautiful lady was not there. She had gone to her summer home. That place, she found, was too far away to be visited.

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"Besides," she told herself, "it's a long chance. She probably told all she knows. Yet who can know more?" Ah yes, there was the question.

In the meantime, Betty's disappearance had become the daily mystery of the Press. Then, one bright day a bomb burst, the mystery was suddenly solved; that is, the mystery of Betty's disappearance. The mystery of the thirteen rings, the pop-eyed Chinaman, of the beautiful lady, of the man in the black coat, and the long distance call remained as mysterious as ever.

It was a bright morning. The sun shining full upon Betty's face awoke her. She sat up with a start. Where was she? Still aboard the *Freda*? She missed the gentle roll. Besides, this was a bed, not a berth!

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Oh yes, now she remembered. She had been put on land by a seaman in a dory at midnight. Some sort of a houseman, or boatman, had led her from a small wharf to a large cottage hid among dark pines.

A single light had shone from a window. A voice had sounded out in the dark, demanding:

"Who have you there, James?"

"It's some girl a steamer dropped off. She's to stay till morning. Shall I take her to the lodge?" This was what the keeper had said.

A light had flashed full into her face. A woman had uttered a low exclamation. Then the same person had said:

"No, James, bring her up. Tell Hilda to put her in the guest chamber."

She, Betty, had gone to the porch in the dark. There, still in the dark, she had been led to a chamber. There had been a candle in the chamber, but she had been too sleepy to look about. She had disrobed in a minute's time. The next moment, with the

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faint odor of pines in her nostrils, she had fallen asleep.

“Now, here I am. And where am I?” she whispered as her gaze swept the room.

Instantly the expression on her face changed. Surprise, mystification, fear, were all swiftly registered there.

“It can’t be—and yet it is!” Her tone told volumes. “It can’t be the room!”

She sat down suddenly. The chair she sat in was a prayer chair from Rome. She bounded out of it as if it were red hot. She whirled about the room, to at last come to rest again.

“Now,” she said, “I am exactly where I was. It is the same room. The House on the Roof. There are the paneled walls. It’s the same fireplace. There is the bronze monkey, there the twisted candle stick, and there the tiny chest of drawers. It can be no other room. I have been ill, out of my head. They brought me here. And yet, why here?”

As if to verify all these conclusions, she sprang to the window and threw up the shade. A mystifying vision met her eye. Sunrise over gold and blue water, framed in the dark green of hemlock, spruce and fir, lay before her.

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“It’s all wrong. The world is upside down. The House on the Roof has blown out to sea.” She dropped in a chair to bury her face in her hands.

To make matters worse, a pleasing voice said, “Are you ready for breakfast, dear?”

She did not need to look up. She knew before she opened her eyes that it was the beautiful young lady of the House on the Roof who spoke.

“In—in a moment.” She spoke quite mechanically.

“Very well, my dear.” The lady was gone.

A hasty toilet, then a scurrying into her clothes, and Betty, still wild-eyed and mystified, put her hand to the knob that was to open the way to another world.

Before she turned the knob she made an involuntary gesture that brought her hand to her heart.

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“The rings!” she whispered. “They’re not there, have not been there for nearly a week. I wonder what could have become of them? I should have asked Aunt Bobbie. But I didn’t dare. She didn’t find them and keep them. She’s not that kind. Perhaps they dropped from my waist when I fell. Perhaps Aunt Bobbie found them and they were stolen from her. Anyway, they are gone.

“And now good Mother of us all,” her thought was a prayer,
“lead me on to the unknown and please, good Mother, help me
not to make a fool of myself.”

After that she opened the door and stepped out with a very
natural grace into a porch dining room, the like of which she
had never before seen.

CHAPTER XXII

IS BETTY A PRISONER?

Dressed in a negligee of silk as blue as the bay before her, the lady from the House on the Roof sat at a rustic table. Resting on dreamy bits of Madeira, translucent cups of real china awaited the coffee which was to come steaming and bubbling from a silver percolater.

“Do you take sugar in your coffee?” Betty was asked.

“Two lumps, please,” said Betty.

“I hope you are to enjoy your stay with us.” The tone of the lady from the House on the Roof was quiet, her words a bombshell.

“Why, I——” Betty paused for lack of words. Her stay? There was to be no stay. She was to be taken to the village, she had hoped at once. What was this? A plot? Was she a prisoner after all? The color left her face.

“The whole thing *is* a plot,” she told herself. “I escaped one prison only to be brought to another. And all on account of those rings.”

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Rings? She had no rings.

“Why, I haven’t——” She spoke again, then once more paused. How could anyone foresee that she would be standing on a bridge dreaming at midnight, would be lifted high in air as the bridge lifted, and then, during a spell of dizziness, fall straight down upon a heap of canvas?

“I am not staying,” she said after an invigorating draft of coffee. “I couldn’t. There’s my father. Don’t you see? He—he must think I’m dead. Poor father.” Tears sprang to her eyes.

“He did think you were dead. We all did. I was more disturbed than you could think.” The lady’s tone was almost solemn. “We all were. But your father knows you are safe.”

“He knows?”

“I sent James with a message to be sent to him last night. One went to Mrs. Brookins and one to your little reporter, Terry. He will have a scoop. It has been a great story: that mystery of the Chinaman, the rings and your disappearance. And now you have reappeared in such a romantic fashion. Little girl, I envy you. You have known real adventure.”

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Betty sat and stared at her mystifying hostess. She knew all

about her, about Betty Bronson, a plain little girl whose home had always been beside the grim old river.

“And she is rich and beautiful.” The thing set her cheeks going hot and cold.

“It is very beautiful here,” her hostess said quietly. “Your father told me you loved the river, and——”

“I do! I do!” Betty’s tone was tense with emotion.

“Then, little girl, you must learn to love this beautiful bay before you go home. It is clean and clear and blue as the sea. You may stand to your neck in it and still see your pink toes. You can see the fishes as they nibble your bait. You may drink a whole bucket full. It is pure and clear as the waters of Eden.

“We have a launch which will take you anywhere. There are beautiful clinker built row boats. They are made of seasoned cedar, light and strong. You may row alone to quiet bays where the wild deer will peer at you from the bush, where the wild duck with her brood of fluffy balls will go skimming away and only the lovely notes of the song sparrow disturb the hushed silence of it all. Surely here, for a few days at least, you can find happiness.”

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Betty listened to these strangely musical words as one in a dream. She had never lived in such a world, had not so much as dreamed that there was one. Yet here it was, hers for the taking.

“And if I am to be free to roam the bays in a row boat, then I am not a prisoner,” she thought. “I wonder why she wants me? It’s the rings! And I haven’t them. I should tell her.”

She opened her lips to speak, then closed them again. “Time enough. Tomorrow will do. I may find them. They may be returned to me. Who can tell?”

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To her hostess she said, “If it does not seem too selfish a wish, I’d like to make a long trip in one of the row boats. I want, want very much indeed, to see the young wild ducks and to hear the song sparrows on a quiet shore.”

“Very well.” Her hostess smiled. “The world is yours. You have Aladdin’s lamp in your hand. Rub it and wish as often as you please.”

Betty’s cruise in the clinker built row boat was more than a success. It was a revelation. How light the little craft was! How quickly it responded to her slightest touch! How different from the heavy, flat bottomed boat by the river bridge!

Never had she seen water so clear and blue, nor heard notes so sweet as the wild birds’ song. She did not catch sight of a wild deer, but she did find their dainty footprints on a lonely, sandy

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beach. There in a shadowy cove, with no eyes but the songbirds' and the pine squirrels to see, she dived from a rock to swim in the sweetest waters man ever knew.

"Oh!" she exclaimed a half hour later as she basked on the sand in the sun, "I don't want to go away. Not ever!"

And yet, as she paddled slowly back to the magnificent summer home among the pines, while "Some artist saint spilled his paint adown the western skies," a feeling of unutterable loneliness crept over her. A deep cry was in her heart. Was it that she wanted to go back to the city and its river, back to all their din and dirt? Or was it that she felt sorry for the river and the city she loved? Who could tell?

Her prow had scarcely bumped the dock before she was handed two telegrams.

"First news from home," she thought as with trembling fingers she tore open an envelope.

"Send the 13th ring at once." She read it, then stared.

It was signed "Florence Huyler." That was all there was to it.

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"The 13th ring!" Betty whispered, then glanced about her to see if anyone were near enough to hear. "What can have happened? Why all the hurry?"

"Oh well," she sighed, "the thirteenth ring is gone. So are all the others. Somehow I must let her know."

The second telegram was from her young reporter friend, Terry Brown.

"I'm coming for the rest of the story. Arrive tomorrow. Thanks for scoop." She read it over twice, then smiled.

There was a little thrill in this. Now, for a short time at least, she would have some one to help her enjoy the wild woods and the water. Perhaps he could interpret for her some of the strange feelings that came sweeping over her. Perhaps, too, he could help her solve the mystery of the missing rings.

"He'll tell me all that has happened at home," she thought with a little thrill of joy. "Perhaps, too, he can tell me why Florence wants the 13th ring."

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That evening, presuming upon her hostess' promise, she asked to be taken to the village in the launch. At the village telegraph station she sent the following wire to Florence:

"Rings gone. Will wire any further discoveries."

She returned through the cool night, to sit for an hour beside a fire of driftwood, then to retire for a night of dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER XXIII

TERRY ON THE TRAIL

Terry Brown came over from Bressel next morning. He had come by night train. A hired motor launch brought him to the Point. He carried only a small bag and a bundle of fishing tackle.

“Must be bass up here,” he said to Betty as he caught her eyeing the tackle. “Person can do a lot of thinking, clear thinking, too, while he’s waiting for a strike.”

Miss Dutton, for that turned out to be the name of the beautiful lady, welcomed him with both hands outstretched.

“I’m so glad you’ve come!” she cried. “Now I know I can keep Betty here. I was afraid she would be lonely. And you can stay, I hope, a long time?”

“That depends,” said Terry. A smile playing about his lips suggested mystery. “I hope,” he added as his eyes took in the gleaming bay and the shady shores beyond, “that it may be for a few days at least.”

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“You’ll stay with us here,” said Miss Dutton as she motioned him to a place beside her and ordered morning coffee for all.

“Oh no, I can’t do that,” said Terry quickly.

“Can’t? Why not?” Miss Dutton’s eyebrows went up in surprise.

“Well you see,” Terry wrinkled his brow in a search for words to express his thoughts, “I—I guess I’m something of a John the Baptist; locust and wild honey in the wilderness, if you know what I mean.”

“I don’t know much about locusts, but the wild honey sounds delicious.” Miss Dutton seemed amused.

“I’ll put it this way,” said Terry. “I’m not rich; in fact I guess you’d call me poor. Anyway, I can’t afford many luxuries, not such as you have here.” His eyes took in the faultless furniture, the silver, the plush and silk in the rooms beyond. “If I were to stay here for a week or so I would get to like it. Then when I went back to my work and my room on Thirteenth Street I’d be unhappy. Anyway I think I might.”

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“Besides,” he fairly exploded, “what’s the good of luxury in a wilderness? What’s that about a lodge in some vast wilderness?”

“I don’t know what it is.” The rich young lady was smiling again. “I’m afraid I’m not up on poetry. But I know just the place you’d like. It’s on our island here, ’way back in a deep cove at the base of Witch Rock Point.”

“Witch Rock Point!” exclaimed Betty. “What a grand name!”

“It’s wild and rocky over there,” Miss Dutton went on.

“There’s a log cabin, built years ago by some trappers. We’ve kept it in repair and roughly furnished. There are chairs in it, hard bottomed chairs.” Her eyes twinkled. “And there is a table and a stove. There is a good axe or two, and I think some sort of a gun. You must gather driftwood and cut it with your own hand. You may catch fish and shoot game for your larder. We will send you over a sack of flour and a side of bacon. Oh yes, Mr. Hermit, you shall fare roughly enough, I can tell you!” She threw back her head and laughed.

“That suits me exactly,” said Terry. “It’s the sort of thing I’ve dreamed of for years.”

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“There’s a fishing pool within a stone’s throw of the cabin,” said the hostess. “Do you see the rock over there to the left where the gulls are soaring? That’s the Witch Rock. The Point is back from it, and you fish beneath a cliff thirty feet high where in the evening the water is green as old jade and shadows appear to leap up at you from the depths.

“Tell me,” she laughed again, “do hermits enjoy the luxury of a row boat, or shall I have Betty paddle you out and leave you there?”

“I think,” said Terry, “that a combination of the two might be fine. I’d like, if you please, to have Betty pilot me out. We can take my row boat in tow. After that she can leave me to my dreams and my fishing.”

“And,” he might have added, “my investigations.” He had been sent north by the editor and owner of his paper to discover the whereabouts of the missing rings, and had been told not to return until he had accomplished his mission.

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It was because of this commission that, before going to his lone cabin, he sought a private interview with the rich young lady.

For some unknown reason Miss Dutton chose as a place for the interview the room Betty had slept in that first night, the one of the twisted candle stick, the bronze monkey and the prayer chair from Rome.

Terry, too, had visited the House on the Roof. His eyes opened wide as he entered this room; but he said not a word.

“The conference,” he said to Betty an hour later as he rowed slowly toward Witch Rock Point, “was a complete failure. If she knows anything regarding the thirteen rings that would help

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me, she hasn't told me. She told me how you were left here and commented on the strange circumstances that brought you to her a second time, so far away from the place of your first meeting. She told me she was superstitious, and that she believed you would bring her good luck. Though what sort of luck she needs is beyond me. She has everything."

"Now that our talk is all over," he resumed after a moment when only the dip-dip of oars disturbed the silence, "I have a feeling that she knows something important that she dares not or at least does not wish to tell. Until she does tell I am afraid it is going to be hard sledding for me.

"Much depends upon the successful ending of this search." He leaned forward eagerly. "The Great High Chief of our paper has become greatly interested in the affair of the thirteen used wedding rings. He called me to his office before he sent me here. It's the first time I'd ever talked to him. I was scared stiff. But he's a prince of a man. This story may mean much to me, Betty!" His tone was tense. "If there is anything you know about those rings that you haven't told me, please tell me now."

"I don't know a thing," said Betty earnestly. "All I know is that when I stood on the bridge they were with me. When I came to myself on the *Freda* and when I dressed, they were gone."

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"That woman must have taken them," said Terry.

"Aunt Bobbie? You don't know her, Terry. She's wonderful. She wouldn't steal a thing. She's religious, and moral. You should hear her talk. One day I said to her, 'Aunt Bobbie, don't you get tired of coming and going on ships all the time?' 'Oh no, child.' You should have seen her Heavenly smile as she said it. 'It's good to be moving. The water's never the same. You come to love your ship and your sailor boys. And besides, Betty, child,' she seemed very serious then, 'besides, we're all going on a long, long voyage sometime and we're not coming back, not to the water and the ship and the sailor boys. Somehow I think it'll make it easier when that time comes, if you've always been goin' somewhere anyway, you'll just sort of fill up the bunkers and the bread box, you might say, and whisper as your spirit passes to the great beyond, 'It's just another little journey. And mayhap there's another ship and more sailor boys out there in the great beyond.'"

"Terry"—the girl's voice was husky as her hand touched his arm, "you wouldn't expect a woman like that to keep what didn't belong to her, would you?"

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"No," said Terry solemnly.

"And you wouldn't even ask her about it, would you?"

"I'm afraid I wouldn't."

“I didn’t, Terry. And I—I’m sort of glad.”

After that for a long time the blue water rippled by them, the oars dipped, the deep shadows beckoned, and save for these and the distant plaint of a seagull, there was silence.

CHAPTER XXIV

NIGHT WORK

As she sat there watching the placid waters of the bay go gliding by, a curious thing happened to Betty. She saw reflected in those waters the strange and horrible faces she had seen in the hold of the ancient ship she had visited in the night.

With a little cry she started forward, then stood straight up in the boat. For a moment her slight form wavered there, then of a sudden she crumpled up and went bouncing back in her place.

“Wha—what is it?” Terry dropped his oars to stare at her.

She had it on her lips to tell him of that strange night’s adventure. In the end she thought better of it. “What’s the use?” she asked herself. “Who would believe it?”

“Only a dream; a day dream.” She tried hard to make her voice seem light and gay.

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“Must have been a bad dream,” said Terry.

“It was.”

There for a time the affair ended.

“What has Florence learned about the thirteenth ring?” Betty asked suddenly. “I had a hurry up call from her, saying to send it at once.”

“I saw your answer. That’s why I came. It’s a curious thing.” Terry dropped his oars in the boat. The boat drifted idly. He leaned forward impressively. His pale blue eyes gleamed from behind his thick glasses. “I think there’s more to that thirteenth ring affair than we can guess. Something that has to do with great wealth, or intrigue or something deep in the Tong wars. You remember the man in a black coat who came to you?”

Betty nodded.

“Well, he found Florence. He gave her a long song and dance about his years in China as a missionary. She thought he was a fake, just as you did.

“But,” he paused to tap his knee with his forefinger, “the curious part is, he isn’t a fake. He has been a missionary. Everything he has said is true; that is, as far as we could follow it out, which was quite a distance.”

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“How—how could he prove it?”

“Brought around one of the big men of a large denomination, a Bishop or something—anyway, the sort of man whose word is never questioned, nationally known and all that. This big man vouched for everything your little man in black said; except of course the part his Chinese friend had told him, the part about the ring figuring so largely in the settling of a rich estate. No one could vouch for that. It remains to be proven.”

“That means that the Chinese Tongs have nothing to do with it, that the little preacher man should have been given the ring? I’m sorry——” Betty paused.

“You needn’t be, not just yet.” Terry’s tone was deeply mysterious. “Your little preacher man, as you call him, is undoubtedly honest and sincere. That does not prove that he is not a dupe, that these Chinamen are not using him as a tool to work some evil end. The ways of an Oriental are past finding out.”

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“I hadn’t thought of that.” Betty seemed quite relieved.

“There’s one thing I’ll be in favor of, if the rings are found,” said Terry, resuming his task at the oars. “I’m in favor of giving the preacher man the ring, and then accompanying him on his mysterious journey into Chinatown. One might be doing him a real service, might save his life. Who knows? Anyway, that way the truth would be bound to come out. And the truth is what we are after.”

“The truth,” said Betty, thoughtfully, “is what every thoughtful person is after. And what a tangle of lies one always finds woven about it.

“See!” she exclaimed suddenly. “There is your cabin. Isn’t it rustic. And look! What a wonderful little natural harbor!”

The spot where the cabin stood was a dream of loveliness. A narrow circle of natural harbor was framed in by a black fringe of evergreens. A narrow, winding path led back a hundred feet or more to the cabin. Extending out from this point into the bay was a rocky line of land. Not five rods wide at any point, and fully a quarter of a mile long, it was punctuated at the end by a dot of rock. This rock, which towered some thirty feet above the water, was known as the Witch Rock. In time of storm, when waves came racing in from two hundred miles of unbroken water, the seagulls were obliged to sit tight upon their nests at the crest to protect their eggs from the cold spray.

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“Now,” said Terry in a grand and dramatic tone, as the last bit of his cargo was landed, “leave me alone with my thoughts and my wilderness. Return after three days. Mayhap by that time I will have a yarn to spin.”

“Yes,” laughed Betty, “but be sure and keep your feet dry, and don’t run out of matches.”

She shoved her boat off from shore, then rowed slowly home. As she rowed her mind was busy with many things. Her father, her home, the river, her river, the thirteen rings, the Chinaman and his lawyer—all these came in for their share of thought. So, too, did Terry and Florence, the man in the long black coat, the phantom prison ship, and the young lady from the House on the Roof. The room she had slept in that first night puzzled her not a little. How did it chance to be decorated and furnished in the same manner as that other room so far away?

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Most of all she wondered about Aunt Bobbie and the thirteen rings. “How could I have lost them?” she asked herself. “Perhaps some one stole them from Aunt Bobbie, and she did not feel equal to telling me of it. Perhaps, too, she hopes to get them back. Perhaps she will.” There was a ray of hope in this.

* * * * *

At nine o'clock of his third evening at the cabin, Terry pushed out from his little harbor to row away toward the spot where the lights of the rich summer home gleamed. His rowing was noiseless. He had padded his oarlocks, and he landed in a dark cove some distance from the Dutton home. After drawing his boat up over the sand and into the bush, he skirted the shore for a time, then cut away across a point. He was nearing the big house.

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“I hate to go spying round,” he told himself. “But somehow I have a feeling that the answer lies here.”

Breaking through the brush, he came to an open space that led to a pile of massive boulders. Atop these boulders and hid in the shadows, he commanded a fair view of the house, some forty feet away.

By this time a single light glowed from an open window. The shade was up. The room was that one in which Terry had held his conference, the one in which Betty had once slept.

Betty was not there. Miss Dutton, looking very young and very beautiful in a gown of dark green silk, sat in the prayer chair from Rome. And one might have said from her attitude that she truly prayed.

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Terry looked away.

When, five minutes later, he looked again, he saw her standing before the miniature chest of drawers. One drawer was out. She had taken something from it.

“A ring!” Terry thought to himself with something of a shock. “She’s trying it on the third finger of her left hand. It fits. She takes it off. She looks at it. One would say she was laughing. No, crying. I can’t be sure.”

As he sat there staring, she slipped the ring on and off her

finger a dozen or more times. Then, with a movement that indicated extreme reluctance, she placed it in the tiny drawer and pushed the drawer into its place. After that she returned to the prayer chair from Rome, and appeared to resume her supplications.

“Now what does all that mean?” Terry asked himself. “Can it be?”

A thought struck him all of a heap. It came with the force of a blow. He bent low under it, like a tree before a storm.

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For a long time he sat there motionless. At last he stirred and, turning his gaze toward the house, found it quite dark. He was seized by an all but irresistible desire to creep up to the mystery room of that summer home and to attempt an entrance to it through the window.

“Too risky,” he told himself at last. “These rich folks are queer. Might be all sorts of burglar alarms and the like about. All the same, I would give a heap for a look into that little chest of drawers.”

Turning, he retraced his steps, to push his boat off the sand and to paddle to his cabin over dark and silent waters.

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CHAPTER XXV

A WILD BEAR

“Well, what have you found out?” Betty’s tone was one of tense eagerness. She had spent three restless days as far as possible from Terry’s cabin. She had conducted some quiet investigations of her own. The only fact of importance she had discovered was that within the next thirty-six hours the *Freda* would pass the Point, southward bound.

In a desperate hope of retrieving the thirteen rings, she had resolved to telegraph the Captain, asking him to pick her up for the city bound trip. This would give her an opportunity to conduct an investigation on board. This was the last thing she wished to do. It was almost certain to bring distress to Aunt Bobbie. And she loved Aunt Bobbie dearly. So it was with unusual eagerness that she asked Terry the question as she sprang from her row boat after the prescribed three days’ absence.

“Sssh! Not a word!” Terry whispered, beckoning her into the cabin. “I was just going out.”

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He led her into the cabin. “Look!” He held out a can of wriggling noses and legs for her inspection.

“Oo-o!” she exclaimed.

“Frogs.” His tone was one of intense enthusiasm. “Caught ’em back of the Island. Little frogs. Best bait in the world for bass, sometimes.

“Look!” He spread his arms wide to take in the whole interior of the cabin. “Sort of comfortable and thrifty, don’t you think?”

It did look that way. At the back of the cabin an even tier of stovewood, all sawed and split, gave off a pleasant odor of spruce and balsam. On the wall hung a brace of partridges. Suspended from the side of the fireplace was a whole school of smoked fish.

“Nothing better than smoked perch,” said Terry proudly. “Done ’em brown to a turn in an old barrel.

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“Do you know,” he said with a sudden burst of enthusiasm, “I like this sort of thing. Like to stay here always. Live off the land.

“That’s the way we lived in the Cumberland Mountains when I was a boy. Pigs up the creek fattened on chestnuts. Sheep in the hills. Plenty of wool for clothes and blankets. Wild game aplenty, corn and pumpkins, potatoes, beans and such like in

the patch above the cabin. All we needed right there. No income; didn't need any. Nothing to worry about. See how it was? Look how we scramble in the big cities. Look how we worry. Nothing like that up here.

"But wait! Sh—come on." Grabbing a fishing rod and his can of young frogs, he led the way to the boat. There, with the gliding motion of one stealing upon an enemy at night, he sent his boat shooting out of the harbor and down along a rocky shore.

"Here!" he whispered at last. "It was right here I saw them last evening. Drop your anchor right there. No splash. There! That's good."

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"Wha—what is it?" Betty asked breathlessly, peering the while into the deep clear water.

"Bass!" Terry whispered back. "Three of 'em. Big fellows. Long as your arm, forearm anyway. Marched out from under the rocks and passed my bait as if they were inspectors. Had minnows then. May like frogs better."

Betty stared at him for a moment as if she thought him out of his mind.

"Bass! I thought you had something important to tell me. Bass!" She began to laugh, a low, gurgling, side shaking laugh.

"Don't laugh! Name of mud!" Terry gripped her arm. "Shakes the boat. Can't you see? It——"

"There!" He dropped her arm to snatch at his reel. "There! He took it. See the line go!"

Fascinated, the girl watched the reel spin round, then saw it suddenly stop.

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"Now! One! Two! Three! Four! Five! Pull!" Terry's arm sprang back like an iron spring. The recoil came at once. The reel sang again. This time Terry checked it. The fish was fairly hooked.

The battle that followed was past anything Betty had ever witnessed. She found herself splattered with water, whipped by a singing line, trampled upon by a wild-eyed boy. She saw the fish circle the boat, leap clear of the water, dive head foremost for the bottom. Then in a moment of sudden triumph, she saw Terry bend backward and, having lifted the bass clear of the water, send him with a mighty thwack onto the shore.

The sudden shock was too much for the boat. All but capsized, it set Terry doing a backward dive into the blue depths.

Betty had barely righted the boat and begun a furious baling, when she heard an angry cry from shore.

Scarcely could she believe what she saw. In dripping clothes, armed only with a rock, Terry was giving pursuit to a half-grown black bear. The black bear, who was apparently a good sprinter, disappeared at once. Not, however, until Betty had seen quite clearly that which amused her much. In his mouth he carried Terry's big black bass.

"Come alongside!" Terry shouted, turning and stumbling over the rocks. "Blast that cub! The biggest bass I ever caught!"

"Is he a tame bear?" asked Betty as Terry tumbled into the boat.

"Wild. Wild as they make 'em. Who cares? I'll get him!"

"How?"

"Got a gun at the cabin; Point's only five rods wide. He went out there. I'll get him."

"And I," said Betty quite soberly, "shall go along to see that you don't get killed."

CHAPTER XXVI

A RIDE FOR LIFE OR DEATH

With the greatest reluctance Betty consented to follow a narrow path down one side of the point in search of the bear, while Terry with the gun beat along the other.

In places there were thickets of underbrush so dense that she was obliged to bend low to get through. Each time her heart was in her mouth, for she expected to find herself facing the piercing eyes and grinning mouth of the bear.

"I'm glad he got the fish and that it was a big one," she told herself whimsically. "He won't be so ready to eat me when he sees me. At least he has had the first course of his dinner."

So, stumbling over dead branches and vines, thrusting brambles aside, climbing boulders here, descending a ridge there, she made her way tremblingly forward until, with a suddenness that was startling, she came upon the tip of the point, and upon Terry.

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"Well," she exclaimed breathlessly, "where's the bear?"

"He must have swum over to the Witch Rock," said Terry disconsolately. "Let him go. He's eaten the bass by this time. And to think—it was the biggest bass I ever hooked!"

"Serves you right for allowing me to think that you had discovered something truly important when all you knew was the hiding place of some black bass," said Betty.

"But black bass are important." There was a curious smile on Terry's face.

"Fishing," he went on, "is a disease, just as bridge is for some women folks and poker is for men. You get into it and it gets to seem the most important affair in the world."

"But truly," he said a moment later, "I haven't had much luck in running things down. Came across a seaman over at the Cove who wanted to fight me when I suggested that your Aunt Bobbie aboard the *Freda* could be other than absolute perfection. She couldn't lie, couldn't steal, couldn't cheat. Not her. Seems he's sailed with her and she nursed him through a fever.

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"Oh yes," he added, "I saw a beautiful young lady making a fuss over a ring. But what's that? Most of them do that sooner or later. But say!" He turned on the girl suddenly. "Do you know what your hostess keeps in that miniature chest of drawers?"

“Of course I don’t. I was in that room only once, the night I slept there.”

“Then you can’t help me.”

For a time there was silence as they made their way back over the irregular trail that led to the cabin.

“The *Freda* goes down tomorrow night,” said Betty.

“To the city?”

“I think I’ll go back on her if the Captain will allow it.”

“To sort of look about a bit?”

“Yes.”

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“Not a bad idea. I’ll miss you, though.”

“You—you mean to stay?”

“Nothing else to do. That’s standing orders; that is, unless something really turns up.

“Time’s short,” said Terry as they stood looking at the row boats. “Let’s make the most of it. Do you see that?” He pointed away to the distant horizon where, out from the bay, water stretched as far as eye could see.

Betty nodded.

“I’ve been looking at that for three days. I want to go out there, to go out and out and out. Ever feel that way?”

Betty nodded again.

“Ever row double?”

“A little.”

“Want to try it? Two sets of oarlocks in your boat. It’s great! Nearest thing to flying. Sort of a rhythmic movement to it if you catch it right.”

Caught in the spell of the thing, Betty took her place at the oars. Terry climbed in behind her. They headed round and pointed their prow toward broad, free, open water.

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Betty thrilled as the light boat bounded forward. She caught the swing of the thing and, listening to inaudible chanties, swung to the time of unwritten music, rowed on and on endlessly, without fatigue, rowed on and on and on until the Witch Rock was a mere speck on the horizon and every other point of land was lost to view.

It was as if their two spirits were blended into one, as if one

will controlled their muscles, the very boat and oars were a part of them, too. It was grand, glorious. Nothing like it had ever come into the girl's life before.

Then of a sudden the spell was broken. A low rumble like the roll of distant cannon shook the air. There were no cannons. No fort was near. One glance toward the west was enough. Like a great curtain, dark thunder clouds were rising out of the water.

There are no storms on the ocean more terrible than the gales that at times come roaring in from the western horizon of the Great Lakes. Terry knew this. Betty knew, too. Well enough they realized their peril, yet neither spoke as the boat, gliding about in a narrow circle headed straight for the speck that was Witch Rock.

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An hour before they maintained that even rhythmic swing for the pure joy of it. Now their lives depended upon it. A sudden break of over-strained nerves, a clash of oars, a whirling boat, this might spell their doom.

From moment to moment the sea changed. It became first a field of gray slate, then a plate of blue black steel. Their oars flashed in perfect harmony. City bred though Betty was, she was fit. At least her nerves, her muscles, her brain had been trained to do her bidding. They did it beautifully now. Terry was like her.

It was one of those stupendous moments that come so seldom in our lives, but which, experienced and endured, leave us stronger and braver, better able to face life as we find it, and to conquer.

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Like steel workers' torches, lightning played upon the blue black surface before them. Still the rumble of thunder came from afar, but the storm came on.

An anxious glance backward left Betty all but appalled. The Witch Rock was still far away. Strangely enough, at that moment she thought of the young bear on the lonely rock, and she felt sorry for him.

Clouds closing in upon them blotted out the sea. Now the horizon was a mile away, now a half, now a quarter, and now, now the wall of black seemed all but upon them.

"Look!" cried Betty. "Only look!"

Terry did look, and his face grew gray. Before them, not two hundred yards away, the water had suddenly turned a glaring white.

"Wind!" His voice was husky with emotion. "It's whipping the water into white foam. Betty, the boat will fill. There's a tin bucket beneath the stern seat. Get back there and bale for your life. I'll try to keep her head into the wind."

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Hardly had Betty grasped the bucket when the wind struck them. In an instant the air was one white sheet of spray. Shaking like some creature in a death agony, the boat at last shot forward at a tremendous speed. It seemed fairly to leap from wave to wave, while from time to time it shot clean through a crest that was too high for it.

Gripping the seat with one hand, Betty baled with the other. Never in all her life had she worked so furiously.

As for Terry, he could do nothing save to catch at a wave here and there with his oars, to hold the boat's prow into the storm and to pray for a safe landing. A landing on the sand might save them. A rocky landing was sure to prove fatal.

The wind, increasing in violence, became a gale. Lightning played across the water. A fortunate glance backward during one of these flashes gave Terry his first ray of hope. Some good angel of mercy had guided their bark directly to their own shore. For a fraction of a second he caught a fleeting picture of his beach, his cabin and the dark woods beyond, then all was black again.

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“In a moment, just one moment.” His voice was strangely calm. “We shall strike. Drop your bucket and be ready to leap.”

Hardly were the words out of his mouth when, with a sudden jolt that sent a shiver down the length of her keel, the boat struck the sand. The next instant Betty felt herself lifted high in air to come crashing down.

With the breath knocked from her, with her senses all but gone, she felt a tug at her arm. Then, realizing that she was being half carried to a place of safety, she struggled to her feet.

Together the two of them fought their way up the path until with a sudden leap forward, they landed on the cabin floor and the wind slammed the door behind them.

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CHAPTER XXVII

A SURPRISING CALLER

The end of the battle left Betty so exhausted that she could do nothing but sit slumped down in a great rustic chair while Terry kindled a roaring fire in his big rusty kitchen stove and set his fisherman's coffee pot on to boil.

With the fire laughing up the chimney, with her clothing steaming and a hot gulp of coffee warming her heart, the girl's spirits rose.

"That," she sighed, "was what you'd call a narrow squeak."

"Yes," said Terry, "it was. But——"

"Listen!" Betty held up a hand for silence.

For a full moment they listened with all their ears. Then, rising high and shrill above the roar of the wind and the beat of rain, there came one long drawn, piercing wail.

"Terry," exclaimed Betty, her eyes wide with fright. "What is it?"

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"Comes from the Point," said Terry. "Witch Rock perhaps. Bear went out there."

"Terry, could a bear make a sound like that?"

Terry did not answer. He was listening. Nor did he listen in vain, for of a sudden it sounded out again, that cry, shrill and high, the sort of cry that sets one's spine tingling.

"Bears," said Terry, "are strange creatures. Especially young bears. They——"

There had come a crash against the door. They were on their feet in an instant. The next instant the door flew open. A great gust of wind dashed out the light. They were in darkness.

Nor were they alone. Something was moving over there by the door.

"The bear!" thought Betty. Somehow she managed to find her companion. She clung to him for protection.

Ten tense seconds passed. Then, from the direction of the door, which had mysteriously closed itself, there came the sound of a voice:

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"Well, why don't you strike a light?"

They recognized the voice at once, and their astonishment increased.

“Miss—Miss Dutton! We—we—” Betty’s voice trailed off into a high pitched tremolo.

Terry did not speak. He sprang for the corner. A second later a lighted match flared. Then a coal oil lamp burned with a steady glow.

Clad in a heavy raincoat, and still gripping her walking stick that had crashed against the door, standing as she did in a puddle of water, the fair daughter of the rich cut a romantic figure.

“Oh, Miss Dutton!” exclaimed Betty. “Are you wet? Where did you come from? Why are you here on such a night? And why did you make that terrible sound?”

“I am not very wet,” said Miss Dutton. “You might help me with my shoes and stockings. I think they’re rather drowned.”

Betty helped her in silence. When the lady’s white feet had been dried with a rough towel and thrust into a pair of deerskin boots, they drew chairs up to the fire. Then Betty awaited the reply to her other questions.

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As for Terry, he sat in a listening attitude close to the chimney. He appeared to be expecting some sudden sound from without. “He doesn’t believe that it was she who cried out,” Betty told herself in some astonishment.

“How do storms strike you?” asked Miss Dutton suddenly. “Do you like them? Do you sort of glory in them as manifestations of a wonderful Creator? Do they make you want to shout? Or do they make you terribly afraid? Do they make you think of all the unkind and selfish things you’ve ever done? And do you feel that, so far as possible, you’d like to go right away and make those things right?”

She did not wait for an answer, but went on at once. “When I catch the first rumble of thunder, the first flash of lightning, it transforms me into a penitent. I want to confess. Confess, not to some Father Confessor, but to some person I have seemed to wrong. That——” she hesitated. Her hand went to her bosom. Betty’s breath came quick as she caught a glimpse of purple velvet. “There! That is what brought me here. There is an overland trail to the Point. I underestimated the speed of the storm. But here I am. I——”

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She broke short off. Terry’s hand was up for silence as again there rose above the storm that long drawn piercing cry.

The rich young lady’s face went white. She was on her feet in an instant.

“So it was not her cry after all,” thought Betty as a sickening dread gripped her heart.

“Wha—what was that?” the rich young lady turned to Terry.

“There was a bear,” Terry began. “We followed a bear out on the Witch Rock. It might——”

“Nonsense!” his questioner exploded. “That was no bear. It was human——”

“There! There it is again.”

Once more the voice came. Wafted in on the winds, it appeared to take on the form of a wild musical chant.

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“Heaven forgive us!” the rich young lady crumpled down in a chair. “Heaven give us courage.”

There was need for courage. Hardly had the high pitched scream died away than there came the sudden shout of a man’s voice.

This, too, died away, and save for the wild beat of the storm on cabin and shore, there was silence.

“There has been a terrible wreck!” Miss Dutton’s voice was hoarse with emotion. “They are calling for aid. We must help.”

A strong lantern hung in the corner. Having lighted this, Terry drew on a slicker. Then, seeing that the two young ladies meant to accompany him, he helped them into such dry wraps as were to be had. Then, lighted only by the flickering blaze of the lantern, they fought their way out of the cabin and into the teeth of the storm.

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CHAPTER XXVIII

VOICES FROM THE STORM

Their struggle through brush and over boulders in the dark will not soon be forgotten by any of them. Now slipping on moss-covered rocks to plunge forward in the dark, now beaten back by water-soaked branches, and now caught in a deluge of spray sent high across the point by the violence of the storm, they fought their way forward.

When courage waned or the very violence of the storm laid them prone upon the ground there came to them shrill cries and wild shouts from the dark. Always these calls led them out, still out toward the breaking sea.

Strangely enough, the sounds varied. Now it was the shrill pitch of a woman's scream, and now it was a deep wail that could not by any chance have come from the same human throat. The men's voices varied, too. At no time was the sound more than a broken fragment of a call. It was as if the moment it rose the wind caught it and whirled it away.

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"There—there must be many people," Betty panted as, with her body pressed close to the earth that she might not be blown out to sea, she strained her ears once more to listen.

"One of the big lake boats must have gone ashore," said Terry.

So led on, battling wind, wave and rugged trail, they fought their way on into the night until, caught by a sudden gale, deluged by a twenty foot wave, they found themselves clinging to one another for support and gazing out to sea. They had reached the end of the trail. Beyond them were mad waters and the Witch Rock. And to their ears there came as before from beyond, that piercing chant-like call.

"It's as if some one were singing," whispered Miss Dutton.

"People often do sing in time of great distress," said Betty.

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"To think," said Terry, "they are beyond our reach. The Witch Rock has got them."

"A boat," suggested Miss Dutton.

"No row boat could ride that storm, not for a moment!" said Terry. "Listen!"

They did listen, and to their ears there came the thunder of mighty waters against the Witch Rock.

"There is nothing we can do," said Terry, drawing them back.

“Nothing now; probably nothing for several hours. We will scarcely be fit for such service as we may be able to render, if we remain here drenched and shivering. The wisest thing to do is to return to the cabin and watch for the passing of the storm.”

Turning with weary, dragging footsteps, they made their way back over the trail. One mercy was shown them. The shouts and chanting screams came no more. Or was it a mercy? What is more terrible—voices in the night, or silence where voices once have sounded?

Two hours later Betty sat in the rustic chair before Terry’s fire. With the cold chill and the damp of night driven from her body, feeling the drowsy fatigue that comes after a battle with the elements, she was fast drifting away to the land of dreams.

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Terry, too, sat by the fire. His eyes were closed, but he did not sleep. He had set his will firmly. He would not sleep. The moment the storm lost its violence, he would launch his boat and away to the scene of the wreck, for a wreck there had been, he was sure enough of that.

A single candle flickering on a shelf above the stove vied with the glow of the fire in an unsuccessful attempt to drive ghost-like shadows from the corners. From without, at times there came the burst and boom of waves on the shore. A nickel clock ticked loudly. It was trying to tell the world that it was past one o’clock, but the world did not care.

At times there came a rustle from the darkest corner. Terry’s cot was there. After a vain protest the rich young lady had accepted the comfort it offered.

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Of a sudden, upon this drowsy night scene there burst a loud exclamation.

Instantly Betty and Terry were upon their feet. What was their surprise to find Miss Dutton bending over the table, from which by the uncertain light, there came a faint golden gleam.

Betty took two steps forward, then threw up her hands in surprise as she exclaimed: “The thirteen rings! How did they come there?”

There was a strange, strained look on the rich young lady’s face. It was lost to Betty. Terry saw it. She appeared about to speak, but in the end kept silent.

“They are all there,” said Terry. There was suppressed excitement and a hint of some new discovery in his tone.

“Yes. Isn’t it grand!” said Betty, ready to laugh and cry all at once. “And Oh! Terry, don’t you think it would be all right to give Miss Dutton the platinum ring? Think what we have gone through together.”

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Terry had no opportunity to express an opinion, for instantly there passed over the rich young lady's face a look of pain, and in sincere protest she cried:

“No! No! Please not that!”

“You won't understand,” she said more evenly a moment later. “There was a time when I thought I must have the ring; that I would go to any lengths to get it. That is over now. I have thought, and fought it through. There are circumstances under which the ring would be priceless to me. At present I almost hate it. Please, dear little girl, fold up the cloth and put the rings away.”

After this most astonishing speech, she retired to her corner, leaving the surprised and mystified Betty to tuck the velvet package in her blouse, and to sit again by the fire.

For a long time after that sleep was banished from the girl's eyes. Of all the strange and mysterious happenings connected with the thirteen rings, their reappearance under such unusual circumstances was the most astonishing.

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“Of course,” she told herself, “some one may have left them there in our absence. That corner was dark. We would scarcely have noticed that they were there unless our attention were called to them. But who could have left them? And on such a night!”

She had given the problem up in despair and her weary mind was about to find peace in slumber, when a thought passed through her mind.

“She said that a storm made her want to confess; that she had come here to confess something. She had confessed nothing. She——”

At that moment her head dropped forward on her breast and she slept.

Seeing this, Terry crossed the room with noiseless footsteps to drop a blanket gently about her shoulders. He threw a glance toward the young woman sleeping in the corner, whispered something about rich people being queer, then, determined to keep his watch for the slacking of the storm or the coming of dawn, he resumed his upright position in a straight backed chair.

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CHAPTER XXIX

THE WRECK

Storm clouds fleeing before the rising sun left tossing water behind; yet into this sea Terry determined to push the prow of his boat.

“Sun-up,” he murmured sleepily as he rose stiffly to stir up the fire and add fresh fuel. “Sun-up after the storm. And now for the rescue.”

“I want to go,” said Betty, tossing away her blanket.

“You must not go without us,” said Miss Dutton. “There is always work for a woman at such a time as this.”

Terry looked at them with disapproval. Realizing the futility of an argument with a woman, he said:

“Well, all right. Only, you’ll have to follow the trail to the tip of the Point. I’ll try it that far alone. If I can make it and can pick you up there it will be safe for all.”

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Shouldering his oars, he went out to face the aftermath of the storm, the great sweeping waves that still came tumbling in upon the rocks.

What thoughts can be more mournful than the contemplation of a wreck at sea? Some great and splendid ship, planned by an artist and created by a master-builder, beating her life away against unfeeling rocks, and, in her cabins all awash, white faces where unseeing eyes stare up at a sun that has often brought joy to hearts that are forever still.

Having lived on the banks of a city river, Betty had seen much of tragedy and sudden death, yet she could never contemplate these without the deepest sense of sorrow. Her heart was heavy with dread as their tiny boat, bobbing up and down like an empty sack, rounded the Witch Rock from which had sounded those voices in the night.

“There! There it is!” she exclaimed as a dark timbered side rose to their view for an instant.

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A wave that had lifted them high, receding, hid the thing from view.

But now, as Terry’s masterful stroke drove them forward and they once more climbed high, the whole wreck lay exposed to view.

“A schooner, a small power boat.” There was relief in Betty’s

heart.

“And yet,” she thought, “there is still possibility of great tragedy.” How many times she had seen a small power schooner, such as now lay high on the side of the Witch Rock, swarming with happy fishermen, men, women and children off for a holiday.

So high had the thirty foot schooner been carried by the rushing waves, that she now lay fully exposed. A gash in her hull, large enough for a man to enter, told the story. She had struck forward by the larboard bow. The force of the shock had stove her in. The small cabin, built well forward, seemed uninjured.

“There is no one in sight,” said Terry, wrinkling his brow. “It would seem that they might have kept to the cabin in safety. And yet——”

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“They were here,” said Betty. “We heard them calling.”

“And now?” said Miss Dutton.

“We must see,” said Terry, skilfully steering his boat into a narrow space between the rocks.

“Now then. Be ready to jump.”

Betty went first. Miss Dutton came after. A second later Terry came booming in, boat and all.

To draw the light craft upon the higher rocks was the work of a moment. Then, hand in hand they made their way over the slippery surface of the water-washed rocks until with a final struggle they went over the rail of the doomed craft.

“Now!” said Terry as he shoved at the door of the schooner’s cabin.

Gripping Betty’s hand, the rich young lady attempted to hold her back. Betty was made of sterner stuff.

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“Come on!” she insisted. “We must see sooner or later.”

The door stuck. Two lusty kicks, and it flew open to reveal a narrow space where in a heap on the floor were sea instruments, clothing and a variety of odds and ends in confusion. Not one human being, either dead or alive, was to be seen.

“Gone!” said Betty.

“If they had stayed in this cabin they must have been safe,” said Terry. “Look! It’s not even wet. They’d have got bumped some, that’s all.”

As his eyes swept the place he saw but one object in its place.

A small, but quite powerful radio receiving set with its aerial running round and round the wall had been so securely screwed down that it had not stirred from its place.

“We should search the rocks,” said Miss Dutton with a shudder.

“Time enough for that when the waves have laid a little,” said Terry. “They are safe enough now, or gone forever.”

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In his own mind there was a sense of confusion. Those voices, many voices in the night and the storm. It did not seem possible that so many persons could be aboard such a craft under the existing conditions and not one of them all have the good sense to stay within the cabin.

“Of course,” he said aloud, “they may have taken to a dory in an attempt to make land.”

“And they may have made it in safety,” said Miss Dutton hopefully.

“Not probable on such a night. They——”

“Look!” said Betty who had been bending over examining the articles on the floor. “There were Orientals among them. This is a Chinaman’s black suit and cap. Can we never escape them?”

Struck by a sudden thought, Terry began throwing things about. When he came to a very good pair of binoculars he laid them aside. Finally, having picked up a business card, he examined it carefully. “Look,” he said, holding it up to Betty. “Isn’t that the name of your Chinaman’s lawyer?”

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“There’s no doubt of it.” Her face changed color. “So it was their schooner. They were back on our trail.”

“I am greatly relieved,” said Terry. “They did not drown. I am convinced of it. Such men seldom meet violent deaths at nature’s hand.”

“But there must have been others. There were many voices. I wonder who and why?” Betty’s brow wrinkled.

“This place is too close for me,” said Terry. Gripping the binoculars, he made his way to the tilting deck.

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CHAPTER XXX

STARTLING DISCOVERIES

Leaning against the rail with the binoculars to his eyes, Terry was studying the opposite shore line when, after letting out an exclamation of surprise, he thrust the glasses into Betty's hand.

"Look!" His tone was tense. "Right over there by that ragged line of firs. There's a cabin half hidden by trees and a small dock in a natural harbor. The dock! Look at the dock!"

Betty focused the lenses, took one good look, then came near dropping the glasses.

"The—the Chinaman and his lawyer." Her tone showed incredulity.

"None other," said Terry. "And another man with them. They are looking this way. The stranger has a long, old-fashioned telescope. They see us beyond a doubt."

Betty shuddered. "I'm going back on the *Freda* to-night."

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"It's all plain," said Terry. "They followed you up here in the hope of getting possession of the 13th ring. They hired this schooner and her skipper. They tied up over there and the storm broke their hawser and took the schooner out to sea. It is all very plain, but——" He paused to consider.

All plain! Betty's head was in a whirl. All plain? Nothing was plain. The return of the thirteen rings to an obscure cabin in the midst of a stormy night. Many voices on a wreck, yet no one drowned. How is one to explain all this? She leaned hard upon the rail, in an attempt to steady her thoughts. It was all too bewildering; the room in the summer home that was exactly the same as the one in the House on the Roof. What was she to make of that? The disappearing rings? They were gone for days; yet on a stormy night in a cabin in the depths of the forest they reappear again. Voices, many voices shouting and screaming, apparently calling for aid, yet no one is found at the schooner. The Chinaman and his lawyer over there. It is a schooner they have bought or hired. No mistake about that. She had recognized some of the garments which had been thrown from a broken suitcase as the pop-eyed Chinaman's.

"What is one to think about anything?" she asked herself.

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In the end two or three facts stood forth clearly. She had the thirteen rings. Florence had wired her to return the thirteenth ring at once. It was her duty to do so.

"I will take them," she said out loud.

“Take what? Where to?” asked her young hostess.

“Take the rings to Florence. I must. I will return to the city on the *Freda* to-night.”

“If you feel that you must go, and I do feel that your friend Florence should have the rings at once—” (There was a half suppressed eagerness in Miss Dutton’s manner of speaking) “I will take you down in our yacht. It is a faster boat and its cabins are more pleasant than the *Freda*.”

“That will be wonderful,” said Betty. “Please, may we go at once?”

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“As soon as we can get our things together,” said Miss Dutton.

“And you,” she said, turning to Terry, “will you go with us?” There was a note of finality, almost of command in her tone.

“As you like,” Terry began. Then remembering himself, “I’ll surely be delighted.”

A moment later Betty found herself drifting from the Witch Rock and the broken schooner that had furnished them a fresh mystery.

“We will gain time,” Terry said to Miss Dutton as they neared his beach, “if you allow Betty to row you over. I will come in the other boat as soon as I get my traps together.”

Since the water was now comparatively smooth, Miss Dutton did not object to this.

Hardly had they disappeared from sight when Terry came racing down to his boat to leap in and row rapidly away toward the wreck. When he returned twenty minutes later there was such an expression on his face as one might expect to find had he won in a debate or solved a mystery.

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To both Betty and Terry the journey back to the city was nothing short of a revelation.

“I never dreamed that so much luxury could be packed away in so narrow a space,” said Betty after a day on board. “Berths that fold down and make wonderful beds; silk comforters stuffed with eiderdown; and such linen! And food! Did you ever see its equal?”

“Never!” said Terry. “Do you know I’d almost be willing to go to all the bother of being rich if I could own such a yacht and travel round the world in it.”

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful!”

“Do you know,” said Terry suddenly changing the subject, “our grand old city is to take a great stride forward? They have

decided to straighten the river. Cost seven million dollars. But what a boulevard there will be along it when it's done. I tell you," he enthused, "it takes old 'Windy City' to do things!

"But what?" He looked hard at Betty. "You seem unhappy. Are you ill?"

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"No," said Betty slowly. "You forget that my home is on the good old river and that progress to the city means the end to my home and all the happiness I am used to experiencing there."

"Your home. Oh yes," said Terry, trying hard to fall in with her mood. "But you know that was the home of your childhood. When little birds grow up they fly away. 'The wind blows east, the wind blows west, the blue eggs in the robin's nest will soon have wings and beak and breast, and flutter and fly away.'"

Sitting in a velvet lined steamer chair, Miss Dutton overheard this conversation. Apparently an idea struck her at that moment for, rising quickly, she went to the stern and said to her boatman:

"James, run in through Barrington Bay when we get there."

"Right," said James.

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Two hours later, just as the sun was hanging low over the waters and all the world was aglow, the yacht turned in through a narrow rocky channel, then entered a broad bay.

The shores here were high, in places two hundred feet above the water. Standing out in a stretch of green, a little back from the shore and quite framed in the dark green of spruce and pines, was a large red stone building. Clustered about it were many smaller ones. Quite a way back, and appearing to cling to a rock ledge overlooking the water for support, was a picturesque bungalow.

"How perfectly wonderful!" Betty's face was aglow with enthusiasm.

"That," said Miss Dutton, leaning on the rail close beside her, "is Dutton Hall, a school for girls. It was named for my mother who endowed it.

"And do you see that bungalow up there among the rocks, overlooking the water?"

Betty nodded.

"That is the home of the engineer who looks after the heating plant. Only—" she added very quietly, "there isn't any engineer at present. This is summer and the school is closed. The man who has held the position for fifteen years retired to a farm last June."

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Twenty minutes later Betty was straining her eyes in a vain attempt to catch a last glimpse of that engineer's bungalow.

"Not that it will ever mean anything to me," she told herself stoutly, "but it's such a glorious dream."

As if reading her thoughts, Terry murmured another bit of verse:

"I hold it truth with him who sings
In clear notes of diverse tones
That men may rise on stepping stones
Of their dead selves to higher things."

Next evening their boat anchored in the park lagoon and at once they plunged into the task of unraveling mysteries.

CHAPTER XXXI

WITHIN THE BARRED ROOM

Florence Huyler sat in her little office at the back of the recreation house of her playground. It was growing dark. The children were gone. The place was very still. She had no light. She was thinking and waiting, waiting for the zero hour of a mysterious adventure. Excitement kept her muscles tense. On this night, at eight o'clock, the mystery of the 13th ring was to be solved. Betty was back in the city. She had returned the 13th ring. It rested in a strong pocket inside her middy blouse at this moment.

"The mystery of the 13th ring," she said softly. "Will it prove a genuine mystery after all? Is that Reverend Simon Buttleford, our precious little man in the black coat, dreaming, or is all that he believes true? Is there a fortune awaiting the dear little pigtailed from the alleys of all our cities, or is it a hoax or a plot, perhaps a really dangerous plot?"

She shuddered a little at the thought. She was letting her friends in for an interesting scene or a dangerous adventure. At seven thirty she was to meet Betty and Reverend Buttleford at the corner of 23rd and Roundtree Streets. Miss Dutton would be there. When she had been told of all that had gone before she had insisted upon being in on the party. Terry, of course, would be there. Their guide was to be a Chinaman they had not seen before. He was supposed to be the virtuous brother of the pop-eyed Chinaman who had dogged their trails so long.

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She looked at her watch, then settled back with a sigh. "No use starting for another half hour. Might—"

She started up. A dark form loomed in her doorway.

Having snapped on the light she found herself facing a smiling young man, a tall chap with fine eyes.

"This," she told herself, "is the young man from Buffalo."

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"You came to me about the ring?" she said before he could speak.

"Yes. How did you guess?" His face registered surprise.

"I am a mind reader, sometimes," she smiled back at him.

Then, a thought struck her and a sudden resolve was formed. He should be in on the party. Miss Dutton would be there. What better place could there be for a reunion?

"I haven't the platinum ring," she said.

His face fell.

“But Betty Bronson has it. I am to meet her in an hour. You may come with me. There is to be a party, a real mystery party. It will be exciting, and—and perhaps a bit dangerous. Do you mind?”

“Not a bit. You thrill me.”

Florence loved him for that.

“No wonder she’s sorry!” she told herself. “I’m sure I would be.”

“Have you—ah—seen Miss Dutton of late?” the young man asked.

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“About six hours ago. I like her.”

“You do? Well, so do I. You’ve seen the panelled room of the House On The Roof?” he went on. “Perhaps she has told you that room was to have been the scene of our wedding.”

“She didn’t tell me.”

“Well, it was. So she didn’t tell you? Well—” he paused, appeared to conclude that he had already said too much, and said no more for some time. He did add after a while, “Perhaps you wouldn’t know it, but that hotel belongs to Miss Dutton’s uncle, and, of course, so too does the House On The Roof.”

“That panelled room is an exact reproduction of one in their summer home on the North Peninsula among the pines. They both came straight from Europe. It was Miss Dutton’s idea, having that particular room, and then—” He paused, bit his lip and was silent again.

When Florence told him it was time to go, he insisted upon calling a taxi. Fifteen minutes later, they arrived at a dark corner.

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“They’re not here yet,” said Florence. “We will have to wait.”

They did wait, and as the moments passed the girl’s blood ran cold. She was thinking of her unintended visit to a Chinese Tong meeting, of her narrow escape, the wild race, and her breath taking ride on the dark river.

“I am going back to Chinatown,” she told herself. “Going with a strange Chinaman, and it is night.”

“At any rate,” (she got some comfort from this) “I am not going alone.”

A moment later a car came to a halt just before them, and four people alighted, a lady, a man in a long black coat, a slim girl

and a Chinaman.

“The party is now complete,” Florence said in a low tone to her companion.

The young man appeared to stiffen as if to prepare himself for a shock. The beautiful lady from the House On The Roof took three steps toward Florence, then stopped dead still. Her face went white, then red. She seemed about to laugh or cry. One could not have told which.

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“Our party seemed a little short of men,” said Florence, breaking the painful silence, “so I brought one along.”

“Where’s Terry?” She turned to Betty.

“He—he’ll meet us a little farther on,” said Betty who, sensing a new situation, found it difficult to maintain her composure.

As they started forward it seemed to Florence that the whole affair was like a funeral march, or perhaps a procession to a hangman’s party. The black robed preacher and his Chinaman, who was tall and dignified as a Buddhist priest, led the way. The others followed. Florence and her new found friend brought up the rear.

Not a word was spoken as they marched down a dark street, turned up a darker one, then entered an alley that was darker still.

From a doorway some one stepped out before them. Florence jumped. Her nerves were on edge. She was ready for anything. Her hand went to her bosom where the 13th ring still reposed. She had refused to allow it to go into other hands; was determined to see the thing through to the end. Why? Because she hoped to reap a rich reward from the affair? No. Curiosity and a desire to see a square deal for all were her motives.

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The person who stepped out before them was Terry. He took his place beside Betty, and once more the solemn procession moved forward.

Fifteen minutes later found the entire party assembled in a large room lighted by a single candle. A strange sort of flickering Chinese taper, it turned each face into a sort of wavering blue image. The whole effect was ghostly. The fact that all the outer doors and windows of this room in the depths of Chinatown were heavily bolted and barred did not detract from the sense of impending terror that tugged at Florence’s heart.

“But I’ll see it through,” she told herself stoutly. “The ring holds a significant place in some mysterious rite. It has to do with a dead Chinaman, and far back as anyone knows, the Chinese people have worshipped their ancestors. Little wonder that the hands of these strange people are tied until they have the ring. But how—”

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For the first time her eyes fell upon a massive steel affair, roughly resembling a human figure, looming out of a dark corner. At the same instant a voice uttered two words:

“The ring!” It was the Reverend Simon Buttleford who spoke.

In spite of herself the girl jumped. Controlling herself with a great difficulty, she thrust her hand into her blouse and drew forth the thirteenth ring.

At the same instant, for all the world as if the whole affair were a play on a stage and some one had been given his cue, there came a loud thumping on the outside of the heavily barred plank door.

CHAPTER XXXII

FORTY-EIGHT PEARLS

Gravely the man in the long black coat passed the thirteenth ring to the tall, dignified Chinaman. Taking the ring in both hands, the Chinaman went through such motions as he might had he been opening a small screw top tin box.

Instantly there came to Florence's mind the discovery she had made that night in her room. Like a flash the truth came to her now. That fine line running straight around the ring had not been engraved. It was a tightly closed parting line. The ring was in two sections. One screwed into the other.

"What can it contain?" she whispered to Betty.

Betty, her black eyes staring, was standing on tiptoe breathlessly looking on. She did not forget for a moment that she, with Terry as her helper, represented the Press. A great mystery appeared about to be solved. The story was all her own. She did not answer her friend's question. It is doubtful if she so much as heard it.

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There followed a breathless moment.

In unconscious imitation of the feat he wished to perform, the Chinaman's face twisted horribly, relaxed, twisted again, relaxed, to twist again. Then with a low whistling breath he allowed his features to relax into a smile.

The next instant he held out before the breathless watchers the ring which showed a parting line at its center an eighth of an inch wide. With greatest caution he tilted this ring over the palm of his hand. At once a little stream of tiny white balls began pouring out.

"Pills," the impetuous Betty whispered.

"Pearls," corrected the man in the black coat. "Forty-eight tiny pearls. And if a single one were lost, all would be useless. Of slight value, to be sure, but for our purpose priceless."

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Next the Chinaman did an extraordinary thing. Searching out a narrow opening in the side of the curious steel cabinet that stood before them, he began dropping the pearls one by one into that opening.

As she saw him do this, without in a very definite way knowing what it was all about, Florence began to count:

"One, two, three, four—"

“There must be forty-eight,” Betty whispered.

Florence did not answer. She was still automatically counting. At the same time her active mind was busy trying to solve the remaining mystery. In order that she might do this she ran rapidly over the events that had led up to this thrilling moment.

While she thought, the banging at the heavy door continued, grew louder, more threatening. With it was mingled the indistinct murmur of voices.

In the midst of all this, expecting anything—a battered down door, a battle, flight, anything—she recalled quite clearly the moment when the man in the long black coat had come into her life.

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He had entered her office in the park building; had been sent, he said, by Betty. He had come to talk of a ring she had in her possession, a broad, thick, gold ring.

“The thirteenth ring,” she had thought at once, with a little flutter in her breast. Somehow she had always expected that ring to bring an adventure. Here it was.

Seating himself in a chair beside her desk, he had unfolded a story as strange as anything to be found in a fairy book.

He had, so he said, been a missionary, a medical missionary to China. During his service there a boy had worked for him. His name was We Long Cheng. This boy had become a Christian. Becoming of age, he had travelled to America and had established a Chinese importing business in this city.

Being a man of some mechanical ingenuity, he had invented a curiously contrived lock for safes. He had not in any way profited by this invention. One such lock was known to be in existence. That was on his own safe in an alcove of his own store.

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“That is the safe,” the girl told herself, glancing at the great steel receptacle that was swallowing the tiny pearls one by one.

Still quite automatically, she was counting the pearls that dropped—“sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—”

The rich Chinese merchant had invested his earnings in diamonds and gold. These he had kept in the safe. Only three persons knew the secret of that lock. The means of opening the safe was hidden away in a broad, gold band ring.

Then a strange thing had happened. By some misplacing of packages the secret ring had been sent out through the mails and lost.

“That is the ring,” the girl thought to herself, “though what the

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tiny pearls have to do with it I cannot even guess. Twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight.”

Misfortunes seldom come singly. While the secret ring for opening the safe was still lost, the Chinaman had died. He had left a will. Being a good Christian, and having a desire to leave the world a little happier because of his living, he had left half of his fortune as a fund for founding a home for Chinese orphan children in America.

But the greater part of his fortune was locked in that safe. The combination was lost. Because of their superstitious veneration of their ancestors, his two sons had not dared break open the safe. In this superstition the two brothers resembled one another. In all other points they differed. The elder one, a tall, serious-minded man, shared his father’s wishes in regard to the Chinese orphans. The other son was greedy. He wished to get possession of all and to keep it for themselves.

“That,” Florence told herself, “is the beetle-eyed one who has hounded my footsteps. Had he but gotten possession of the ring, the Chinese orphans in America would have fared badly indeed. It is he and his confederates who are at this moment banging at the door.”

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She listened to the hubbub outside for an instant, then was surprised to find herself still counting: “Thirty-two, thirty-three, thirty-four—”

The former missionary had appealed to her. He had asked for the ring. She had told him at the time that she did not have it, which was true. She had promised, if the ring was found, to go with him and the elder son to Chinatown.

“And here we are,” she thought. A thrill stirred her as she realized that the Chinaman’s palm was nearly empty; the pearls nearly spent.

“There must be forty-eight,” she told herself. “And then? Forty-three, forty-four, forty-five—”

Here her counting ceased. She could do nothing but stand and stare. The pounding at the door had ceased. Something like a whispered sigh passed through the room. As the last pearl dropped into place there came a dull thud as of some heavy weight falling. The next instant, without a sound, the massive circular door of the safe swung open.

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“You see,” said the returned missionary in a tone that was all but a whisper, “the mechanism was very delicate. Poised as on a hairspring, a heavy weight awaited its task of throwing open the door. Before it would do any man’s bidding, however, forty-eight tiny objects, those pearls, of exactly the same size and weight, must be dropped upon a balanced scale. Nothing else in the world could have opened the safe.”

“And now,” he said briskly, stepping to a door at the back, “now for the business of the hour.”

As soon as he had opened the door, three policemen stepped through.

“You are all to be witnesses of my actions,” he went on. “As head trustee for the proposed Chinese orphans’ home, and as administrator of the estate, it is my duty to open this safe and examine its contents.”

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As a hushed silence fell upon the place, he removed from the safe three heavily lacquered steel boxes. These were not locked. Without opening them, he drew tape and sealing wax from his pocket and sealed them.

“And now,” he said to one of the policemen, “I think you may open the door.”

As the door flew open a beetle-eyed Chinaman sprang over the threshold. There was murder in his eye. He was followed by a score of others. When they saw the policemen they came to a stand.

“Son,” said the returned missionary, speaking only in the kindest tone to the Chinaman who stood facing him, “as you will see, the boxes are sealed. They will remain sealed until ten tomorrow morning. If you will return at that hour you may witness the opening and in due course of time you will receive your just share.”

For a moment the men stood there in silence. Then turning, they went their way.

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The silence in the room, which lasted for three full moments, was at last broken by Betty:

“Our story!” she exclaimed. “We must get it to the Press. Call me a taxi, please. Some one call it, quick!”

As Betty sprang into the taxi and Terry came after, some one pulled at her sleeve. It was Miss Dutton.

“Take me too,” she whispered. “I must go with you.”

She dropped in beside Betty. Terry pushed down a folding seat and the taxi jolted away.

They were not a moment too soon, for one thing or another. A second taxi came bounding along after them.

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CHAPTER XXXIII

A RACE IN THE NIGHT

“It is to be a race.” Miss Dutton’s tone was vibrant with emotion. “Pursuit and capture, as of old. He must not catch us.”

Betty did not need to be told that she referred to the young man who had been with Florence.

“We were to have been married,” the rich young lady went on breathlessly. “My uncle built the House On The Roof on his hotel. The most gorgeous apartment in the city, it was to be occupied, free of charge, by celebrated persons—famous moving picture actors, great musicians, statesmen, presidents. It had been occupied by all these, yes, even by the President of our Nation.

“But first,” her voice was mellow with memories, “first of all it was to have been our wedding place and bridal chambers.

“He is,” she went on, speaking of her young man, “a splendid young man, from an old family and rich. What is still better, I truly loved him.

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“The wedding day was set, the House On The Roof was decorated for the occasion, the guests arrived. He came, too. He and his pal, who was to be best man, occupied the panelled room, the one in which you saw me that night.

“Little girl,” she said suddenly, “why did you run away that night, when you were showing me the rings? And where did you go?”

“I—I was afraid,” said Betty, feeling quite ashamed. “I had been terribly frightened the night before. I hadn’t known any rich people. You seemed to be locking the door, and—”

“So I was. To keep others out, not to keep you in.”

“I didn’t know that. I went out of the window and down the fire escape. I got into that strange dining room with all the curious wooden people in it. I saw you there and was afraid again, so I escaped into the street.”

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“That was almost the way I did,” the rich young lady laughed. “I—”

The taxi bumping round a corner, reeled like a drunken man, then plunged on into the night. The rich young lady wrinkled her brow as she peered through the back window.

“Have you the platinum ring?” she asked suddenly.

“No. I gave it to Florence.”

“Oh! Then I hope she is with him. It would be tragic if she were not. There must be a ring, that ring! No other will do.” All this puzzled Betty, but she asked no questions.

Florence was with the handsome young man. She had the ring, and at that very moment was giving it to him. He in his turn was forcing a crumpled paper into her unwilling hand. The paper went into her jacket pocket and was for the time forgotten.

One other person was in the pursuing taxi—the Reverend Buttleford. It had been Florence who insisted that he come along. The strong boxes had been entrusted to the three policemen. No need that he bother with those before morning. In the meantime, she had a notion that there might be another task for him to perform.

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So the two taxicabs rattled on.

“At the last moment, when everything was prepared,” the rich young lady went on, “when the hour arrived for our wedding, I went into a panic. I can’t tell why. There are moods you can never explain. I wanted terribly to run away. And I did.”

She paused, and for a moment there was no sound save the cab speeding down a pavement.

“I went down the very fire escape you used. I crawled into a window. The place I entered was a tailor shop, all closed for the night. I removed my bridal things and put on a man’s suit. Then I went down to the street, took a taxi and rode away.

“There was no wedding,” she sighed. “I don’t see why there should be weddings, big weddings, anyway. I’d like to be married by a little old preacher in a long coat, with you and Terry for witnesses. That would be quiet—heavenly.

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“The House On The Roof is not occupied to-night,” she said a moment later. “When you and Terry have done your story, I want you to come there. I will be waiting. We will have some refreshments and—and maybe—” She did not finish.

“But the ring,” said Betty. “How did it get lost in the mail?”

“That is the strangest part of all. His mother, of course, was furious. I—I don’t think he ever was. He loved me too much and I—I think he sort of understood. Perhaps he wanted to run away from it all himself.

“When I came back I found the ring that was to have been my wedding ring in a drawer in the miniature chest. How it came to be left there I do not know.

“I tried to mail it to him, and it was lost. I could not know this. His mother threatened to disinherit him if he so much as wrote

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me a note.

“By the time I saw your story of the thirteen rings in the paper, I felt that our romance was only a tender memory and I wanted so much to have the ring back to keep always as a priceless treasure.

“But now—” again she did not finish.

“Betty,” she said after a long pause, “do you remember the school we saw on our way down in the yacht?”

“Yes.”

“And do you remember the bungalow among the rocks, overlooking the water?”

“I could not forget.”

“You are to live there.”

“I? Live there?” Betty’s heart gave a great bound.

“If you care to. We have asked your father. The school needs his services. You may attend the school. Your home by the river will soon be only a memory. Why not a home by quieter, cleaner, more glorious waters?”

Tears sprang to the girl’s eyes. Were they tears of sadness shed for her old home, or tears of joyous anticipation of the new?

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“Of—of course I want to go,” she said at last. “Nothing could be half so grand.”

“Terry,” she spoke to the silent listener in a corner, “you will have to write to-night’s story. I couldn’t write three words in a straight line if my life depended upon it.”

“And you shall go with me directly to the House On The Roof, dear little Betty,” said the rich young lady, drawing one slender arm about her waist.

Fifteen minutes later, with hearts aflutter, the two of them, Miss Dutton and Betty, sat in the panelled room. They were listening intently for the sound of footsteps on the stair. They had won the taxi race. It was evident that the rich young lady hoped they had not won too well.

“The thing that puzzles me,” said Betty in a wee small voice, “is the question of the vanishing rings. Where did they go when I fell upon the deck of the *Freda*, and how did they get to that little woodland shack in time of terrible storm?”

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“Little girl,” Miss Dutton pressed her hand, “I came to that cabin to confess. In the end I did not do it. I will confess now.”

Betty leaned forward eagerly. There had come a sound from below. They listened breathlessly. It did not come from the stairs.

“That Aunt Bobbie of the *Freda*,” Miss Dutton began hurriedly, as if wishing to get something off her mind, “must have been a dear old soul.”

“She was. She—”

Miss Dutton stopped Betty. “When your Aunt Bobbie sent you ashore, she also sent the thirteen rings with a note attached. She had, so the note said, found the rings on your person at the time you were brought to her. They puzzled her. She was sure you were too good to have stolen them; yet how else would one come into possession of thirteen used wedding rings? Perhaps some one had played a shabby trick, had hidden them in your clothing while you were unconscious. She was greatly troubled. Would I do what I could about it?

“When I saw the rings,” she went on after ten seconds of listening, “I wanted to keep the one that was to have been my own. I ended by keeping them all. I deceived you. I am sorry for that. That’s what I meant to confess.”

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Betty pressed her hand.

“Then I came to see that a wedding ring where there had been no wedding would come to be a hollow mockery. The storm came. I wanted to confess and give you back the rings. I made my way to the cabin and was about to own up when those terrible screams began.

“We went out into the storm. We returned after a time. I had nearly fallen asleep when I felt the rings. I suppose I cried out. I know I got to my feet and spread the rings on the table. Then, before I knew what was happening, you were bending over the table exclaiming, ‘The rings! How did they come here?’

“I should have owned up then, but it seemed simpler to allow you to misunderstand. So now you know. Do you forgive me?”

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Again Betty pressed her hand.

Ten seconds later, as they sat there listening, footsteps sounded on the stairs.

“We didn’t lose them!” said Miss Dutton, seizing Betty and hugging her tight.

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CHAPTER XXXIV

THE LAST MYSTERY

A strangely simple ceremony was performed that night in the richly appointed panelled room of the House On The Roof. Yet, with all its simplicity, there was something wonderfully solemn about it all.

Betty was there and Florence. Terry, who had finished his story of the 13th ring, was there to gather notes for the society page. In spite of the lateness of the hour and the simplicity of the ceremony, two of the richest and greatest families of the city were being united by bonds of matrimony, and Betty's much beloved Miss Dutton was the bride.

Reverend Simon Buttleford, scarcely a society preacher, but a very good little old parson, for all that, officiated. The platinum ring, which had led to so many high adventures, was the one slipped upon Miss Dutton's finger at the proper time. As was planned in the beginning, the House On The Roof provided the bridal chambers.

"There are two mysteries still unsolved," said Betty as a short time after the wedding she sat with Terry on the balcony that overlooked the city.

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"What are they?" asked Terry.

"The prison ship in the river and the voices in the night."

"The prison ship," said Terry in surprise.

Betty began telling him of her experiences in the ancient ship that night on the river.

"Oh that!" he exclaimed before she was half finished. "The answer is simple enough. There is a ship touring our country at the present time, an ancient prison ship which harks back to other days of unheard of cruelty and barbarism. It came from Australia. It was passing through and anchored for one night in the river."

"But there were men in the cells."

"Wax figures; very terrible figures, and, in the uncertain light of night, awfully real, I haven't a doubt.

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"And as for the voices in the night," he said after a time, "the voices that appeared to come from the shipwrecked schooner, I solved that mystery before I left.

"You may have noticed that there was a radio screwed to the

cabin wall. Someway, by tossing on the water or bumping on the rocks, the loud speaker, a very strong one, was turned on. At the same time the aerial connection was loosened, but at such times as the schooner rolled to a certain position the wire would touch the aerial post and a loud voice could be heard. At times, of course, it was a man talking and, at others, a woman singing. But, being very loud and of short duration, they seemed shouts and screams.

“So you see,” he concluded, “no one was lost on the schooner that night, and our conclusion that the vessel had been torn from its moorings by the violence of the storm was undoubtedly correct.”

“I am glad all these things are solved,” sighed Betty.

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When Florence arrived at her room late that night, happening to thrust her hand in her jacket pocket she felt there a crumpled bit of paper. What was her surprise, upon drawing it out, to find it to be a five hundred dollar bill.

“He gave it to me in the dark. Payment for the platinum ring,” she said to herself. “And it was worth that to him beyond a doubt.

“Some day,” she said thoughtfully as she crept beneath the covers, “I will attend another sale of unclaimed parcel post packages.”

The three sealed boxes were opened next day and were found to contain a great treasure of gold and diamonds, a large share of which went to the support of Chinese orphans in America.

A month later found Betty happily installed in her new home among the rocks.

“It is all quite wonderful,” she told herself. “But this, after all, is only fresh water. Some day I must have a breath of air from the grim old ocean.”

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She did. The very next summer found her beside the ocean, and thereby hangs a tale. This story of mystery and adventure on the high seas must be told in our next volume, called “Witches’ Cove.”

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12. The Magic Curtain
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17. A Ticket to Adventure
18. The Third Warning

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- Relocated promotional material to the end of the book, and completed the list of books in the three series (using other sources).

[The end of *The Thirteenth Ring* by Roy J. Snell]