

**BITSY
FINDS THE CLUE**

AUGUSTA HUEILL SEAMAN

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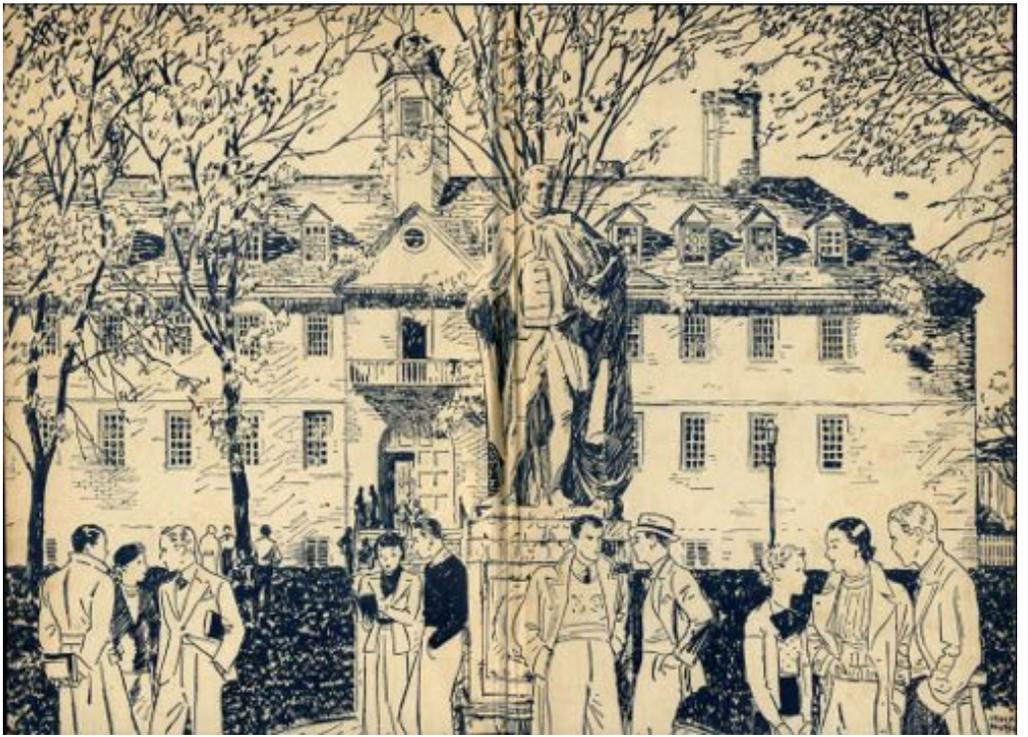
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**BITSY
FINDS THE CLUE**
by
AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN

It is a charming setting that this popular author has chosen for her lively story of three young college students who share in the mystery that surrounds old Romney House in Williamsburg—that quaint, Virginia town which has experienced a resurrection unique in the history of the United States. Through the generosity of an eminent American philanthropist the historic buildings and homes of Williamsburg have been “restored” to the appearance which they bore in Colonial times.

When tiny, shy, red-haired Bitsy Bates, a Northerner, comes as a Freshman to the old College of William and Mary she is a misfit in campus life, so she moves to Romney House, at the suggestion of Celeste Dufresne, a Senior and great-niece of the three elderly owners of this historic home, which they have refused to have “restored,” in spite of their obvious need. What is the real reason back of this? Why does Colonel Drew Rodney prowl about the house late at night? The girls determine to fathom this challenging mystery, aided by the stalwart Senior, Duff, halfback of the football team, whose romance with pretty Celeste moves along none too smoothly. Most unexpectedly, courageous little Bitsy finds the clue!

BOOKS BY

Augusta Huiell Seaman

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THE SECRET OF TATE'S BEACH
THE ADVENTURE OF THE SEVEN KEYHOLES
BLUEBONNET BEND
THE BOARDED-UP HOUSE
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THE GIRL NEXT DOOR
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THE CHARLEMONT CREST
THE BRASS KEYS OF KENWICK
THE STARS OF SABRA
THE MYSTERY OF THE EMPTY ROOM

BITSY FINDS THE CLUE

A Mystery of Williamsburg, Old and New

By
AUGUSTA HUIELL SEAMAN



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All of the characters in “Bitsy Finds the Clue” are purely imaginary. Even Romney House does not actually exist in Williamsburg, Virginia—although there are many interesting old houses very much like it.



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CL

To
WILLIAMSBURG
Past and Present

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Bitsy Finds the Clue

CHAPTER I

THE MEETING

THE VAST CONCOURSE of the Pennsylvania Station seemed dim and weird and unnatural, at that late hour of the night. It had been a rainy, dreary September day in New York, and now the streets were filled with fog. Some of the fog seemed to have drifted into the Station, augmented by the odor of many moist umbrellas and damp goloshes. The Station clocks marked ten-thirty, and around one of the gates where a train was scheduled to leave at eleven for “Washington, Richmond, Charleston, Savannah and Jacksonville” were clustered a crowd of travelers, interspersed with “Red Caps” bearing their luggage. On the outskirts of it hovered a group of three, their eyes wandering anxiously from one to another of the many entrances to the concourse.

“Do you think you’ll know her when you see her, Bitsy?” demanded a worried, motherly looking woman of the young girl at her side.

“Oh, I’m *sure* I’ll know her, Mother,” answered the girl a trifle impatiently. “She’s described herself to me in her letters, and she said she’d be sure to have a bit of yellow paper pinned on the lapel of her jacket. She warned me, too, that she’d probably be late, because some of her friends were giving her a party before she left. I’ll be all right, anyway, even if she doesn’t come. I’m nearly seventeen, and I’ve traveled around *some* by myself, already!”

“Yes, but never so far—alone,” returned her mother. “Oh, I’m sure you’ll be all right, of course. You’ve only to get on the train here and get off at Williamsburg tomorrow morning. You can’t miss it. Only I’d feel more comfortable about you if this senior who has been writing to you so pleasantly were here to sort of see you through, this first time—especially as you haven’t been very well for so long.”

The girl shrugged impatiently and turned to watch one of the entrances from which taxicab riders were apt to make their appearance. She wished that her mother would not make such constant references to her not being very strong—would not dwell on and fuss about it so much. She was glad she was going to get away where people wouldn’t be apt to know about it or comment on it. As a freshman entrant to William and Mary College, way down in Virginia, few would know that she possessed a heart that didn’t always behave itself, and, short of not going in for strenuous athletics, her troubles would remain unnoticed.

Just at that moment the gates to the train entrance clashed open, the Red Caps seized their luggage, and the crowd began to surge forward.

“Have you got your tickets and money all ready, honey?” asked the man, speaking for the first time. “You’d better get aboard at once, and meet your friend on the train. The ticket agent said that the Williamsburg students would all be in one car. I’ll see you aboard, but Mother had better stay in the waiting-room. So say goodbye to her now.”

And in that moment, Elizabeth Bates (known to her family and friends as “Bitsy” or “Bits”) on her first long journey alone to enter college as a freshman, suddenly lost all her

feeling of independence and adventure, and clung to her mother in a wave of homesickness and regret.

“I’ll write, Mummy—several times a week—and I’ll be terribly careful! Don’t worry about me! Oh—goodbye—goodbye——”

Her father gently took her arm and hurried her through the gate and her mother was lost to her sight in the surging crowd. A Red Cap followed them with her hand luggage, and she was presently standing in front of her already made up berth in the subdued rustle and confusion of the semi-darkened Pullman sleeper.

“Remember, I’ve tipped your porter, so you won’t have to bother about him. And write pretty frequently so that Mother won’t worry,” Mr. Bates counseled her, as he stooped, hat in hand, to kiss her farewell. She was so tiny, and looked so frail, and had been but a short time ago so very ill! Almost his own heart misgave him at leaving her, but of this he showed outwardly no sign. Waving cheerily he left her, disappeared down the aisle and around the corner of the corridor, and Bitsy Bates was left alone, on the first stage of an entirely new adventure.

For a few moments she sat on the edge of her curtained lower berth, opening her suitcase to get at her belongings, while she surreptitiously wiped two unwelcome tears from her brown eyes. It had all looked so gay and happy and adventurous in prospect—getting away from home where she had been (she thought) too much petted and coddled and supervised since a severe illness had left her with a slightly irregular heart—away where she was to take care of herself, tend to her own affairs, and mingle with hordes of others of her own age. Gay and carefree and delightful! Why on earth should she suddenly be smothered in such a fog of loneliness at the very outset of the big adventure? Shrugging her shoulders again, she half-muttered:

“I suppose it’s because I counted so on meeting Celeste right at the start. She’s written me such nice letters! I think it’s swell for one of the seniors to take a freshman she hasn’t even seen, under her wing and sort of guide her through the first of it. I suppose they all have to do it—but she seemed so particularly nice—and now she isn’t even here as she said she’d be! Oh well, I don’t care! I can get along by myself—without any assistance from *anyone!*”

There were other occupants of berths, coming surging in, laughing, chattering in a subdued clatter, girls and boys of her own age or slightly older, most of whom seemed already known to one another. She eyed them as they were assigned to their various berths, but none seemed to correspond with the description Celeste Dufresne had given of herself, and none took the slightest notice of the tiny, red-haired figure sitting on the edge of Berth 10.

Suddenly a Red Cap, burdened with suitcase, golf-clubs, magazines, and other oddments, stopped directly in front of Berth 10 and pointed to the one above it.

“Right here’s yo’ berth, Miss,” he indicated to a tall, willowy young girl following behind him. Bitsy moved aside while he deposited his burdens in the upper berth, accepted his tip and departed down the aisle. And then, left alone facing the passenger who was to share the section with her, she cried with a little gasp:

“Why—why—pardon me, but—aren’t you—Celeste Dufresne? You—you have a piece of yellow paper pinned on your coat!” The tall, dark girl looked down at her for the

first time.

“Oh, what *luck!*” she exclaimed in a slightly excited voice. “I believe it must be Elizabeth Bates—and right in the berth below me! I was awfully late—the train’s just going to start—but they kept me so long at Sally Dean’s party—and then saw me aboard. I was afraid I’d miss you. But now we’ve a grand chance to get acquainted—if the others don’t spy me too soon. I took an upper berth to save expense—I’m always short of money somehow—but didn’t dream we’d be lucky enough to have the same section. How does it feel to be starting out for the first time? I nearly passed away with homesickness when I was in your boots three years ago!”

She seated herself on the edge of Bitsy’s berth and chattered on in a warm, friendly, scrappy manner, while she took a mental survey of the new girl whom fate had assigned to her to steer through the first difficult days of college life. What a tiny mite she was! Frail and delicate looking, with bright red, wavy hair, a freckled face and slightly snubbed nose, redeemed by a pair of beautiful and wistful brown eyes. She looked scarcely old enough to have graduated from a grade school, much less to be entering college!

“You’re just like you described yourself,” ventured Bitsy half-shyly, “only you didn’t say how nice-looking you were!” In fact, Celeste was an extremely pretty girl, tall and slender, with dark, lustrous hair and heavily lashed gray eyes.

“Couldn’t very well do that!” laughed Celeste, “But thanks anyway, for thinking it! But now, tell me, what are you——”

At this moment, a lanky young fellow strolling down the aisle spied the two of them seated on the berth, and called out to the other visible occupants of the car:

“Hi!—Here’s Celeste!” There was an immediate rush toward Berth 10, and the two were surrounded by an excited mob of students clamoring their greetings to the senior, who was evidently a great favorite. After the first handshaking, the girl remembered the stranger at her side and introduced her all around. And Bitsy Bates felt a warm, pleasant glow of happiness at being absorbed so quickly into the charmed circle. But her joy was short-lived. For after the first casual “How-do-you-do-s,” they immediately forgot her and began hurling questions and miscellaneous information at the popular Celeste, who answered, parried and retorted with the glib assurance of long association.

“Come on, Celeste!” a stout, light-haired girl finally commanded. “Spud Smith has a box of two dozen French pastries in her berth. She thought she was going to save them till she got down to Williamsburg, but we’ve decided to have them right now!” They all scurried down the aisle toward the other end of the car.

“Come along, won’t you?” suggested Celeste to Bitsy, who had turned away and begun unpacking her bag, after being rather pointedly left out of the invitation. “We’re both invited—really. They’re so wild and excited about meeting again after all summer, that they don’t know how they’re behaving. But I know they’ll be awfully glad to have you.”

“Oh, no—I guess I’d rather not—if you don’t mind!” faltered Bitsy Bates. “I—I—It’s rather late and I’m awfully tired, so I reckon I’d better turn in. But I’m terribly glad we’ve met—at last!”

“So am I,” agreed the older girl, “and I’ll look in on you later, when they get through that messy feast. I don’t really want any myself—I’m bursting with sweet stuff after that

party I just came from—but I want to chat a bit with one or two of them. We haven't met since last June.”

She sauntered away down the car, and Bitsy went about the business of getting ready to retire. Later, when she was in her berth with the curtains drawn, and the train clicking away across New Jersey, she reviewed the whole episode and decided that the others were “a horrid bunch,” but that Celeste was adorable and would have her undivided allegiance forever. “But she might have stayed with me a while longer!” she thought almost savagely. “Why did she have to go off and leave me right away?” A fresh wave of homesickness struck her and she buried her head deeply in the pillow.

She woke out of a sound sleep, after what seemed hours later, when the curtains of her berth parted slightly and Celeste Dufresne poked in her head to murmur softly:

“Good night, Elizabeth! They kept me longer than I meant to stay, but we'll have breakfast together in the morning, and a grand talk then.”

“Good night,” answered the younger girl, rousing sleepily. “But—if you don't mind—I wish you'd call me ‘Bitsy’—all my friends do!”

“I sure will. But I think when you get down on the campus, they'll probably call you ‘Carrots’—with that grand head of hair—” chuckled Celeste. “But you mustn't mind it.”

“Oh, I won't!” cried Bitsy eagerly, and she was left alone once more in the dark, the warm glow surging back to her heart. Her last thought before returning to sleep was, “Celeste's a *dear*! I hope we're always going to be friends.”

Little did she dream, however, in what a web of mystery and adventure the lives of herself and Celeste Dufresne were about to be entangled, in the tiny, sleepy little Southern college town to which they were bound!

CHAPTER II

THE RESCUE

AT HALF-PAST FOUR in the afternoon, the September sun is very hot in old Williamsburg. It blazed down on the college campus, mitigated by only a slight breeze which scarcely stirred the foliage of the tall trees in front of Wren Hall. Celeste, coming around one corner of the building on her way to her fraternity house, paused in the shade of the Hall to enjoy its slight coolness for a moment, and in so doing, her eye caught an arresting sight. Leaning against the pedestal of old Lord Botetort's noseless statue was a red-haired, dejected little figure whose every line bespoke discouragement and woe.

"Why, I do believe it's little Bitsy!" she exclaimed aloud. "I'd almost forgotten her these last two days. Wonder what's the matter?"

"Hello, Bitsy dear!" she called on her way over. "Haven't seen you for a spell. You don't look too peppy! Is anything wrong?"

"*Everything!*" muttered Bitsy Bates, packing all her tribulations into one expressive word. Then she lapsed into silence and concentrated her gaze on the disfigured face of the one-time Colonial Governor's likeness.

"Well, do tell me about it!" exclaimed Celeste, putting her arm around the drooping shoulders of the younger girl. "Homesick—are you? I'm a beast not to have looked you up oftener the last two or three days, but, honest-to-goodness, what with getting my schedule arranged and helping to get the fraternity house running and planning for the 'rushing season', and one thing and another, I haven't had a moment to myself. I'm terribly sorry! I ought to have been with you a bit more, but it was literally impossible. Things'll be better from now on. What's gone wrong, honey?"

Bitsy Bates said nothing for a moment, then she turned and looked Celeste squarely in the eye. "I can't stand it another day. I'm going to pack up and go home tomorrow!" she announced with stubborn distinctness. Celeste was startled and shocked.

"You're *not!*" she cried protestingly. "What would your parents say? You can't do *that!*"

"I can and I will," Bitsy persisted. "I'm sick of it all. I hate everyone—except you, and I scarcely ever see you at all. I'm lonesome. I'm frightfully homesick. My roommate and I don't get on together at all. I don't know anybody hardly to speak to. I spent all yesterday—that was Sunday—just sitting in my room or roaming around this town—alone. I can't *stand* it! I never dreamed it would be like this!" Her self-control gave way suddenly and she burst into wild sobs. For a few moments Celeste could only hold her shaking little body and soothe her with inarticulate murmurs. She hoped that no one would come by, for she didn't want any uproarious or unsympathetic students to witness the crushed unhappiness of this pathetic little newcomer. Presently Bitsy got herself in hand, ceased the wrenching sobs and dried her eyes.

"Gosh!—I hate being so silly, but—but—I sort of feel better for—acting like a baby!" she sighed. "But I haven't had anyone—*anyone!* I come here and hang around old

Botetort for company. Poor old noseless fellow!—Seems as if he'd had some hard going too, sometime or other!" She grinned forlornly and Celeste gave her a sympathetic hug.

"Well, you're going to cut all this out—from now on. You hear me!" she announced. "It's been all my fault, but I was rather helpless about it before this. From now on, though, it's going to be different. I want you to go over to the Library and wait for me there a little while. I've got to go to my fraternity house and do a little work that will keep me about half an hour. Wish I could take you with me, but it isn't allowed. But I'll stop at the Library for you when I'm through. After that, you're coming home with me and have dinner and this evening we'll go to the movies. There's a good show on tonight. Are you game?"

"Oh, I'd love to!" sighed Bitsy. "You're—you're awfully good to me!" And she strolled over to the college Library and spent a quiet half-hour of anticipation in its cool and soothing silence. Celeste was certainly a *dear!* she mused. If everyone were like her, college would be heaven! But all the same, she—Bitsy Bates—was going home tomorrow. That was *final!*

Presently she saw Celeste in the doorway, and hurried over to meet her. And the two went out together into the hot sunlight.

"Which dormitory are you in?" asked Bitsy. "Jefferson—or Chandler or what?"

"Oh, didn't you know?" exclaimed her companion. "I don't room in any of the dormitories. I'm in town, staying with my aunts and uncle. The old Romney House. I thought I told you. You see, Dad and Mother live in New Jersey. Dad's business is in New York, and I go up to them for the vacations. But when I'm at college, I stay with my relatives at the house in town. It's cheaper for us than room and board in the college, and the folks here need the money pretty badly, in these hard times. They're my great-aunts and great-uncle really and they're quite old, but they love having me with them. You see, Mother was born and brought up here before she married Dad and went to live up North. I get just as much college life, through the fraternity, but it has its advantages—living at what's practically your own home, this way. You're much freer in a good many ways. Come along now! You'll like the house, I think. It's a quaint old place."

They crossed a corner of the campus and made for the Duke of Gloucester Street. This wide avenue, stretching a mile long, from Wren Hall, facing it at one end, to the distant "restored" House of Burgesses at the other, lay dreaming in the hot afternoon sunlight. Quaint and dignified old Colonial houses lined it at intervals on both sides. Even the new commercial buildings and shops near the college end partook of that old-time atmosphere in their architecture, with their ancient-looking gables and tiny-paned windows, instead of the ordinary plate-glass array of a modern age.

"Let's stop at the Coffee Shoppe and have some soda—or ice-cream—my treat!" suggested Bitsy shyly, anxious to do her part in the afternoon's entertainment.

"That'll be jolly," agreed Celeste, and they went in to refresh themselves, coming out to stroll on eastward along Duke of Gloucester Street.

"Great old town—isn't it!" smiled Celeste, as Bitsy commented excitedly on Bruton Parish Church and the ancient brick and wooden residences dreaming in the shade and sun of that wide and lovely avenue. "You should have seen it, though, before the 'restoration' began! Quite a different proposition, let me tell you! My folks don't like this 'restoration'

business at all, but I think it's wonderful."

And then, as Bitsy seemed rather hazy on the subject of "the Restoration", she went on to explain how one of the country's wealthiest citizens had decided to spend some of his millions in restoring this marvelous example of a Colonial town to its ancient appearance, removing eventually all signs of modern invasion, and presenting it as a memorial for all time to the nation, in a true picture of its early Colonial aspect.

"I think that's *great!*" exclaimed Bitsy. "It's a grand way to use one's money. I should think everyone who lived here would be crazy about it."

"Most of them are," said Celeste, "and have given their homes gladly to be 'restored'. They can still go on living in them, you know. But my folks have a queer 'kink', somehow. I don't understand it myself, but they just won't let that house be touched. It's a beautiful old place, too. One of the oldest and most interesting in the town. Our ancestors have lived in it from the first. I don't think Aunt Eva would mind so much. She's the youngest and has more modern ideas. But Uncle Drew and Aunt Abigail won't hear of it. Let's turn down England Street here. Our house is on Francis Street."

Bitsy was never to forget her first day in the old "Romney House." Long and low and considerably weather-beaten, it stood in the midst of a wide old box-garden, now sadly gone to seed and over-run with weeds and wild vines and uncut shrubbery. It had fascinating wings and additions in a bewildering number, and several enormous chimneys, one at the end occupying the entire side of the house. And if from its clapboards the ancient paint was peeling, its windows were snowy-curtained, and the grand old trees about it threw a cooling shade over its shabby exterior. Two flowering crêpe-myrtle bushes that flanked the doorway were still radiantly in bloom, and the scent of the box-garden perfumed the quiet afternoon air.

On a wide porch at the back, overlooking another stretch of garden, Bitsy was introduced to Celeste's relatives. She was considerably overawed by white-haired Colonel Drew Romney, with his stately manners and the gold-headed cane he was never without, since he suffered greatly from rheumatism. And equally white-haired, decrepit and constantly trembling Miss Abigail Romney, who seldom rose from her chair without assistance, and whose sharp black eyes and aquiline features proclaimed her unquestionably the "martinet" of the trio. But she fell in love at once with gentle, charming Miss Eva, whose wavy gray hair was piled regally on top of her head in a quaint but singularly becoming manner, whose big gray eyes resembled Celeste's own, and whose delightful welcoming smile went straight to Bitsy's heart. They all chatted a few moments on the porch, and Celeste retailed to them the news of her day. Then she excused herself and took Bitsy with her to the safe retreat of her own room upstairs, from which they could look out on the garden through three ancient gabled windows.

"Well, what do you think of it all?" inquired Celeste, when they had thrown themselves across the bed and were nibbling chocolate-bars purchased by Bitsy that afternoon. Bitsy's eyes grew dreamy.

"I think this house is—wonderful!" she sighed at last. "And I like your aunts and uncle. I—I just love your Aunt Eva. She's a *peach*—isn't she!"

"Yes, she's a dear," admitted Celeste. "They're all really pretty nice—when you get to know them. And I'm glad you like this old ranch. I'm sort of keen on it myself. Wish it

were in better repair, though. By the way—to change the subject—you didn’t mean what you said about leaving college tomorrow, of course.”

“I surely *did!*” exclaimed Bitsy, sitting up and surveying her friend with tragic eyes. “I meant it so much that I wrote Dad and Mother yesterday—that was Sunday—that I couldn’t stand it any longer and why. I expect they’ll wire me by tomorrow and settle it with the college—somehow. But I wouldn’t spend another four days like the last—not for anything you could offer me!”

“But *what* exactly is the trouble?” demanded Celeste, shocked anew by this revelation and unable to unravel the puzzle of Bitsy’s obsession. “Of course it’s hard getting used to it at first. I felt it too, that freshman year, even though I was here with my own folks. I missed Mother and Dad horribly, and didn’t know any of the girls and felt awfully out of it, just at first. So did almost all of them, I found out later. But it wore off in a little while and I settled down to have a jolly good time. Why can’t you?”

“You—you don’t understand, I guess,” hesitated Bitsy. “You’re pretty and—and charming—and just bound to be popular, somehow. And you are strong—and can go in for all the athletics—and sports. And—and—well—I’m just different. I know I’m little and undersized and unattractive. I’ve been awfully ill and my heart behaves badly sometimes. I can’t go in for all the strenuous things. And I—I somehow don’t make friends easily. I—I like the nice ones but I just hate the ones that snub me and turn me down—and I show it. My roommate—she—she—well, I just can’t talk about her—but you can imagine!” Celeste could. And she saw, moreover, that tears were gathering again in Bitsy’s brown eyes at these memories.

“But you have *me* now,” she ventured. “And I can have you meet some really nice girls and—look here!—if things go all right perhaps you can get in to our fraternity! Wouldn’t that be grand?” But Bitsy’s hurt had gone too deep for her to rise even to that lure.

“You—you’re awfully good to say all this,” she answered, “but I still would hate it—so much of it—that dormitory, for instance. I can hardly bear to think of going back to it—even for a night. I—I’ve suffered so horribly there. No, I’m going home!” Celeste immediately sensed the full tragedy of this lonely child’s suffering in her first experience so far away from all she knew and loved. And a sudden solution sprang full-fledged into her brain.

“Look here!” she exclaimed. “How would this do? You just can’t leave William and Mary like this, without ever having tried it out and found what a swell place it really is. Suppose you change your quarters? How would you like to board here with my folks, instead of in the dorm? I’m pretty sure it could be arranged. There’s an empty room right next to this one. It’s small, but we could fix it up nicely, and old Eliza in the kitchen gives us grand meals. If the folks will agree, would your father and mother consent?” Bitsy’s eyes sparkled with delight.

“Oh, I’d *love* it!” she sighed ecstatically. “I know my family would think it wonderful. Do you—do you suppose your people would consent to it? I’d be awfully quiet and never any trouble.”

“I think I can persuade ’em,” said Celeste, “but one thing I must tell you first. It won’t be so convenient as the dorms. Or as comfortable. Not nearly. You see this house hasn’t

had a modern improvement in it since the War Between the States, I reckon! No nice plumbing or steam heat or anything that you're used to. The folks can't afford it and wouldn't hear of it anyway. You won't be very comfortable—especially in winter, for we only have open fires to heat the place.”

“I don't care—I don't care a thing about *that*!” cried Bitsy, scornfully. “I'd rather *be* uncomfortable—if I can be with you. Oh, will you ask them—right away?”

“Yes,” said Celeste. “This is pretty important. You wait here while I go down and talk it over with them.”

She was gone a long while. Bitsy began to have terrible misgivings that they could not agree to the proposition. She could fancy Colonel Drew Romney and Miss Abigail flatly refusing to allow a stranger to make a home in their exclusive domicile. Finally she decided that it was hopeless and mentally began to pack her luggage while she watched two cardinals flitting about the box-garden. Then Celeste returned.

“It's no use, I suppose,” Bitsy sighed resignedly.

“Nothing of the sort!” laughed Celeste. “They were kind of stunned at first, I'll admit. And Aunt Abby declared you'd dislike the cooking and die of cold, and probably your parents would sue us. But Aunt Eva wanted you, and Uncle Drew thought it would be nice for me to have a young companion in the house, so it's all settled. You'll have to wire your parents tonight and get them to fix it up with the college, and meantime I'm going to get permission for you to spend tonight here with me, so you won't have to go back and stay in that dreaded dorm!”

Words failing her, Bitsy could only hug Celeste convulsively. But the older girl laughingly held her off and said:

“Wait a minute! There's something I haven't told you yet. Maybe you'll change your mind after you've heard it. This house is *haunted*!—at least they say it is—and even I've heard queer noises and things that no one could explain. Can you stand living with an honest-to-goodness *ghost*?”

Bitsy laughed. “If it's haunted, so much the better! I've always been crazy to be in a real, actual haunted house. Never thought I'd have the chance. You can't scare me *that* way!”

“Well, I may be exaggerating about the hauntedness,” admitted Celeste, soberly. “But there *is* some queer mystery about this place that I've never been able to fathom. It's some family affair, I think, from way back. I'm sure the folks know something about it but they would never tell me. It's for some reason connected with this that they won't have the house 'restored', I rather imagine. There are certain times and periods when nothing seems to be right, when queer, weird things happen—and everyone seems 'up in the air', if you understand me. So don't be surprised if you get an inkling of them. Just act as if you didn't notice anything amiss. I think that's the main reason they had for hesitating about having you here.”

“I'll do anything you say, Celeste, just so long as I can be with you!” breathed Bitsy. But to herself she whispered: “Oh the joy—the *luck*—of going to live in a 'haunted house'—like this!”

CHAPTER III

THINGS BEGIN TO HAPPEN

THE DAY SHE ENTERED old Romney House to remain there, marked the beginning of a new life for Bitsy Bates. Not that it solved all her problems by any means. She was still unpopular with her freshman contemporaries—more so than ever, perhaps, since she had deserted them to go and live in a house in town. They felt it a slight to the dormitory that she had not been contented there. Those who were indifferent to her never noticed her at all, and those who disliked her teased and plagued her unmercifully, and she launched back at them with all the quick temper of which her blazing red hair was an indication. Two or three of them, however she presently found friendly and more congenial, and with these she could be moderately happy when Celeste was not available.

But it was to Celeste that she gave her whole-hearted allegiance and devotion, and was never so happy as when they could be together at the Romney House, away from the interruptions and demands of the campus. But even here there was a “fly in the ointment”. Bitsy speedily discovered that Celeste had a steady “boy friend”—a senior at the college. In fact it was apparent that they were practically engaged. Campbell McDurford—popularly and for no explainable reason known as “Duff”—was a fine, athletic, blond giant of twenty-one, whose home was in Richmond. He had been devoted to Celeste ever since their second year in college, where he was studying electrical engineering. While nothing was definitely settled, it was rather guessed that he would marry her soon after their graduation, provided he could secure a good position.

All this Bitsy learned from Miss Eva, one evening when the two happened to be alone together, the other elderly people having retired and Celeste and Duff being off at the movies.

“That is, if Drew and Abby don’t interfere,” went on Miss Eva, after this revelation. “You see, they don’t like Duff. Not that there’s anything wrong with *him*, but his people came originally from the mountain people of the Shenandoah Valley, and Abby, particularly, doesn’t think it a suitable match for Celeste. She never forgave Celeste’s mother for marrying a Northerner, and she says this is the last straw. Drew rather agrees with her. It’s all very absurd, of course, and they’re very old-fashioned in their ideas. Celeste will probably do what she likes, in the end, but it all makes her rather unhappy.”

At first, after this discovery, Bitsy was violently jealous. She wanted Celeste to herself, and she had thought she was going to have her so, after moving to Romney House. She didn’t want to share her with even this nice young man—for she had to admit that he was undeniably delightful, even to her insignificant self—and she spent several miserable nights thereafter sobbing secretly into her pillow. But finally she resigned herself to Duff’s presence in Celeste’s life—and indirectly her own—and after that was happier.

And so the days marched on, and Bitsy Bates inevitably settled herself into the round of college life. In her classes she was excellent, for she was a born student. But in the social life, she herself admitted that she was “a complete flop”. She secretly longed to be

admitted to one of the fraternities, particularly the one to which Celeste belonged. But, though the “rushing season” soon began in dead earnest, no one “rushed” her, or made the slightest advance toward bidding her in to any of the charmed circles. Though she did not know it, Celeste had been making overtures for her to her own fraternity, but no one so far had agreed to these overtures, and Celeste could not be the only one to sponsor her admission. Her “fraternity sisters” frankly confessed to an active dislike for red-headed, cantankerous little Bitsy Bates!

But Bitsy was gradually finding other compensations. When she was lonely and Celeste was not available, she began to turn to gentle, charming Miss Eva Romney, who seemed to understand and sympathize with the difficulties of this shy and somewhat misunderstood young girl. They spent many hours happily chatting together, and Bitsy learned from her much of the history and atmosphere of old Williamsburg in the quiet years before the “Restoration”, and even, to a limited extent, of the Romney family itself. But here Miss Eva was a little guarded.

“We’re a queer lot!” she had once confessed. “I’m the most modern-minded one of this family, I expect. I’d like to do a great many things the others wouldn’t approve of. But Abby and Drew are distinctly of the ‘old school’. There are some like them still left in this town. They want to stick strictly to the old ways—even when some of them are rather silly now. And then—there are other reasons——”

She stopped abruptly, as if she had said too much, and went on to talk about something else. And Bitsy, breathless with curiosity, did not dare revert to the subject. That the old Romney house harbored some inscrutable mystery, she was now firmly convinced. Curious things had happened, even in the short time she had been living in it. There had been one night in particular. Celeste had not been at home, as she was spending the night in her fraternity house after some “spread” or festive entertainment that had been going on there. Bitsy had been studying alone in the living-room. Miss Eva was in bed with a rather severe cold, and the other two elderly people had sat about formally for a time, conversing between themselves, while Bitsy bent over her books. Then they had both withdrawn to their own rooms and she had been left alone. Presently, in sheer loneliness and boredom, she had herself gone to her room and to bed.

She had wakened, far in the night, aroused by some sound she could neither place nor explain. At first she could not believe she had really heard anything. But lying motionless and listening, she heard it again, and that time with great distinctness. A steady “tap-tap-tap,” coming from the direction of the stair not far from her door. It sounded like someone with a cane, either going up or down the stairs. She thought at once of Colonel Drew Romney, the only one in the house who used such an article, but she had always noticed that he used it very silently, never bringing it down with the slightest thump. Still, he might be ill or in trouble now, and not caring or thinking of its usual noiselessness. It couldn’t be Miss Abby, as she had a bedroom on the ground floor and never went up or down the stairs. Never moved about at all, in fact, without considerable assistance. And old colored Eliza slept in a little house out beyond the garden.

She lay for a moment wondering if she ought to do anything about it—and what. With Celeste away, and Miss Eva ill in bed, and someone else possibly needing assistance, it appeared to be “up to her” to see what was the matter. For it was very late. The moonlight streaming into her room enabled her to see the face of her wristwatch quite clearly—and it

was after two. The “tap-tap-tap” was still audible. Suddenly she sprang out of bed, threw a bathrobe over her pajamas, opened her door and went boldly into the hall. A gable window at the end of the hall threw a broad patch of moonlight directly on the stairs and Bitsy went straight to the top of them and looked down. Then she received the surprise of her young life. The stairway was absolutely empty of anyone, likewise the hall below—and *the “tap-tap-tap” was still audible!* A cold shudder of fear shook her. Thinking no longer of being of help to anyone, she scurried back to her room, leaped into bed and literally buried her head under the clothes!

Later, when she had regained her poise, she wondered if she ought to go and wake Miss Eva and tell her about it. She decided that she would if she heard the sound again, and lay listening long for its repetition. But the sound did not come again, and presently she fell asleep, to wake no more till morning. Next afternoon she told Celeste of the queer occurrence.

“You heard the ‘ghost’ all right!” said Celeste soberly. “I wish I’d been here. I’ve heard it once or twice myself in the past, but more vaguely. There’s some explanation, I’m sure. I don’t believe in ‘hants’. But when I mentioned it to the others they’ve always laughed at me and said I was dreaming. Don’t let it worry you, though. I told you in the beginning that this house had the reputation of being ‘haunted’ and you said you didn’t care.”

“I *don’t!*” declared Bitsy stoutly. “Only I was afraid I ought to do something—and I didn’t know what.”

“Just forget it,” advised Celeste, and there the matter dropped. But other curious things were to be added shortly.

It happened one afternoon, not very long after her adventure of the night, that Bitsy was sitting alone in the box-garden on an old stone bench beside a long-ago dry and unused fountain. It was a warm Saturday, and a clump of tall crêpe-myrtle bushes behind her cast a welcome shade. Celeste was off on a horseback riding expedition with some of her own classmates, and the older people were dozing on the veranda. Bitsy herself was absorbed in a knotty mathematical problem when old Eliza came out to gather some parsley and other herbs for her cooking. Idly glancing up from her work, Bitsy watched the old colored woman with the white turban knotted tightly about her kinky gray hair and the huge steel-rimmed spectacles adorning her broad flat nose. Presently, as the woman passed close to her on her way back to the kitchen, Bitsy remarked:

“You must have something mighty nice cooking in the kitchen, Eliza. It smells grand, even way out here!” And Eliza, who had always shown a decided partiality for the little newcomer, and who was also, moreover, weakly susceptible to any praise of her cooking, retorted:

“Yo’ sho’ am right, honey. Dey’s some gran’ cupcakes in de oven an’ dey’s mos’ done. Yo’ come in ’bout five minutes or so, after dey’s iced, an’ Eliza’ll let yo’ sample ’em!” And with a gleaming grin that displayed all her still strong white teeth, she went on her way. Bitsy lost no time in accepting her invitation. And it was in the big, cool kitchen, while she was eating delicious fresh-baked and chocolate-iced cupcakes, that she was to receive another curious item concerning the mysteries of old Romney House.

“How yo’ like dis place, honey?” asked the old colored woman as she set about

mincing parsley in a chopping bowl. “Spec’s yo’ mighty lonesome an’ homesick lots of de time.”

“Well, I’ve sort of got over that,” admitted Bitsy, munching a cupcake as she leaned against the kitchen table. “I like it pretty well now, specially this house. And I love Celeste and—and Miss Eva.”

“Sho yo’ do!” chuckled Eliza. “Ah done cahried dat Celeste child when she was a tiny baby—an’ her mamma befo’ her—an’ Miss Eva too. But yo’ doan like de Cunnel an’ Miss Abby?”

“I—well, I don’t know them very well,” Bitsy hesitated. “They—they’re sort of harder to get acquainted with.”

“Dey is dat!” sighed Eliza, chopping briskly. “But dey is de salt ob de earth—when yo’ know ’em better. Dey has had it hard—dey sho’ is. An’ dey is borne de burden. Dis ol’ house is full ob secrets an’ Ah doan know whether dey knows de answer or dey doan. Ol’ as Ah am, Ah doan know dat!”

“This sure is a queer old place, isn’t it!” commented Bitsy. And suddenly deciding to confide in this friendly old colored woman, she blurted:

“I heard the queerest thing the other night!” And she told Eliza of the incident of the strange tap-tapping on the stair. Somewhat to her consternation, Eliza dropped her chopping-knife and stared intently at her through the steel-rimmed spectacles during her recital. And when she had finished, the old colored woman began wringing her hands and moaning softly.

“Honey, honey, dis am a *bad* sign—hit sho’ am!” she groaned. “Yo’ is heard de hant! Hit only come once in a long, long time, an’ den it do sho’llly always mean trubble! Ah nebber knowed it to fail.”

“Oh, but maybe you’re mistaken! Maybe it wasn’t—that. I might have only imagined it,” Bitsy tried to reassure her. But Eliza was positive. Bitsy had certainly heard the weird sound that always preceded a bout with “trubble” in the Romney House.

“But why *should* it?” Bitsy persisted. “What’s it all about, anyway?”

“Ah’ll tell yo’ de story ob dat hant,” declared Eliza. “De odders dey nebber would. Dey ain’t too proud ob it.” And she went on to tell Bitsy about old General Sumter Romney who had been master of the house in the years preceding the Civil War. He had been a very fiery, hot-tempered old gentleman, it appeared, and was always quarreling, or in some sort of trouble, with his family, his slaves and his neighbors. He was quite lame, having had one leg permanently injured during the Mexican War, and always went about with a crutch. One horrible morning he was found dead, lying in the hallway, his crutch by his side. He had been murdered by some unknown hand, and the crutch used as the weapon—as its appearance plainly showed. No one knew or could guess who had done the dreadful deed. The family had all been away at the time, visiting in South Carolina. It was finally pinned on a runaway slave whom the General had had to punish earlier that year for some serious misdemeanor. The slave could never afterward be found. It was thought he had died in trying to escape, somewhere down in the region of the Dismal Swamp.

The General was buried in Bruton Parish churchyard and his inseparable crutch with him. But at intervals all through the years since, his “ghost” was occasionally heard in the

house, known by the “tap-tap” of his crutch as he made his way about. And the sound of that ghostly crutch invariably preceded trouble in Romney House.

Such was the tale Eliza unfolded. Bitsy listened wide-eyed, half-disbelieving, half-impressed. It was a gruesome story, and a most regrettable incident, she had to acknowledge. But what it could possibly have to do with the present queerness of the Romney House inhabitants, or why the old General’s supposed ghost should be bothered coming back and annoying his descendants, she couldn’t fathom and said so to a quite scandalized Eliza.

“But, honey chile, yo’ doan unnerstan’!” she had begun to remonstrate, when Miss Eva suddenly put an end to the discussion by appearing in the kitchen for her garden shears and basket, as she was planning to gather some roses for the dinner-table. Eliza fell into silence, shaking her head, and Bitsy went back to the garden to get her books. In spite of her incredulity, however, the story persisted in her mind, and she went to bed that night deeply thoughtful.

CHAPTER IV

TROUBLE IN THE HOUSE OF ROMNEY

MISS ABBY WAS “on the rampage”! She got that way every once in a while, so Celeste informed Bitsy, when Bitsy had come into her room one evening and found Celeste in tears. When the old lady was laboring with one of these unfortunate spells, the family, one and all, suffered.

“She can be the most infuriating!” muttered Celeste, wiping away the furtive tears. “She’s so exasperating—so *unreasonable!*”

“But—what’s the matter? What caused it?” queried Bitsy, who had been aware for the last twenty-four hours of a singular tensivity in the atmosphere at old Romney House.

“Several things!” vouchsafed Celeste. “I might as well tell you—you’re almost one of the family now.” She settled herself in the old and slightly decrepit winged-chair by the window, while Bitsy threw herself across the bed, and went on:

“This particular ‘rampage’ got started on account of the old Middlebury house across the street. You see, they’ve suddenly decided to go in for the ‘Restoration’! They’re sort of cousins of our family, and old Grandfather Middlebury was like Aunt Abby—had no use for this restoration business and wouldn’t hear of allowing their place to be ‘desecrated by Yankee millions’, as he called it. Didn’t matter to him if the roof leaked and the chimneys were falling to pieces and the house hadn’t been painted since before the flood. But he died about six months ago, and now his daughter has decided to turn the house over to the ‘Restoration’ and have it put in proper shape. She’ll be allowed to live in it all the rest of her life, so she thinks she may as well be comfortable and happy while she can. She’s awfully interested in it anyway and helped quite a bit looking up old records and plans for the Restoration Committee, when they were working on some of the other buildings.

“But *was* Aunt Abby wild when she heard the news! I thought she’d have an apoplectic fit. She says she’ll never enter the Middlebury house again or even speak to Cousin Eustacia Middlebury! Which is a great pity, because Cousin Stacia’s awfully nice. I always enjoy having her come over here—but I doubt if she ever will again—while Aunt Abby’s in the house! But that’s only part of the trouble. I wouldn’t care so much about that, except for the effect it has on other things.

“Yesterday the family learned that some holdings they’ve had for a long time, the income from which they’ve always depended on mainly for support, have just stopped paying dividends—indefinitely. And that *was* a blow! It’s been a miserable little pittance anyway, of late years, but they managed to scrape along on it. But this depression has done for it, I reckon. And they’ve scarcely anything else. Now see how sensible it would be if they’d just sell this place to the ‘Restoration’, get a good, fair price for it, have it all put in proper repair (and the Restoration does a thorough job!) and then be allowed to go back and live in it all the rest of their lives in peace and comfort. Can you think of anything more like a fairy-story? But will they do it?—They will *not*—at least Aunt Abby

and Uncle Drew won't, and they have the main say in the matter. Aunt Eva and I spent all last evening arguing with them about it. I reckon you must have heard us."

"Yes, I did," admitted Bitsy, "at least I heard you all talking hard about *something*—I couldn't tell what. I didn't want to listen and I was awfully busy in my room on an essay for my English class. How did you come out with it?"

"Complete deadlock!" admitted Celeste. "Got nowhere and the only result is that Aunt Abby isn't on speaking terms with anyone except Uncle Drew." She sighed heavily and twisted her damp handkerchief into a ball.

"But that isn't all of it, either. She's so annoyed at me now that she's forbidden me to have Duff come here to the house. She never did like him, anyway, and she doesn't approve of my being interested in him. But she's never done anything active about *that*—till now! It's the reward I got for taking sides against her in the other matter. So, you see, just about everything's gone wrong!"

"But—but what about the others?" queried Bitsy. "Don't they have *anything* to say about these things?"

"Precious little—it seems," averred Celeste. "The property's in Aunt Abby's name—legally—and the others are right under her thumb. I've reason to think that Uncle Drew isn't entirely in sympathy with her—always. I even believe he wouldn't mind the Restoration business, for himself. But there's some other reason I've never been able to fathom, for their not wanting it, outside of just the tosh about 'Yankee millions'. I've come to the conclusion—and this is a dead secret, Bitsy, just between us two—that there's something about this house they don't want *discovered* by having it restored. Don't ask me why I think so. I've only been forced to that conclusion by strange little things that happen, curious ways in which they act once in a while, and a general air of secrecy they maintain, for no apparent reason. You can't put your finger on any one thing and say it's this or that—just the impression you get. Queer, isn't it!"

Bitsy privately thought it exceedingly "queer", but she saw too that Celeste was in a very depressed mood and ought to be lured out of it in some way. So she proposed that they forget it all for the present, and, as the evening was yet young, that she would "treat" to the movies if Celeste would go. Celeste agreed, and they even gathered in Aunt Eva, too, who also plainly needed some diversion. And the three of them went out and saw an uproarious comedy, had sodas afterward in the Coffee Shoppe, and came back mentally refreshed.

Two days later, the atmosphere still being tense, Miss Eva announced that she was going on a visit to some cousins in Richmond and disappeared from the scene for an indefinite stay.

"She usually does that when Aunt Abby gets too difficult," Celeste confided to Bitsy, after the two had escorted Miss Eva to the station and seen her off on the train. "It makes her terribly nervous when Aunt Abby gets into one of these spells, and she generally gets sick herself unless she can get out of the way and have a rest from it. But something always happens while she's gone to bring her back in a hurry. You'll see! It'll be the same this time, no doubt. Meanwhile I've promised to help her out by sticking closer to the house and keeping an eye on the others. Aunt Abby's so feeble about getting around, and Eliza gets careless about the meals, and Uncle Drew loses his appetite and won't eat. I've

promised to try to keep them all up to the mark and free Aunt Eva from worry. Poor dear—she needs a vacation badly! Hasn't had one since last spring. Will you help me, Bitsy?"

Bitsy promised wholeheartedly that Celeste would have her entire coöperation. But neither of them, that sunny afternoon, suspected the surprising complications that were to ensue before Miss Eva Romney's return to Williamsburg.

CHAPTER V

THE CURIOUS CONDUCT OF COLONEL ROMNEY

BENEATH THE NOSELESS STATUE of old Governor Botetort, in front of Wren Hall, two students loitered, at noontime some two days later. One was Bitsy, the other the stalwart, blond Duff, and both were waiting to meet Celeste, who was detained by a French class. The late October weather still held mild and sunny, and crowds of other students were drifting by on their way to lunch in the dining-hall.

“Can’t think why Celeste is so long,” vouchsafed Duff. “She promised to meet me here and have a sandwich at the Coffee Shoppe and go for a little stroll afterward. Don’t get a chance to see so much of her lately, since Miss Abby’s got a grouch and won’t let me come to the house!” He grinned ruefully.

“I’ve got to see her too, for a minute,” admitted Bitsy. “She left earlier than I did this morning, and Eliza wants her to do some errands in town before she comes back this afternoon. I knew she’d be passing here, so I said I’d tell her. I’ve got to stay late for a math class this afternoon. Kind of hard on you, isn’t it, Duff? Miss Abby acting so cantankerous!”

“Sure is, but we’ll weather it somehow! They’re a strange lot, all of them—I mean the Romneys—except Miss Eva. The old Colonel sort of likes me, I think, but he’s right under Miss Abby’s thumb, same as Miss Eva.”

“Duff, I want to ask you something,” suddenly interrupted Bitsy. “I’m just sort of curious, and I hate to be always asking Celeste about her relatives. What is Colonel Drew always working at when he sits writing all day at his desk, surrounded by a lot of old books and letters and things?”

“Oh, didn’t you know?” Duff replied. “Why, I understand he’s writing a history of the Romney family. Been working on it for years. It seems they were always very prominent in this town’s affairs and the State too, from earliest Colonial times, and he’s made it his life work of late years to write up their history in this part of the country. Celeste says he’s been at it ever since she can remember. She thinks he’s sort of lost some of his enthusiasm about it the last few years, for some reason he never would explain, but he still digs away at it off and on. Keeps him busy and takes his mind off of other troubles, I suppose.”

“He acts so strangely about it, sometimes, when I happen to come in the room,” added Bitsy. “You know he writes at that big secretary desk in the living-room. And if I happen to enter the door, he just quietly stops, puts all his books away, shoves his writing in a drawer and gets up and walks off. It makes me feel sort of queer, as if I’d interrupted him, or he didn’t want me to know what he was doing, or ask about it—or something. I’ve got so I always peek in first now, and if he’s busy at it, I just walk off and don’t go in!”

Duff shook his head as if the riddle were too much for him, and at that moment Celeste joined them and the conversation ended for the time. It was, however, no later than that same evening that Bitsy was to happen upon another most curious phase of the problem.

Celeste had gone off after dinner to rehearse in a play that the senior class was to give the following month. She had confided to Bitsy that she wouldn't have gone, except that she had quite an important part and couldn't be spared. She had made it a rule since Miss Eva's departure, to be on hand at home as much as possible and help out there. But this was a matter which could not very well be dodged. So Bitsy had promised to do her part by helping Eliza get Miss Abby off to bed at the proper time, see that the Colonel had his glass of milk and cracker that he always took before retiring, and generally keep an eye on things till her return. And Celeste had departed with a free mind.

The evening had proceeded in its usual way. After dinner Bitsy sat in the living-room, busy at the table on her work for the next day. Miss Abby and the Colonel had sat by the open fire, for the evening had turned chilly, reading and conversing in their usual desultory manner. On this particular evening Miss Abby had chosen to converse with Bitsy at quite unusual length on the subject of her studies, and seemed more than ordinarily human in her interest. Bitsy always felt a trifle shy with Miss Abby and could never seem to relax into friendly chat with her as she did with Miss Eva. But on this occasion Miss Abby was remarkably kind and friendly, and finally asked Bitsy to help her to her room without the aid of Eliza, who, she confided, was sometimes clumsy and prone to step on her toes or jerk her about with well-meant but unnecessary energy. Very much flattered at being singled out to give this "pernickety" old lady assistance, Bitsy did her best and was rewarded by a kindly good night and pat on the shoulder when she had landed Miss Abby safely in her own quarters.

Then she went to the kitchen to get the Colonel's tray of milk and crackers from Eliza, and tell her she would not be needed any longer that night, but could retire to her own cabin out beyond the garden.

"Bress yo' heart, honey!" groaned Eliza. "Ah done feel dat stiff wid de rheumatics an' de misery in mah back dis night—Ah'm glad Ah kin git ter bed right smack off. Dere's gwine ter be a change in de wedder—yo' mark ma words, honey! Ah kin feel it comin' on, in mah ol' bones. De autumn storms is mos' hyah—an' Ah doan lak de autumn. Hit mos' always brings trubble in dis yere house. Yo' ain't heard no mo' o' dem tap-tappin' sounds at night, hab yo'?"

"No," said Bitsy as she took up the tray. "I haven't—and I hope I don't either!"

"Well, yo' look out fo' dem hall an' stairs—dey ain't *safe*! Yo' hyah me talkin', chile?" Bitsy nodded solemnly, and fled with the tray to the living-room. Sometimes Eliza made her flesh creep and her blood chill with those eerie warnings!

The Colonel accepted his evening refreshments from her with his customary old-time courtesy, thanked her and consumed them in silence while she went on with her work. When he had finished, she removed the tray to the kitchen and, returning, gathered up her books and bade him good night. Then she went upstairs to continue her studying in her own room. Privately she had decided that she would wait up till Celeste's return and have a chat with her before they both retired. But the evening was still early, scarcely more than nine, and she knew her friend would not be back much before eleven. So she lighted the fire on her own little hearth and huddled over it for warmth, while she wrestled with some difficult Latin translation. It must have been nearly an hour later that, having finished her Latin and turning to her mathematics, she discovered that she had left her algebra textbook down somewhere in the living-room. Taking her pocket flashlight (there being no

electricity in the house) she prepared to go down and get it, deciding that Colonel Romney must have long since gone to his own room.

She had reached the head of the stairs before she realized that something unwonted and strange was going on down below. The lower hall was lighted dimly by an oil-lamp in an elaborate bracket hung from the ceiling, and this lamp had been left lighted till Celeste's return. But to Bitsy's enormous astonishment, she beheld, at the foot of the staircase, the figure of Colonel Drew Romney, upon his hands and knees, his gold-headed cane lying beside him, and two lighted candles standing on the lower step. What he was doing, she could not make out at first, and a sheer fascination of curiosity kept her standing there, unobserved, for she had long since taken off her ties and put on a pair of soft bedroom slippers that had made no sound. Presently she saw what he was engaged in, and her wonder grew by leaps and bounds.

For Colonel Drew Romney, his gold-rimmed eyeglasses dangling by their black ribbon, his white moustache and goatee fairly trembling with earnestness, was prying and poking at the boards in the hallway near the bottom step of the stairway, with an open penknife, which he suddenly laid down to peer more closely at the boarding with—of all things!—*a magnifying glass!*

Bitsy could scarcely believe her eyes. And not for any consideration could she have withdrawn her fascinated gaze and returned to her room at that exciting moment. She could not understand what he was searching for. If he had merely dropped something, he would surely not be employing a *magnifying glass!* Presently the Colonel removed his attention from the stair, placed the candles on the floor near the wall and, without rising to his feet, changed his position so that he could examine the boards of the paneling near the floor. And in the shadows above, she still stood and watched him, breathlessly. At the first moment she had felt that perhaps she ought to make her presence known and offer to go down and help him with his search. But she speedily sensed the fact that this would be an unwelcome intrusion and the consciousness had been forced on her that she should not then be spying on him. She was just about to tiptoe reluctantly back to her room, when suddenly, without warning, he rose stiffly to his feet, stooped for his cane, reached for one of the candles and replaced it on the hall table where it evidently belonged. Then he rescued the other, replaced it and blew them both out. And Bitsy, fearful of being discovered, retreated hastily to her own room and closed the door. Later she heard him come slowly and softly up the stairs and retire to his own quarters at the end of the hall. But there was no more studying for her that night!

When Celeste returned shortly before eleven, she found a strangely wakeful Bitsy waiting for her, with an excited gleam in her brown eyes, and was prompted to ask:

“What's the matter, old dear? You look as if you'd seen the family 'ghost'! Anything happen while I was away?” And Bitsy took a sudden resolve. She had not at first intended to tell Celeste what she had seen that evening, as she always felt shy of intruding on any family matters. But when Celeste had inquired so pointedly, she determined to give her an account of the whole affair, and did so, with full details. Perhaps, she thought, her friend ought to know of this queer occurrence, especially since her family relations had lately become so complicated. Celeste listened to it all in silence, a queer, determined expression dawning in her fine gray eyes. At the end she sat silent for a moment, and suddenly burst into a most unexpected declaration:

“Look here, Bitsy, old thing! I’m not going to stand this business any longer. What you’ve just told me has made up my mind for me, and I’m going to get up and *act* about it now—and you’re going to help me, if you will—and we’ll get Duff in on it too!” She stopped impressively.

“I—I don’t know what you mean, I’m afraid!” stammered Bitsy, amazed at her friend’s sudden and enigmatic vehemence.

“I mean I’m going to find out what this is all about—I’m going to chase down this family mystery and get it solved—once and for all! I’ve got a perfect right to! I’m one of the family, when all’s said and done. Mother is own niece of all these folks here. We’ve got a right to be let in on it. I’ve known for a long time that *something* is preying on the minds of Aunt Abby and Uncle Drew, though they haven’t apparently told even Aunt Eva. And they’re both old and feeble and can’t get about much, and it hampers them a lot in trying to solve whatever they *are* trying to solve. I believe that if we could get this mystery cleared up, things here would change and be a lot happier. And there’s no sense why they shouldn’t all be happy in their old age—and let the rest of us be happy too.

“But I can’t do it alone—I’m so busy at college and all that. I need help. And you and Duff could lend a hand if you will. We might even get Aunt Eva in on it when she comes back. What do you say, Bitsy child? Are you game?”

“Sure I’m game!” declared Bitsy loyally, thrilled to be taken thus into the innermost secrets of the mysterious Romney affairs. “But—but how are you going to go about it, Celeste? Have you any plan?”

“Nary a plan—just yet—it’s too sudden. But we’ll have to think it over and talk it over a lot. I know a good many things I’ve never told you yet—things that have happened in the past. I never thought about them much at the time, but they probably all have a bearing on what’s going on now. We’ll dope out this Romney mystery—or I’ll eat my chemistry textbooks! You hear me talking, child?”

They discussed the affair excitedly, far into the night, and then retired, wide-eyed and sleepless, having definitely planned to begin operations the very next day.

CHAPTER VI

CELESTE MAKES SOME IMPORTANT DISCLOSURES

IN CELESTE'S ROOM on the following night, the girls threw aside their books, opened a fresh box of chocolates (a recent gift of Duff's) and began in earnest to discuss the subject of the solution of the Romney mystery. It happened to be "test week" at college, and feverish and hectic reviewing had had to be the order of almost every free hour, but now they were through "cramming" for the next day's ordeal and could concentrate on this far more interesting matter. Moreover, the other inhabitants of the house had long since retired and they had the silent establishment quite to themselves. A cosy fire crackled on the hearth and the little clock on the mantel had just chimed twelve.

"Have you said anything about this to Duff?" questioned Bitsy, selecting a particularly large and juicy chocolate and draping herself across the foot of the bed.

"I told him a little about it at noontime," answered Celeste, pulling the winged-chair toward the hearth and curling up in it. "Didn't have time to explain much, but he's with us, of course, and has promised to help in every way he can. Since Aunt Abby won't allow him to come to the house, it'll hamper him a bit, naturally. But he can consult with us and give us any advice we need. He really knows quite a lot! He said he was going to get a great 'kick' out of it—if nothing else!"

"Look here, Celeste," began Bitsy, reverting to another aspect of the subject, "you told me last night that there was a lot you'd discovered yourself about the mysterious things that have been going on around here. Don't you think it would be a good idea to tell me about them to begin with? I'm crazy to hear about them anyway!"

"Good idea!" agreed Celeste, thoughtfully contemplating another chocolate. "I'll begin right now. Let's see—where *shall* I begin? Well, perhaps you don't know it, but Uncle Drew is writing a history of the Romney family from way back in Colonial times." Bitsy did not say in so many words that she had already heard this fact from Duff, but remarked:

"So *that's* what he's doing when he sits writing all day, surrounded by all those old books and things."

"Yes, he began it a number of years ago," went on Celeste, "and he's still at it. He used to let me help him once in a while, by reading over the manuscript to him while he compared it with his rough copy, or hunting up references in old books and records, and that sort of thing. I always thought it sort of tedious work, but I was glad to be of help if I could. But a couple of years or so ago he stopped asking me for any help, or even allowing me to do anything when I volunteered to. I never could think why. Seemed as if he didn't want me to see his work any more, though he always gave it as an excuse that I was too busy now, with all my own college work, and oughtn't to be bothered with it. But I'm dead certain that wasn't the *real* reason. At first I didn't think much about it and was only too glad to be let out of a kind of boring job. But after a while I noticed that he got to shoving his books and papers away whenever I came in while he was working, and that

got me sort of curious as to why he apparently didn't want me to see it."

"I've noticed the same thing when I come into the room," interrupted Bitsy. "I've got to feeling that I must be bothering him somehow, so I don't come in any more when I see him at his desk."

"So you've noticed it too!" commented Celeste. "Well, I'll have to admit that the way he was acting made me feel that something must have gone wrong, somehow, or he wouldn't act so worried. I *had* worked with him a lot on the book, and he'd never forbidden me to look at what he was writing, and it was *my* family just as much as his. So one Saturday it happened that I'd come home from college unexpectedly in the morning, because Professor Jameson was ill and we had no Latin class. Uncle Drew had been working at his desk, but had left it for a while to go out and sit in the garden, and his work was all spread out still, as he had probably planned to come back to it. As I was passing the desk, I glanced down at his manuscript." She stopped to throw some more wood on the fire, and Bitsy demanded breathlessly:

"Oh, what did you see there?"

"It wasn't anything so very exciting—at least on the surface," Celeste enlightened her. "You see, the way he is writing this history, is taking character by character, in chronological order, and tabulating everything of interest about each particular one, consulting old letters and records and that sort of thing. Each one had taken him a long time to work over, and I was curious to see how far he'd got, and which one he was working on at the time. And all there was at the top of the page was '*Sumter Claiborne Romney*, born July fifth, 1789, died April twenty-third, 1858.' That was all there was—but it set me thinking!"

It set Bitsy thinking too, but she did not like to tell Celeste the reason, so she only murmured:

"Why?"

"Because Sumter Romney is our pet family 'mystery' and the origin of our 'ghost!'" And Celeste proceeded to give the history of his strange and tragic end, retailing the story in much the same way that Eliza had told it to Bitsy.

"But that isn't all about this particular phase of it," continued Celeste. "About a month later, I came in again unexpectedly one day, and I reckon Uncle Drew didn't hear me, for as I came into the living-room (I had on a pair of sneakers and he didn't hear my step) I found him bending over his desk, his work spread out all around him, but he had his head in his hands and he somehow looked the picture of despair. Before he could move, I went over to him and said:

"'What's the matter, Uncle Drew? Feeling discouraged about the book? Why not let me help you?' But he only roused himself and shoved his work aside and got up, saying he was merely a little tired and had a headache, and thought he'd stop for the day. Then he put his writing away and left the room. But here's the queer part of it. As I bent over him, I couldn't help but see the page of his manuscript in front of him. And, Bits, if you'll believe me, it was just the same as it had been the day I saw it over a month before! He apparently hadn't put a line down since! Nothing but the name of General Sumter Romney and the date of his birth and death. Now, do you see why I strongly suspect it's *that* person who has caused a snag somewhere? Take it from me, my dear, he's dug up

something about that old ancestor of ours that's causing him some bad moments!"

Bitsy digested this piece of information in silence. She hated to ask Celeste what she thought it might be, yet she was dying to know. At last she ventured:

"Do you—do you think that can have anything to do with their not wanting to have the house 'restored'—besides their just resenting 'Yankee money' being spent down here—and all that?"

"I'm *certain* of it—and I'll tell you why. At first, when the 'restoration' was talked about, it was only Aunt Abby who felt so strongly about it. Aunt Eva was keen for it, and Uncle Drew was sort of undecided. Thought it might be a good thing in some ways, and didn't agree entirely with Aunt Abby about 'Yankee interference' in our town and personal affairs being so obnoxious. Said he thought that in many ways it was a fine idea to preserve the town historical relics in this way. If Southerners couldn't afford to do it themselves, why not let some generous-minded Northerner have the privilege?—and all that kind of talk. Then, all of a sudden, he changed. And as I remember, it was just awhile before that first discovery of mine. Now he's almost as rabid on the subject as Aunt Abby herself. And I'm as certain as I am of anything, that it's on account of this!"

"But I still don't see," countered Bitsy, "what that can possibly have to do with 'restoring' this house, even if he *has* discovered something about some ancestor that bothers him."

"It's kind of complicated," explained Celeste, "and of course I haven't been able to figure it out exactly either. But as far as I can think, it looks like this. And to explain it, I've got to tell you just exactly what they do, when they take over a house like this to 'restore' it. Maybe you think they just go over it and fix it up a bit and give it a new coat of paint and that's all there is to it. But it's far more elaborate and complicated than that. First the family has got to move out with all its movable belongings for quite a while."

"But—where do they *move* to?" queried Bitsy.

"That's all arranged for, by the Restoration Committee. If they haven't any relatives they can go to (in which case they have fireproof sheds built temporarily on the property to house all their furniture and things), the 'Restoration' provides them with another house in town—most likely an empty one that they have already 'restored', where the family can live very comfortably till their own house is done. Anyhow, after they're out of their own house, the 'Restoration' proceeds to take that house to pieces, board by board, all laid aside carefully to be put back later. Then, when nothing is left but the bare framework, they strengthen this with steel and concrete and all that sort of thing, so that it will be practically indestructible and fireproof, and then put back everything just as it was, only removing any modern or ugly additions, and restoring old features of it that have at some time in the past been torn away or destroyed. Then they put fireproof shingles on the roof, made to resemble exactly the old cypress ones, and they install fine modern heating-plants and electricity, making the house marvelously comfortable, at the same time looking exactly as it did in the early days. And when they're all through, the family can go back and enjoy it for the rest of their lives."

"I think that's perfectly *marvelous!*" cried Bitsy, enthralled by the description of this "restoration" that sounded almost like a fairy tale. "I can't see how anyone could possibly object to such a wonderful thing being done to their home. But I don't understand what

that's got to do with the thing that's bothering your Uncle Drew."

"Well, of course, as I've said before," went on Celeste, "I don't know anything positively, but just let's suppose, for instance, that Uncle Drew may have discovered, in his researches into our family history, that something was done or hidden somewhere in this house which he wouldn't care particularly to have come to light. He evidently can't find it himself, but he wouldn't want anyone else to, either. And it would be sure to come to light if the Restoration got busy on the place in the way they do."

"Oh, then that would explain," cried Bitsy, sudden understanding dawning on her, "why he was poking about in the hall the other night! He's looking for some hidden thing!"

"It would explain a lot," admitted Celeste, "provided I've hit on the right idea. But that spot, by the way, isn't the *only* place that has had his attention. I happen to have discovered him at other times, usually late at night when he thought every one in the house was asleep, prowling about the house examining the walls and floors. And there's a queer place in the cellar that's had his particular attention a number of times."

"Oh, tell me about that!" cried Bitsy, all excitement.

"Well, last year, I happened to wake up late one night and heard someone going softly along this upper hall and down the stairs. I got up and looked out and saw it was Uncle Drew. And as I watched him, I noticed he was making for the cellar stairway. That was too much for me, so I got on my slippers and bathrobe and tiptoed quietly down after him. He had a candlestick to light him, and I could watch pretty well what he was doing, while I kept out of sight myself, on the dark cellar stairway. I must tell you that there's a strange old stone in one corner of the cellar floor, about two feet wide and four or five long. It seems to be cemented down very tightly in some way and has evidently been there for years and years. No one appears to know how long, or what the old thing covers. I remember it from the time I was a little child. Eliza would never go near it. In fact, she will never go into the cellar at all if she can help it. She declares the stone covers a grave, and even once confided to me that old General Sumter Romney was buried there! All of which is nonsense, of course, and nothing but darky superstition. Old General Sumter Romney has a nice proper gravestone in Bruton Parish churchyard where he was buried alongside his wife—and that's that! And as for its being anyone else's grave, that's all tosh too.

"But, aside from all that, there's something queer about that old stone. It's different from the flooring of the rest of the cellar, which is made of uneven stones joined by some kind of cement. This is off in an inconspicuous corner, and is quite a regular oblong in shape. And, besides that, way in one corner it has a small but very curious mark cut in the stone. I sneaked down myself one night very late, with my electric torch, and examined it thoroughly. But, whatever it all is, it has Uncle Drew 'coming and going', as it were!"

Suddenly Bitsy was inspired with a mad idea. "Look here, Celeste," she whispered excitedly, "I'm just crazy to see that stone! And I've never been in the cellar, except once when Eliza asked me to go down and get some apples for her from a barrel right at the foot of the stairs. She said her back 'had de misery' so bad that she hated to go up and down stairs, and she needed the apples for cooking. I just went down and right up again. Why couldn't we go down now—every one's asleep—and take a look at that stone? Oh, do—*do* say yes, Celeste!" Her friend considered the matter for a moment. Then she

replied:

“All right! I reckon no one will hear us, and if we’re going to unravel this mystery, we might as well begin by letting you see that stone. You wouldn’t have much chance to do it in the daytime. But it wasn’t ‘de misery’ that kept Eliza from going down there—the clever old rascal! She just hates to go into the cellar and insists on having the barrel of apples and the one of potatoes right near the steps so she never has to go far into the cellar depths. Come along! Where’s that electric torch of yours?”

“But just suppose some one hears us, or your Uncle Drew suddenly decides to do some of his own exploring?” Bitsy hesitated, seized with belated fears for the project.

“Oh, I’ll invent some excuse!” laughed Celeste. “We want some apples to eat—or something like that. But don’t worry. No one will disturb us at this unearthly hour—it’s nearly two o’clock.”

They found the torch and tiptoed from their room down the dark stairs, through the hall, and descended to the eerie depths of the cellar. Delightful shivers, half of fear, half of thrilled excitement, ran up and down Bitsy’s spine as they penetrated the weird, cobwebby shadows, dodged around ancient barrels and trunks, and finally found their way to the obscure corner where the stone in question was located. To their great disgust, they found the place covered over with a mound of discarded packing-boxes and miscellaneous trash so deeply that, to the uninitiated eye, no such stone was visible.

“Uncle Drew’s work—this!” muttered Celeste. “It never used to be covered with anything. I believe he’s been trying to keep it out of sight. Now we’ll have to remove all this trash—and do it without making any noise, at that!”

They began patiently and quietly to lift off the accumulated boxes and rubbish and lay them aside till finally the ancient stone came to light.

“There it is!” announced Celeste. “Queer thing, isn’t it? So different from the rest of the cellar floor. And here’s that curious mark I told you about. You’ll have to bend down closely to get a glimpse of it.”

She turned the torchlight toward one corner and both bent over it. And Bitsy beheld a singular symbol, no longer than about two or two-and-a-half inches, cut into the stone. The mark resembled a couple of oddly crisscrossed lines, with two loops near one end, and over it the tiny figure 4.

“Celeste, what in the world can that mean?” she breathed. “I never saw anything quite like it.”

“Neither did I,” Celeste replied, “and I haven’t the faintest idea what it means—and neither has anyone else, I reckon. And up till recently, no one’s been curious enough about it even to care. But I imagine that now Uncle Drew would give a good deal to know!”

“Then why doesn’t he have the place dug up and see what’s underneath it?” demanded Bitsy.

“If he could do it himself, without being seen, I reckon he would. But as that’s out of the question, he’d probably rather die than have strangers do it for him. That’s probably one of the main reasons he doesn’t want the house ‘restored’, don’t you see? He’s *afraid!* But come,—we must put all this stuff back and get upstairs again.”

They began to re-pile the miscellaneous accumulation back over the stone, and at

length it looked as it had before they disturbed it. But in suddenly stepping backward, Celeste stumbled over an old iron bucket that had remained unnoticed, and the thing rolled over with a tremendous clatter. For an instant the two girls stood transfixed with alarm, sure that the noise must have been plainly heard in the house above. And they were not mistaken, for in another moment there came an insistent pounding from the floor above.

“Quick!—that’s Aunt Abby,” breathed Celeste. “She always keeps a cane by her bed to thump with if she wants anyone to come to her in the night. She’s heard us—and we’ll have to go in there and explain!”

With pounding hearts, they scurried through the cellar to the foot of the stairs, and Celeste grasped a handful of apples from the barrel as they fled up the steps and guiltily approached Miss Abby’s door. But Celeste was giving the old lady no opportunity to make any accusations. Opening the door, she entered with the torch on and her hands full of apples.

“So sorry we disturbed you, Aunt Abby!” she began, before the old lady could open her mouth. “We were getting some apples in the cellar, and I stumbled over some old iron thing and made that racket. I ought to have been more careful.”

“What on earth you want apples for at this time of night, is beyond *me!*” Bitsy heard Miss Abby irritably exclaim.

But Celeste soothed her with the explanation of how hungry one might become studying late at night, and the old lady was gradually mollified and the incident closed with the two culprits creeping softly up to bed. But Celeste remarked, as they sat munching their apples:

“I tell you, there isn’t much going on around this house that Aunt Abby doesn’t see or hear. She’s going to give us some trouble before we’re through, I reckon!”

CHAPTER VII

THE UNFORESEEN

FATE HAS OFTEN strange ways of turning the wheel, just at the most unexpected moment!

A half-drizzly, chilly Saturday afternoon following their night's adventure found the two girls walking home from a basket-ball game in which Celeste, as captain of her team, had brilliantly distinguished herself. A lowering gray sky and sudden spurts of rain fulfilled the prophecy of Eliza's "ol' bones", that the fall storms were about to begin. Celeste was elated over the winning of the game, but Bitsy tramped down the Duke of Gloucester Street by her side, a sulky and discontented expression clouding her face. After the first, "You played a swell game, Celeste!" she had been very quiet.

"What's the matter, old dear?" queried Celeste at length. "Somebody been ragging you again?"

"It's that Rita Spence—my roommate that was—as usual!" Bitsy sullenly acknowledged. "I stumbled over her feet, getting to my seat for the game, and she turned and muttered to the girl beside her, 'That red-headed shrimp is a blamed nuisance!' I turned right around and told her I'd thank her to refrain from calling me names in public. Then she got hot under the collar and we had some words—more or less! It just spoiled everything for me." Celeste's happy expression faded, and she turned on Bitsy with an annoyed:

"When will you *ever* learn to control yourself, Bits? Can't you realize that the best way to treat remarks like that from a girl like Rita is simply to ignore them? She isn't worth quarreling with, and you did just the very thing she hoped you would—took it right up and made an issue of it. You'd have disappointed her bitterly if you'd let it pass."

"I know. I suppose I ought," acknowledged Bitsy, "but she's so *mean!* She never *has* forgiven me for leaving our room at the dorm and going to live with you."

"Well, I'm going to tell you something you don't know," went on Celeste, "but I think it's time you heard it. Rita's just crazy about that senior, Elsie Crane, who's in our fraternity, the Pi Theta Phi. And I suppose she's filled Elsie's mind with a lot of talk about you. For it was Elsie who voted against admitting you as a pledge three weeks ago. I moved heaven and earth trying to get you in, but she wouldn't stand for it—and you can easily see why. I felt horribly bad about it, but I couldn't do a thing when she voted against you. If you want to get in next semester, you'll jolly well have to learn to control your temper and get along more smoothly with Rita, even if you don't like her. You hear me, child? I'm saying it for the good of your soul!"

Bitsy only nodded miserably, and they trudged along in silence after that. Nothing was nearer to her heart than to be admitted to that coveted fraternity, and she had grieved secretly over the fact that she had not been "pledged" during the season. She had rather suspected the reason, but now she knew it definitely. Celeste said no more, but let the seed she had planted do its work in silence. And at that moment they turned into Francis Street.

"*Great day!*" exclaimed Celeste, glancing down the street. "What's happening at our

house? Look at that crowd in front of it!" They both took to their heels and raced along the intervening block, reaching the Romney house to find a dozen or more children, some idle darkies and a few concerned Williamsburg citizens standing about and gaping at a long, shiny vehicle marked "Ambulance" standing by the curb. The two girls dashed up the steps and into the house and were instantly plunged into excitement of the most hectic sort.

On a chair in the hall sat Eliza, her apron thrown over her head, rocking back and forth and wailing softly. In the living-room, Miss Abby's voice could be heard, unwontedly shrill, arguing with another voice which Celeste recognized as Cousin Eustacia Middlebury's, from across the street. The family doctor at that moment emerged from the kitchen with a pitcher of hot water and raced up the stairs, calling to two men in white uniforms, evidently connected with the ambulance, to bring some blankets and get the stretcher ready. Celeste went over to Eliza and shook her shoulder, demanding to know instantly what was the matter.

"Oh, Lawdy, Lawdy!" moaned Eliza, removing her apron from her eyes. "Hit's de Cunnel! He done fell an mashed hisself up! De doctor say he gwine tek him to de hospital in Richmond! He done gotta hab a operation—or somepin! Oh, Lawd hab mussy on us all!" Eliza was so nearly hysterical that the alarmed Celeste felt it useless to question her any further, and dragged Bitsy after her into the living-room, where Miss Abby and Cousin Eustacia were having a heated argument. Miss Abby was enthroned on the couch, and Miss Middlebury was standing before her, cool and collected and very much mistress of the situation.

"Please tell me what this is all about!" cried Celeste. "What's happened to Uncle Drew?" Before Miss Abby could gather herself together sufficiently to reply, Cousin Eustacia answered calmly:

"Don't get too upset, Celeste. Things aren't as bad as they seem. Cousin Drew slipped on the stairs and fell to the bottom, and has broken a shoulder, the doctor thinks. He was a good bit shaken up and knocked unconscious, too, but is coming around all right. The doctor feels, though, that he'd be much better off to be taken right to the hospital in Richmond, where that bone-specialist, Dr. Carey, can give him a thorough looking over—X-rays and all that—and have him under his care till his shoulder is all right again. At Drew's age you can't take any chances with trying to treat these things at home."

"That's all very well to say," snapped Miss Abby, "but where's the money coming from for such a course of treatment, I'd like to know?"

"I've *told* you, Abby, what can be done about that!" mildly remonstrated Cousin Eustacia.

"If you think Drew is going to tolerate recovering by means of *unwanted Yankee dollars*—" Miss Abby fairly hissed the words. But Cousin Eustacia paid no attention whatever to this outburst, and turned to explain to the girls:

"This is how it all happened. Eliza came running over to me about an hour ago to say that Drew had fallen down the attic stairs——"

"The *attic* stairs?——" breathed Celeste. "Why, he *never* goes up there!"

"Well he did *this* time," smiled Cousin Eustacia. "Nobody knew it, I reckon, till he fell. I called up the doctor at once on my telephone, and fortunately caught him at home

and he came right over. We got Drew to his own bed and the doctor examined him and then announced that he *must* be taken to the hospital. Abby objected, because of expense and that sort of thing, but I told her she must not let that stand in the way of his recovery. I've enough and to spare, since the Restoration took over the house, and will be only too delighted to see this thing through. Drew's done some pretty kind things for me, in the past, and I'm honestly happy to be able to return it in some way. I'm going up to Richmond almost at once, myself, to stay while the house is being done over, and I'll be able to keep an eye on things in the hospital and be company for him when he's able to see people. Eva must come right back here where she'll be needed most. It's all very simple!"

"Simple to *you*, perhaps," thundered Miss Abby, "but not to people who feel as we do!"

"Aren't you putting your feelings before Drew's welfare, Abby?" remonstrated Miss Eustacia.

"There are limits——" began Miss Abby, but she never finished the statement, for at that moment the doctor poked his head into the room and announced:

"They're bringing the Colonel down now and putting him in the ambulance. I wish you'd all refrain from seeing him or trying to bid him good-by. He's conscious and quite comfortable for I've given him a hypodermic to ease the pain. But I don't want him upset by anything. You can see him later in the hospital, when he's further 'out of the woods'. He's going to be *all right*. Don't worry about him! Good-by!" And he was gone, leaving them in a stunned silence to watch from the windows while the orderlies deftly finished their work, the ambulance drove off, and the crowd scattered, all but three curious children who remained to stare at the blank front of the house all the rest of the afternoon.

Through the united efforts of the girls and Cousin Eustacia, Eliza was gradually calmed and reduced to something like her normal placidity, and returned to the kitchen to her work. Miss Abby remained sternly seated on the couch and refused all offers of being helped to her room, fortified with smelling-salts or aromatic ammonia, and only requested to be left to herself.

"I've had a shock, of course," she condescended to admit, "but thank heaven, I'm not the kind that goes to pieces under them! I'll go right on as usual."

"I'd be very glad to come over and stay here for a night or two, till Eva gets back, if you like, Abby," offered Cousin Eustacia. "I don't go to Richmond till Monday, and I could help around a bit."

"Thank you. I appreciate your offer, but there is no need," said Miss Abby stiffly. And Miss Eustacia took the hint and departed smilingly, bidding Celeste and Bitsy not to hesitate to run over and get her if any other emergency should arise. Thus the Romney household was left to digest this latest astonishing and rather painful turn of affairs and cope with its problems unmolested.

"Isn't Cousin Eustacia a *peach!*" cried Celeste, as soon as that lady was well out of hearing. Miss Abby glared at her in keen disapproval.

"My dear, I detest that type of slang!" she countered haughtily. "And I consider Eustacia's intrusion into this affair quite uncalled for." Celeste saw that it was useless to continue along that line, and veered to another.

“Poor Uncle Drew! It must have been a horrid experience for him. I do hope he’s going to be all right. By the way, hadn’t I better go over to Cousin Eustacia’s telephone and have a message wired to Aunt Eva—or call her up direct?”

“Eustacia has already done so,” Miss Abby admitted grudgingly. “But I think you had better go up and straighten out your uncle’s room. I expect those men left it all upside down. And Eliza has to tend to getting dinner.” And at this welcome dismissal, Celeste and Bitsy thankfully withdrew from her irritable presence.

“I’m sorry for Aunt Abby,” confided Celeste when they were ascending the stairs, “but she’s always cross and unreasonable when she’s upset. This must have been a big shock to her. She’ll get over it by herself, better than any other way. Will you help me get Uncle Drew’s room to rights, Bits?”

True to Miss Abby’s prediction, the room did indeed look as if a cyclone had struck it, with the bed drawn out to the middle of its space, clothing, sheets and towels strewn everywhere, and a basin and pitcher of water standing squarely in the middle of the Colonel’s most cherished mahogany table, where they had imprinted two horrifying circles. The girls flew about clearing up the clutter, glad to be actively employed after the strain and shock they had arrived upon. And when the room was reduced to some semblance of order, they turned to go out toward their own.

At the foot of the steep, narrow attic stairs (usually concealed behind a shut door) they halted, for there lay the Colonel’s gold-headed cane, a pathetic reminder of his painful accident.

“Whatever *possessed* him to go up there?” marveled Celeste, as she stooped to pick it up. “To my knowledge, he hasn’t been up there in years—not since he had to use that cane. The attic used to be full of trunks and chests of old books and family documents, and even old Colonial records. But he had those all brought down and stored in another part of the house so that he could get at them easily, when he began to write his book. I can’t think what he would be prowling around up there for!”

“Unless he’s hunting there for—*something*—like he is around the rest of the house,” offered Bitsy as she stooped to pick up a scrap of crumpled paper that had lain almost unnoticed, close to the wall, near where the cane had fallen. And quite unconsciously, while they were discussing the matter, she smoothed it out and glanced down at it. Suddenly her brown eyes widened with acute surprise, and she handed the paper to Celeste, exclaiming breathlessly:

“Look at *this!*”

CHAPTER VIII

COUSIN EUSTACIA INTERVENES

CELESTE GLANCED at the paper, gasped and seized Bitsy by the arm.

“Come to my room!” she whispered. “This is a find! It’s evidently some notes of Uncle Drew’s. He must have had the paper in his hand and dropped it when he fell. We’ve struck a clue here, I think!” They hurried to Celeste’s room and shut themselves in and fell to staring anew at the scrap of crumpled paper. Scrawled on it, in the Colonel’s rather shaky writing, were these words:

Memo.—Might be possible by way of attic. Sixth stairway indicated on old plan.

“Can you make out what it’s all about?” questioned Bitsy in an awed tone.

“It’s evidently a note he made—he was always jotting down little items he didn’t want to forget when I worked with him,” suggested Celeste, her brows knit in a frown of intense concentration. “That’s plain from the ‘memo’—short for *memorandum*, of course. He must have had it crumpled in his hand when he started out. And, if you ask me, I figure he never reached the attic at all. He must have stumbled or missed his footing on that steep stair and fallen down backward while he was trying to climb them. Poor Uncle Drew!—It surely was tough for him! I do hope he’s going to get over this all right.”

“So do I!” fervently echoed Bitsy. “But meantime, what’s the meaning of the rest of it?”

“I can’t quite think yet,” vouchsafed Celeste, “but we’ll figure it out in time. You’d understand better, Bitsy, if you knew a little more about the curious features in this house. You must have guessed, in looking at it from the outside, that there’s quite some of it not in use at all—closed off. It was added to and altered considerably, even from its first years, and it’s far too big for such a small family as the Romneys are now. For instance, there’s that addition on the side east of the living-room. There’s a good-sized room downstairs that has a door opening into it on the right-hand side of the living-room fireplace. You remember that door, don’t you?” Bitsy nodded.

“That’s always kept locked because Uncle Drew, when he first began to write his book, had all the trunks full of documents and things brought down from the attic and stored there, so that he could get at them easily. He locks it when he isn’t in there, because some of those old Colonial records are extremely valuable. That room used to be old General Sumter Romney’s bedroom, but nobody’s ever used it for that since he died, I reckon. There’s a room over it, too, that isn’t used, and beyond that another, smaller addition that’s closed.”

“But what do you think he means about the ‘sixth stairway’?” demanded Bitsy. “I only know of two in this house. The main one, up to the second floor, and the enclosed one to the attic, that your uncle fell down. Are there others?” Celeste laughed.

“There are certainly *three* more, honey. One from the west annex where Aunt Abby’s room is, leading to a tiny room above that she only uses to keep some of her own personal belongings stored. And two others in the addition at the east annex, leading from the ground floor to a room above. And of course there’s the stone stairway down to the cellar, but I’m sure Uncle Drew didn’t count that in when he said ‘a sixth’. I think he meant stairways in the house itself. But if there *is* a sixth, I can’t imagine where it can be! I’d like to get hold of that old ‘plan’ he speaks of in this note, and study it a bit.” Suddenly she sat up, inspired by a brand-new idea:

“Tell you what!—I’ve a hunch at last, as to how we’re going to go about this investigation. We’ll start by looking over all that stuff Uncle Drew keeps stored in the room off the living-room. It’s simply crammed with old documents and letters and books and so on, that he has used to work up the earlier part of his manuscript. We’ll begin this very night!”

“But——” hesitated Bitsy, “how are you going to get in there? Didn’t you say he kept it locked? And—and ought we to go rummaging around among those things if he—he didn’t want us to?”

“I appreciate your scruples, Bits,” laughed Celeste, a little excitedly, “but you don’t quite understand. He keeps it locked more because some of the records are very valuable Colonial documents, than because he doesn’t want them examined—at least by a member of his family. I’ve gone over some of them dozens of times with him in the past, when I was working on the book with him, and there’s no reason why I shouldn’t again. And as to getting in there, with the door locked into the living-room, that’s no trouble—for anyone who knows this house! It’s got to be done by way of the attic. You’ll be surprised!—Of course, we’d better not let Aunt Abby know, or she’d certainly block us. But Aunt Eva’s coming home soon, and I’m going to take her right in on our secret. I’m certain she’ll help us out a lot. So calm your conscience, honey!”

At that moment Eliza rang the dinner bell, and they went down to a rather strained meal, with Miss Abby nervous and upset, and worrying constantly about her brother’s condition, though she said little during the interval. Directly afterward, there was a knock at the front door and Eliza admitted Miss Eustacia once more.

“I came over to tell you all,” she announced, quietly seating herself in the living-room, “that I’ve just called up the hospital and heard the latest news about Drew. It’s very good. They have X-rayed him pretty thoroughly, and found no other damaged places except his shoulder, which has been set and strapped, and he is resting very comfortably. But he will have to be there quite some time, to get it properly healed and to be sure he has no internal injuries that might develop later. They think he got off pretty luckily, considering his age, and the seriousness of the fall. I thought you’d like to hear the news at once.” She smiled at Miss Abby, who, in spite of her disapproval of the whole hospital episode and Miss Eustacia’s part in it, looked considerably relieved.

“It’s very kind of you, Eustacia,” she acknowledged, evidently trying to keep the grudging note out of her voice. “Of course, I still do not approve of his having been taken there, but I am relieved to know he is doing so well.”

“I also called up Eva,” went on Miss Eustacia. “She was very much shocked, of course. She will see Drew tomorrow and then come right on home. She feels she ought to be here, as I can keep an eye on Drew at the hospital, when I get to Richmond.”

“It is not at *all* necessary that she come back,” retorted Miss Abby. “We are doing very well as we are, and she left because she was nervous and out of sorts.” Miss Eva’s departure still rankled in her sister’s mind. “She won’t be improved by coming back so soon.”

“Well, that’s strictly up to *her*, I should think,” countered Miss Eustacia, in her calm, slightly amused voice. “Anyhow, I told her I’d deliver the message.” Miss Abby had nothing at all to comment on this very obvious remark, and sat silent for several moments while her cousin chatted with the two girls. Presently she gathered herself together and addressed Celeste:

“I think, if you will all excuse me, that I’ll retire at once. I have had a great shock and a very trying day. Will you help me to my room, Celeste, and call Eliza to assist me while I get to bed? Good night, Eustacia, and thank you for coming over with the messages.” She rose stiffly, assisted by Celeste, and departed to her own room. When Celeste had returned, Miss Eustacia suggested:

“It’s early yet, and a bit dreary for you two alone here. Could you come out with me and go to the movies? We could be back soon after nine. We could get Eliza to stay in the house so that Abby won’t be alone.”

“Oh, we’d *love* to, but I don’t think we’d better!” hesitated Celeste. “It might bother Aunt Abby, and she’s all sort of criss-cross tonight. But can’t you stay here a while and visit with us, Cousin Eustacia?”

“I reckon you’re right—you oughtn’t to leave,” agreed that lady. “I’ll stay for a bit, though I know every minute I’m in this house irritates Abby, now. She never has forgiven or will forgive me for ‘going Restoration’, you know!” They smiled a bit over that, and all drew their chairs close to the hearth where Celeste piled up a cheery, blazing fire, and went to get a dish of apples to munch. After a few minutes of idle chat, she suddenly burst out:

“Cousin Eustacia, I want to ask you something. Have *you* noticed anything queer or different about Uncle Drew, this last year or so? He seems to me to be worrying about something. You always were very fond of him, and I think he talked to you more freely than he did the rest of us. I’ve wondered if he ever confided in you about what’s troubling him.” Miss Eustacia looked a bit startled at this, and glanced with an involuntary, questioning look at Bitsy.

“Oh, you needn’t mind Bits,” hastily added Celeste, understanding the hesitation. “She’s just like a sister to me, and I’ve told her a good deal about our family history.” Miss Eustacia appeared relieved, and answered:

“Well, since you ask me, and since Bitsy here is one of us, as it were, I’ll confess that I *have* noticed something’s been troubling Drew for some time past. We grew up together, he and I, and have always felt quite close to each other. I used to come over and help him, too, occasionally, with his work, just like you did, Celeste. We always enjoyed discussing the family’s past, for of course mine was connected with it too. But one day a curious thing happened. I had promised to come over on a certain morning and help him arrange in chronological order, some notes he had been collecting on old General Sumter Romney, his grandfather. But when I got here, I found him sitting at his desk, his head in his hands, looking the picture of despair. I questioned him as to what was the matter—whether he

weren't feeling well, or what. And he finally confessed that I needn't bother to wait, that he couldn't go on that day and so on and so on.

"I somehow felt certain he wasn't telling me the real reason, and said so. And at last he acknowledged that something most disturbing had come up in regard to the notes he had been collecting. He said:

" 'I can't tell you what it is, Eustacia. The thing has affected me too deeply. It's a blot—a black blot on the family 'scutcheon. I shall have to discontinue this work till I have cleared it up.'

"I said, 'Fiddlesticks, Drew! It's my family as well as yours, remember. You needn't be squeamish about telling *me*!' But he only answered:

" 'I have told no one but Abby, not even Eva, and never will. If I find that what I suspect is true, the secret will die with us two, for I shall never finish this book. Please do not question me about it any more!' And that's absolutely all I ever heard him say about it. Of course there was nothing left for me to do but accede to his wishes. But I did have the curiosity, when I returned home, to question my father about old General Romney, who, as you know, was Father's own uncle. He said he didn't remember much about him, as he was only a small boy when the General died, except some vague excitement over his having been mysteriously killed. He said he did recall some rumors later, that all was not as it should have been with the General's affairs, but being a very proud young person where his family was concerned, had refused to hear them discussed, and later the subject was forgotten. That was all he remembered and it wasn't very enlightening. And I never tried to make any further inquiries. But why are *you* so concerned about this, Celeste?"

And in answer, Celeste, in a hushed voice, poured out to Miss Eustacia all the puzzle and bewilderment that had come to the surface lately, and the bearing she suspected it had on the subject of turning the house over to the Restoration. And to finish, she showed the paper they had discovered in the hall that afternoon, and her determination to hunt down the mystery to its solution, and clear it all up. Miss Eustacia's pretty blue eyes began to sparkle with contagious excitement as Celeste came to a close.

"Hurrah for you, Celeste, say I!" she exclaimed. "I'm with you hand and heart in this decision. And if I can help in any way, just call on me. I've thought all along that if some one of the family were only brave enough to hunt down this Romney bugaboo, it would be so much happier for every one concerned. Whatever it is, I haven't an idea. But if it's something concealed about this house Drew's afraid of, we'll hunt down the 'family skeleton' and get it decently buried and give this oldest living generation a chance to have some happiness while they remain here!"

"Well, it's a relief to have told someone connected with us," sighed Celeste, "and feel I'm not meddling in anything I oughtn't. I'm going to tell Aunt Eva as soon as she comes back, too, and get her coöperation. But what can you do, if you're going to be way off in Richmond for so long?"

"I'm going to devote a lot of my time, to begin with, to visiting Drew in the hospital," planned Miss Eustacia, "and I can have some good long talks with him there. I never had much chance to see him here, without Abby being constantly around. Perhaps he'll confide in me now, as he hasn't before. We'll see! And if I get any inkling, be sure I'll let you know. But now I must run home. It's getting late. Are you girls really going to begin

your researches tonight?”

“We surely are!” laughed Celeste, as they escorted Miss Eustacia to the door.

“And now, Bits,” she whispered, when they were at last alone, “upstairs with you, after I’ve looked in on Aunt Abby for good night, and I’ll show you a thing or two you don’t know about Romney House!”

CHAPTER IX

BY WAY OF THE ATTIC

WHILE CELESTE WENT to see if Miss Abby was safely settled for the night, Bitsy waited in the living-room. When she came back, reporting all serene, they blew out the lamps in the living-room and were just about to run upstairs when they heard a low whistle outside the house.

“Glory!” exclaimed Celeste. “That must be Duff. I clean forgot, in all this excitement, that I had promised to meet him tonight and go to the dance in the gym! He must be wondering what on earth has happened!” She opened the hall door and they both went outside to explain. Celeste gave him an account of the afternoon’s excitement, and then added:

“Sorry I couldn’t let you know—or at least that I forgot, in all the uproar, Duff. But look here!—we’re going on an exploring expedition tonight, Bits and I, in this house, and you can help if you feel so inclined. We need a third party as a scout.”

“Don’t see how that’s possible, when Miss Abby doesn’t want me in the house,” he objected. “I’m certainly not coming in when she feels that way about me!”

“You don’t understand,” whispered Celeste cautiously. “You needn’t come in. We need you more outside than *in*, anyway! What I’d like you to do is stay around for a while on the *outside*, and keep an eye on Aunt Abby’s room—or rather—an *ear*. As I explained to you the other day, we’re going to do a little exploring in the middle room there, where Uncle Drew keeps all those records and old books. Aunt Abby’s room is at the other end of the house, and we mightn’t know it if she got excited and thumped with her cane, for some reason or other. But if you could just while away a bit of time out in the box-garden, and listen to hear if she thumps—her windows open out on that side—you could slip around and tap on the windows of the middle room, and I could slip back and calm her mind. Would you be willing to do this for us?”

“Sure thing!” grinned Duff. “There’s no moon tonight, so I won’t be too visible, and I’ll sit on that bench near the sundial, where the box bushes are pretty high. Go to it, Sherlock Holmes and Watson!” He sauntered away to his post, and the two girls went back into the house, put out the hall lamp and scampered upstairs to their rooms.

“Put on a pair of sneakers and a sweater,” Celeste advised Bitsy. “We must make no noise, and it’s apt to be pretty cold in that room at this time of night. Bring your electric torch and I’ll bring mine. See you in two minutes!” Shivering with excitement and anticipation, Bitsy obeyed and met Celeste in the hall, from which they crept softly up the attic stairs.

Bitsy had never been in the attic, and its eerie shadows, cobwebbed rafters and dark, unexplored depths caused fresh chills to creep along her spine.

“Where *are* you going?” she whispered. “I don’t see how you are ever going to get into that room downstairs from *here*!”

“Just you follow me and say nothing!” warned Celeste. “I *told* you I’d show you a

thing or two!” She led the way through the dark length of the attic to the end where a solid wall apparently stopped their advance. But Celeste flashed her torch along its surface, inserted her finger in a small hole waist-high in one of the boards, pulled on it, and four boards swung outward on hinges fastened on the other side. It was a concealed door, very simply arranged to simulate a part of the wall. Flashing their torches into the aperture, Bitsy discovered that this was the way into a smaller attic, on a lower level from the main one, and reached by a flight of two or three steep steps. And down these steps Celeste led the way.

“This is the attic over the middle addition,” she informed her companion. “It’s lower than the other, and has a short stairway leading to the parts below.”

This section of attic, as Bitsy could dimly discern, had two small dormer windows, one at each end, facing garden and street. And to the window over the garden Celeste led her for a moment, while they peered out into its black depths. Celeste was trying to see if she could discern Duff, far over toward the other end of the house. As she could not, at that distance, she flashed the electric torch in his direction, to show him how far they had progressed in their journey of exploration. Then she turned and led the way to a trapdoor in the floor, which, having been lifted, disclosed a tiny flight of steps leading down to the floor below. Leaving the trapdoor open, they climbed softly down these steps, Celeste in advance.

The stairs ended at a door opening into an upper room that was practically unfurnished, and from a tiny hallway outside it they descended to the floor below, where, from another tiny hallway, they entered directly the room that held the records. Bitsy drew in her breath and looked about in awed wonder at the mysterious apartment they had come so far to enter, and which could have been attained so simply had they only possessed the key to the door that led from it into the living-room.

It was a fair-sized space, about fifteen feet square, and was furnished more like an office or library than anything else. An antique corner cupboard of mahogany with diamond-paned glass doors appeared crammed to bursting with books and documents. A great secretary desk at one side was also loaded with similar array. Two walls were lined with bookcases also crowded with heavy old tomes, and papers and packets of letters were scattered all about on the various chairs and a center-table. The whole constituted a rather bewildering and daunting array.

“Where shall we begin?” sighed Bitsy. “It would take us ages to look through all of this stuff!”

“I know it,” agreed Celeste. “I’ve been thinking of that, and here’s what I’ve decided. This place isn’t really as confused as it appears. I know that because I often used to be in here with Uncle Drew. He kept the records fairly well sorted out, so that he wouldn’t have to go over everything whenever he wanted something of a particular date. All the books and files on that south end are past material—mostly Colonial—and these on this side are Revolutionary or after-Revolution period. They won’t concern us at all, I think. The documents and letters in the corner cupboard are Civil War stuff and a little later. But these on the desk and table are the ones concerning the time of General Sumter Romney. I remember when he got them all sorted out and laid here, just before he stopped having me help him.”

“But even these would take us a week to go over carefully,” objected Bitsy. “And you

can't possibly do much at it with only these electric torches for light. Would we dare to light one of those lamps, do you think?"

"I reckon they haven't any oil in them," said Celeste, taking one up and tipping it. "No, just as I thought—they're dry. You see Uncle Drew never worked in here at night, so there hasn't been any need for illumination here for a long time. And anyway, working here isn't my plan, anyway. My scheme was to select various packets of letters and things that seem promising, take them with us back to our rooms, and go over them there at our leisure. With Uncle Drew away, no one will miss them, for no one ever came in here except himself. If he's to be in the hospital quite a while, you see we have ample time to do it thoroughly. When we get through with one lot, we can bring it back and get another. Good scheme—what?"

It seemed to Bitsy a perfect scheme, and while she held both lights, Celeste went about the business of sorting out and selecting the material she thought might be of most use to them for the present. She had laid aside a number of packets of letters and a long book of some kind that looked like an account-book, when they were both startled almost out of their wits by a violent tapping on the window pane toward the street side. This window had the shade drawn, and was fastened by a patent catch that Colonel Romney had had especially put on before he stored his precious documents in the room. Celeste was the first to recover her poise. Thrusting the packets and book into Bitsy's arms, she flew to the window, raised the shade a trifle and unfastened and raised the window a few inches. Outside, Duff was wildly gesticulating.

"*Quick!*" he hissed through the aperture, when she had raised the window. "Get out of here as soon as possible! Eliza just came hustling out of her cabin moaning and raising sand, and Miss Abby is thumping like mad in her room. I sneaked around this side so Eliza wouldn't see me. Guess I'd better clear out for good now!"

"Thanks, Duff—run!" was all Celeste had time to say before closing and locking the window and drawing down the shade. And then, to Bitsy, who was shuddering so with nervousness that she could scarcely hold her burden, "Run, honey! Up those stairs. We'll get back to the main part of the house in a jiff, and I'll see what's up. You carry the things, so I can go on ahead! It's Eliza that's causing all this fracas!"

She seized one of the torches, leaving Bitsy to follow as best she might with the other, and sprang up the stair lightly and was almost instantly out of sight.

Bitsy never afterward could tell how she accomplished the nightmare journey back over the route they had come, alone, burdened down with the armful of packages, and in mortal terror lest she be discovered by the already aroused household. But somehow she finally found herself at the foot of the attic stairs in the main portion of the house. Listening, she heard a wild altercation going on down below, so seizing the opportunity, she dashed into her own room, shoved her loot far under her bed out of sight, and then tiptoed downstairs to find out what was transpiring outside the door of Miss Abby's room.

"Ah *seed* it—Ah *seed* it, honey, sho's yo' bawn!" Eliza was moaning to Celeste. "Ah wuz jest gwine to bed an' Ah looked out mah winder lak Ah sometimes do, an' Ah seed a quare light in de attic winders—a flashin' an' a-disappearin'—jes' as ghos' like! Ah tell yo', honey, de hant am walkin' dis night—an' it doan mean no good to de po' Cunnel. He ain't gwine git well!—Ah'm tellin' yo'! Ah wuz dat scairt Ah hadda come where folks wuz."

“Oh, ginger!” groaned Bitsy to herself. “She saw that flashlight, of course! Why didn’t we think of it? Why *ever* did Celeste flash it out the window at Duff?”

“Now see here!” commanded Celeste soothingly. “You didn’t really see anything, Eliza. You’re just all worked up—and you’re disturbing Aunt Abby, and she’s had enough to worry her today! You come with me and I’ll take you out to your cabin and stay with you a while. We’ll watch and I know you won’t see anything in those attic windows. Come along now and don’t make any more disturbance.” She poked her head into Miss Abby’s room, laughingly made some remark about Eliza “seeing things again,” and led the objecting old colored woman out to her own abode. And Bitsy, retiring upstairs again to her room, could still hear Miss Abby mumbling and spluttering in her room, but she did not dare venture down to the irate old lady’s domain. After what seemed an interminable interval, Celeste returned, stopped for a moment at Miss Abby’s door, and then ran lightly upstairs to throw herself across Bitsy’s bed.

“What a night!” she groaned, laughing in spite of herself in retrospect at their predicament.

“Eliza saw our flashlights, of course, and naturally had a fit. And Aunt Abby was all worked up because she smelled tobacco smoke, through her open window, and thought there was some marauder in the garden. And she wasn’t so far wrong either, for I suppose Duff had been foolish enough to light his pipe while he was waiting. So between Eliza seeing a ‘hant’ and Aunt Abby thumping for someone to come and oust the marauder, we got ourselves into a fine mess! But I think I have it all straightened out. I told Aunt Abby there is no one in the garden or around the house now—which there isn’t!—and when I got Eliza to her cabin, I confessed to her that I was up in the attic with a flashlight hunting for something—didn’t say what!—and made her promise she wouldn’t tell Aunt Abby, because she doesn’t like me prowling around late at night. Eliza’s all calmed down, and Aunt Abby was asleep when I returned, so all’s well that ends well! Where did you put those things we brought from that room? We might as well get down to the job right now!”

CHAPTER X

ON THE STEPS OF THE HALL OF BURGESSES

THE FOOTBALL SEASON was on! The whole atmosphere of the college campus lived and breathed football scores and the probabilities of games with various college teams. Duff, being halfback on the William and Mary eleven, was completely absorbed by it, as he was almost constantly in training when he was not studying. So just at this period the girls saw little of him.

It was a week after the eventful Saturday night's adventure in the attic, and several things had happened. To begin with, Miss Eva had returned on Monday from Richmond and resumed her place in the Romney household, rather shocked and distressed still by the accident that had happened to the Colonel. She had seen him in the hospital, and reported him as comfortable as he could hope to be, with his right arm in a sling, and his shoulder strapped and practically immovable. He was in no pain, but the inertia and confinement and helplessness of his condition had made him very nervous and, she added, he seemed to be worrying a good deal about affairs at home.

Miss Abby had welcomed her sister's return with a not too great warmth of greeting, but had softened after a day or two, as Miss Eva's resumed charge of household affairs had considerably smoothed out the hit-or-miss regime that had held during her absence. And the two girls were openly overjoyed to have her back.

On the first night of her return, they had invited themselves to her room, after the household had retired. And being made welcome before her cosy open fire, Celeste had poured out to her all the history of the events during her absence, and her own firm determination to run this troubling family mystery to earth and "lay the ghost" once and for all. Miss Eva had listened to it, her beautiful gray eyes wide with the intensity of her interest. And Celeste had finished with an imploring:

"You *won't* fail us, will you, Aunt Eva? You *will* work with us and clear this up—for the good of everyone, won't you? I've taken Bitsy right in with us on this, because she seems like one of the family. And she *will* be one of my 'fraternity sisters' some day. Say you'll help us, Aunt Eva—please!" Miss Eva sat quiet for an appreciable interval, thinking it over. When she spoke, her voice was very low:

"This all surprises me very much, Celeste. I never supposed you were so interested in this older portion of your family. Young people usually aren't—and naturally so. They have their own affairs to think of. But what you say touches me in a very special way. I too have long known that Abby and Drew were harboring some secret that prevented us from taking advantage of the 'restoration' for this house. And I have felt it very keenly that they would not take me into their confidence and explain it all. I am certainly just as much concerned as they are. But because I was the youngest, they have always tried to spare me. Sometimes they seem to forget that I'm sixty-five years old, and treat me as if I were still a child.

"I've often thought of rebelling and asserting my rights. But I could do little alone and

so—I never have. But I think your idea most sensible, Celeste. If there is any ‘ghost that needs to be laid’ in this family, we’d better get about it, for we’re all stronger and more able-bodied than those two. I’m glad Eustacia is helping, too. She and I have always been very much in sympathy, though I never could feel and act as independently as she does. Never had her courage! We’ll all work this thing out, if we can. And the best time to do it is while Drew is away. I can act as a sort of buffer between you and Abby, if I can’t do anything else! She’s the one who will try to block us in this affair. Poor Abby! She’s so domineering—and so proud! Whatever this mystery may be, it has hurt her severely—that I know. She’s really so kind and generous-hearted underneath it all!”

“But tell us, Aunt Eva,” demanded Celeste, “haven’t you ever had any ideas about it yourself? You lived here right in the midst of it all. You must have wondered a lot what it was all about. Haven’t you ever tried to find out?” Miss Eva colored slightly at this question, and finally admitted:

“Yes—I’ll have to confess I *have* been terribly curious—naturally. And once I did a thing that I’ve always been rather ashamed of since. Like you, Celeste, I felt that they had no right to exclude me from what was my own family affair as well as theirs, and I resented it deeply. One day Drew had been called away unexpectedly by a visitor—old Mr. Page—and was entertaining him out in the garden. He had left his desk unlocked and his documents all strewn around, and I came in to dust the living-room. Abby wasn’t well and was spending the day in bed, so I had the place to myself. And when I got round to the desk (I feel so ashamed to confess this!) I deliberately looked over some of his notes and the writing that were scattered about. I realized from the material he was working at that it was our grandfather, old General Sumter Romney, that he had under consideration at the time, and of course I knew all the current stories about *him*—had always known them. So I felt it must be definitely somewhere about this period that Drew had struck a snag in his work. But I hadn’t much time for my spying, for I soon heard Drew coming back, so I simply went on with my dusting.”

“But didn’t you see *anything*,” cried Celeste excitedly, “that gave you any idea of the secret?”

“Yes,” admitted Miss Eva hesitantly, “I saw one thing. It was a note tucked away under some books—one of Drew’s memoranda he’s always making. It read—I’ve never forgotten the wording—‘*Memo. Scrapbook No. 4, bills marked Starr (N.Y.) and letters from B.G. to be ultimately destroyed.*’ That was all.”

“But what does that all *mean*?” queried Celeste, bewildered.

“I don’t know any more than you do,” acknowledged Miss Eva. “I couldn’t inquire, of course. I was ashamed enough as it was, of my spying, and never tried it again. But the thing about the note that struck me as queer was those words—‘*ultimately destroyed*’. You know how almost *sacred* all those family records and things are to Drew. He would as soon think of burning off his right hand as destroying a single letter or piece of paper that has reference to the family’s past. Some of them, I admit, are very valuable as historical records, but others are of no interest to anyone except the family itself. Yet to Drew they are all as precious as a mine of diamonds! Now what could lead him to *destroy* any one of them except that it might contain something that Drew wanted never to be known? Don’t you see?” They all did.

“But where *are* those things he wants ‘ultimately destroyed’?” again demanded

Celeste. “They certainly aren’t among those packets we brought from the attic, last Saturday night. That big old book was a scrapbook, but it was marked ‘Number One’, and didn’t have a thing of the slightest interest in it. Lot of old newspaper clippings and poems and old-timey articles and some pictures—that sort of thing. Guess Grandfather Sumter Romney must have had a fad for keeping scrapbooks, if that was only one of at least *four*! And the letters were nothing at all that one could dig a mystery out of. We haven’t put them back yet, but there’s no use examining *those* any further.” She sat a moment in deep thought, and suddenly burst out:

“There’s one thing positive though about that discovery of yours, Aunt Eva. Do you realize this?—It narrows down our search a *lot*! Up to now, we didn’t know just what we were looking for, and it was a hit-or-miss affair in the dark. Now we *know* what we’ve got to find—those things he made a note of—and can just pass up all the rest for the present. I vote that tomorrow night, if you feel like it, Aunt Eva—you’re too tired tonight after your trip—we have another expedition into that record room and see if we can find them there!”

Miss Eva had been entirely agreeable and so it had been arranged. Celeste had asked her if she knew where the Colonel had kept the key to the room, so that their work might be simplified by not having to go around by the attic. But Miss Eva had said she knew he always kept it among his own keys, which he doubtless had with him at the hospital. So there was nothing for it but the former tedious journey.

The next night, Miss Abby, with extraordinary perversity, had been extremely wakeful and talkative, and required her sister’s presence in her room long after she had retired. But, by a hastily arranged plan, this really worked to their advantage, as Miss Eva agreed to remain in her sister’s room, while the two girls made their way, via attic, to the room of records, as they had come to call it. Here they could work without interruption, and if there were any suspicion on the part of Miss Abby, or necessity for their presence, Miss Eva was to slip into the living-room and tap lightly on the door between, as a signal that they had best desist for the night.

The plan worked perfectly and without a hitch. The girls took back the material they had borrowed the first night and spent an uninterrupted hour and a half going over all the accumulated “Romneyana”, as Celeste often called it. But never a sign did they discover of the mysterious “Scrapbook Number Four” or the letters and bills mentioned in the Colonel’s “memo.” They had returned more than a little discouraged, to talk it all over with Miss Eva after her sister had at last succumbed to sleep.

“Well, after all, if the matter in those documents is so disturbing and secret, it isn’t likely Drew would keep them lying around, even in that locked room,” pointed out Miss Eva. “I felt pretty sure you wouldn’t find them there, though it was just as well to look the place over and make sure. He’s hidden them somewhere pretty safely, you may be sure of that. Where, I haven’t an idea—or whether we could get at them if we knew. Let’s think it over for a day or two. Perhaps something will occur to help us.”

So matters had stood till the following Saturday. Then there was to be a big football match between the college and one in Richmond. Almost the entire collegiate body was planning to migrate to Richmond that day to witness the game. On the night before there had been a big bonfire football rally on the campus, and Bitsy, as one of the freshmen who were so pressed into service, had marched around decorated with a large placard which

read: “*William and Mary Will Win!*” Duff being one of the prominent members of the team, both she and Celeste had a more than usually intense interest in the affair.

“Shall we go to the game tomorrow, Celeste?” she had asked that night. Never having seen a real football game, she cherished secretly a wild desire to witness one in which her own college was taking part.

“You can, surely,” Celeste had said. “But I’m not going to, Bits. To tell the honest truth, I can’t afford to. I’m giving a good bit of my allowance in toward the expenses at Romney House just now, since they’ve been so hard hit in their income lately, and it keeps me pretty well down to hard pan.” This was news to Bitsy, and she immediately proposed to take Celeste as her treat. But Celeste would not agree, saying Bitsy had done enough “treating” as it was, and anyway she felt she ought to stay at home and help out her Aunt Eva in this particular family crisis.

“Then I’ll not go either,” Bitsy had declared. “I’d far rather be with you!” And not all Celeste’s urging could budge her from this determination.

So, on this particular Saturday, the sleepy little town of Williamsburg seemed more than usually deserted, its liveliest inhabitants, the students, having departed in a body to the Richmond game. The day was sunny and unusually warm, and Miss Abby having callers in the afternoon—some particular elderly cronies of her own—Celeste proposed that she and Miss Eva take Bitsy on a stroll through the town and show the Northern girl some of the interesting sights of the place.

“Just think, Aunt Eva,” Celeste had cried, “this child has actually not seen or rather been *in*—a single ‘restored’ building here, except old Bruton Parish Church on Sundays! It’s really shocking! We must ‘show her the town’ or she’ll go back home at Christmas knowing not one thing about the really important part of our city, and disgrace us!” Miss Eva had entered gaily into the expedition, and so in high spirits they set out on their afternoon of sight-seeing.

“Let’s start at the college end of Duke of Gloucester Street,” suggested Celeste, “and work along it till we get to the other end. Most of the things are on that street or near it, anyway.” So they meandered west to the college end and began their pilgrimage, first stopping at the post office for mail.

“Here’s a fat letter to me from Aunt Eustacia!” cried Celeste. “Maybe she’ll have some news that interests us from the hospital. I’ll save it to read till we can sit down somewhere and look it over in comfort.” And they proceeded along their way, proudly exhibiting to the deeply interested Bitsy the various houses that had been “restored”, most of which were not open to public view except in “Garden Week.” They took her into the vault below Bruton Parish Church to see the silver presented by William and Mary, the monarchs of England so long ago, through the stately Wythe Mansion facing on Palace Green, they rambled around and through the imposing Governor’s Palace, still in the process of construction, made a call at the fascinating old St. George Tucker House on Nicholson Street, beautifully “restored”, then back to Duke of Gloucester Street to explore the quaint little gem of a Court House, “restored” and filled with ancient relics that had been discovered in digging for the various foundations of the Capitol and other structures.

Later they went through the Paradise House on the same street, the Powder Horn, vine-covered and octagonal in shape, so closely connected with the early outbreak of the

Revolution, and from there proceeded to the Raleigh Tavern, where Miss Eva guided them through the utterly charming rooms, rebuilt to duplicate those where the early colony once held its most fashionable affairs. By this time Bitsy was physically weary and footsore, Celeste also was rather fagged with the unseasonable heat, and Miss Eva showed obvious signs of fatigue.

“We’ll take Bitsy to see the new Hall of Burgesses” suggested the latter, “and then I reckon we’ll be tired enough to quit, though there’s lots she hasn’t seen yet.” Miss Eva was more than usually interested in the old Capitol, or Hall of Burgesses, because she had done considerable research work in helping to rebuild it from the original plans on the old foundations, all that had remained of it after a disastrous fire many years before. Workmen were still busy with its interior, and after they had made the tour of its marvelously “restored” halls and rooms, they went outside and sat down to rest on the top step in the shaded portico connecting the two halves of the H-shaped building.

“Golly—but I’m hot and tired!” sighed Celeste, fanning herself with her béret. “It’ll be good to sit here and rest a while before we have to amble home. By the way, I’ll read that letter now from Cousin Eustacia. It’ll be nice to hear how Uncle Drew is getting along.” She drew it out of her handbag, opened it and skimmed through its pages, regaling her listeners with such bits of news from it as she thought would interest them. Drew was improving, Cousin Eustacia reported, but growing daily more restless and worried, though he would not admit directly about what. She had tried to talk to him on the subject of his work with the book, but had met with flat failure there. He absolutely refused to be communicative on that subject. So she had relinquished it for the present. And so on and so on.

Suddenly, however, Celeste sat up straight and exclaimed, “*Listen to this!*” and continued to read:

“I found out, however, one thing that is worrying Drew. He confessed to me this morning that he was bothered about his *keys*, which, in the excitement of the day he had his accident, he left somewhere in the house. He would like to have them found and forwarded to him here. He isn’t quite sure where he left them, but if they’re not around in plain sight, they’re probably in his secretary desk in the living-room, among the books on the upper part. He says look behind the second volume of Gibbon’s *Rome*, as that’s where he sometimes puts them for safekeeping. I told him I’d write you to find them and send them to him at the hospital.”

“And *there*,” exclaimed Celeste in deep excitement, “if you ask me, is where we’re going to find the *key*, in more ways than one!” Miss Eva suddenly stiffened and exclaimed in her turn:

“Celeste Dufresne—I know what’s in your mind! But if you think we’re going to use his keys to go through his desk and examine his private correspondence, you’re mistaken. I’ll never stoop to that, whatever is at stake! And I won’t allow you to either!”

“Now don’t get all hot’n bothered, Aunt Eva! It’s nothing of the sort. I wouldn’t do such a thing any more than you. But I happen to have just remembered something that’s quite unconnected with that desk—something that happened years ago when I was a youngster, and when Uncle Drew had just begun to work on his book. He was in that record room one day, prowling around, and I came in unexpectedly and found him doing a rather strange thing. He was standing by the mantel over the fireplace, and to my great

astonishment, part of the paneling above it was standing open like a little door and the tiny closet inside it seemed to have shelves in it. As soon as he heard me there, he slammed it shut and acted rather embarrassed about it.

“Of course, childlike, I had to ask him what the queer little receptacle was, and he told me it was a *secret closet* he had discovered, that was made so that it appeared to be just a part of the panelling. Then he opened it and showed it to me and it was empty. After that he told me to run off and play, as he was busy. He never said another word to me about it, then nor since. But later that same summer I was alone in the room one day and had the curiosity to try to find the thing for myself and examine it again. To my astonishment, I couldn’t find the panel at first, for nothing would come open. But I was certain which one it was and in fumbling around I discovered that a part of the wooden carving or molding at the side of the panel could be moved a little to the left, and when I moved it, there was a tiny *keyhole*! I pushed and pulled, but the panel was evidently locked, so I had to move the carving back and give it up.

“Singular that I’d clean forgotten about it ever since—but it’s so long ago! Must have been in the back of my mind though, and the mention of those keys brought it back. I’d be willing to wager dollars to doughnuts that that key to that place is on his ring—and that *that’s* where he keeps those documents hidden! You’d be willing to look for them *there*—wouldn’t you, Aunt Eva?”

“Well—perhaps—yes,” hesitated Miss Eva. “At least it isn’t like rifling a person’s private desk—and we’ve got to find those things to know what we’re doing. It was probably the safest place he could think of to hide them in—far safer than his desk. Looks as if we’d made some progress this afternoon, girls!”

“Let’s get at it this very night, then,” advised Celeste as they got up to wander homeward. “I’ll have to send off those keys not later than Monday, so we can’t get about it too soon!”

And all the way back, through the sun-drenched, deserted streets of Williamsburg, Miss Eva kept murmuring at intervals:

“To *think* that there should be that secret cupboard—right in my own home—and I never knew about it!” But Celeste’s comment was:

“I venture to say there are several other features about that house which none of us know of—*yet!*”

CHAPTER XI

MISS ABBY BLOCKS THE GAME

THE THREE CONSPIRATORS had had visions of a long, free evening, with Miss Abby retiring to her room at her usual early hour, in which to obtain the keys and prosecute their search in the record room. But as events transpired, it was to be very differently spent.

The two girls expected to go to a dance, in the earlier part of the evening, at the college gym. This dance was to be by way of a celebration in case the college won the game, or a consolation affair in case they hadn't. They expected to return fairly early and have all the rest of the night to explore the mystery of the secret cupboard. They dressed after dinner and dashed off, promising Miss Eva they would return not later than eleven, and she in her turn promised to have Miss Abby safely stowed away in her room well before that hour.

William and Mary had won the game, and the dance was more than usually gay in consequence, but the two girls made their excuses and tore themselves away at the time they had promised, and Duff accompanied them as far as the house. On the way, Celeste explained to him excitedly what the recent days had brought forth in furthering them on their quest.

"Wish I could come in with you and see the fun!" he had commented, as they neared Romney House. "But of course that's forbidden. Do you need me to do scout duty in the garden, this time?" Celeste thanked him but acknowledged that it wouldn't be necessary, and they stopped in front of the entrance.

"Oh, my hat! what's up *now*?" ejaculated Celeste, as a vision through one of the unshaded windows revealed Miss Abby, seated in her usual chair, instead of long since having been escorted to her room to bed, as was her custom.

"Don't know," said Duff, "but I reckon it's up to me to disappear—pronto!" And he wished them good luck and good night, and sauntered back toward the college, while the girls entered the house. Miss Eva met them in the hall, explaining nervously:

"Abby simply *will* not go to bed! She's in for one of her sleepless nights, I reckon." Then she explained to Bitsy:

"She has them once in a long while—nights when she cannot sleep at all—cannot even bear to stay in her room. So she sits up all night in the living-room, and someone has to sit with her. It makes her so nervous that she has to be read to or play cards—or games—or *something* to while away the time. She hasn't had a spell like this for several months. Maybe this won't last as long as they sometimes do. She may get sleepy after a while and want to go to bed later, but I've known her to sit there till breakfast time without closing her eyes!"

"Oh me!" moaned Celeste. "What's to become of our search, then? We simply can't do a thing about it while she stays in the living-room!"

"'Fraid we can't!" glumly agreed Miss Eva. "Too bad it had to happen just this particular night!"

“Come in! Come in, all of you!” called out Miss Abby. Her voice sounded positively gay. “You’ve all got to help me pass the night—somehow. I’m in for one of my ‘white’ ones. How about a game of Five Hundred?”

As Celeste confided to Bitsy, next day, it seemed as if Miss Abby positively *enjoyed* these spells, which, though they did not happen often, were always a trial to the rest of her family. The Colonel could always bear these times of stress with his sister better than the rest of the family, and remain broad awake to help her through the sleepless hours. But poor Miss Eva had been known to drop asleep at the card-table, or stumble along through her reading aloud in a state of semi-coma, till Miss Abby would exclaim:

“Oh, *wake* up! Come to, Eva! You’re reading perfect nonsense!” Though usually thoughtful and considerate of other people’s comfort, Miss Abby seemed to be perfectly merciless in one of her “spells.”

After they had assured Miss Abby that they’d be delighted to have a game of Five Hundred, the girls ran up to their rooms to change from their dance-frocks into something warmer and more suitable for spending indefinite hours sitting about in the not-too-warm living-room.

“Don’t despair completely!” groaned Celeste as she struggled into a sweater and skirt. “There’s always hope that this won’t last all night. Sometimes, around one or two in the morning, I’ve known her to get to nodding and ask to be helped to her room. We’ll get at our own affairs then, no matter how late it is. But you see we can’t do a thing while she stays on in the living-room. Even if one of us stayed with her, and the others got round by way of the attic to the record room, she would be certain to hear us—right in that room next door, no matter how quiet we were. And besides that, we haven’t got the keys yet. They’re still back of Gibbon’s *Rome*! Oh well, buck up, Sugar! Maybe the fates’ll be kind to us!”

They played Five Hundred for two solid hours, Celeste keeping score, and Miss Abby winning consistently. Frequently during the games Celeste involuntarily let her gaze wander to the glass-doored bookcase over the Colonel’s desk where, behind the books, reposed the keys. Finally Miss Abby’s alert eyes noticed the direction of her gaze.

“What are you staring so at that bookcase for, Celeste?” she demanded sharply. “You seem so absorbed by it that you just trumped my ace!”

“Oh, I’m *sorry*!” cried Celeste guiltily. And after that she stared at the bookcase no more. At one o’clock, Miss Eva, whose eyelids had long since grown heavy, went out to the kitchen and brought in some sandwiches and hot, black coffee that she had earlier ordered Eliza to prepare and leave. The coffee (of which Miss Abby did not partake) restored the rest of them to some renewed semblance of activity, and after it, Miss Abby decided against any more cards.

“It’s Sunday morning, really,” she explained, “and I never did countenance cards on Sunday. Celeste, you might read aloud to us, if you will. You’re better at it than Eva. She invariably falls asleep!”

“All right, Aunt Abby, I’ll be glad to,” agreed her great-niece, strolling over toward the desk. “What would you like? How about a dip into Gibbon’s *Rome*?” She had a wild idea that she might extract the keys unseen, while getting out the book.

“Nothing of the sort!” snorted Miss Abby. “Drew may prefer that sort of thing but I

never did. Go to my room and get that volume of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. I'd enjoy listening to that chapter called 'How to Live Well on Nothing a Year.' Fits our present circumstances very well!" She chuckled grimly.

Celeste went and found the book and settled herself in a comfortable chair near the fire. Bitsy curled herself up in another and prepared to listen, and Miss Eva stretched herself out on a Chippendale sofa, drew an afghan over her and promptly fell asleep. Celeste read on and on, at first with considerable animation, then more mechanically, till, with sleep-drugged eyes, she could scarcely distinguish the words that jumbled themselves blurrily before her gaze. And still the hours dragged on, and Miss Abby's black eyes were as alert and her brain as wide awake as they had been six hours before. By that time, Bitsy too had passed into unconsciousness, her head pillowed against the side of the chair.

"Well, well, *well!*" interrupted Miss Abby, when the hands of the grandfather's clock were approaching four. "I must say you-all are exciting company! Celeste, you haven't read three consecutive sentences properly this last half-hour. Send that child Bitsy up to bed. She isn't used to this sort of thing and ought to have her sleep. Eva, you wake up! You've had your turn at a nap. Let Celeste lie down awhile and you do some of the reading. Put some more wood on the fire, too. The room's getting chilly."

After that they gave up all hope and resigned themselves to fighting it out with the wakeful Miss Abby along her own lines. Bitsy, half-unconscious, stumbled up to her bed, and Celeste changed places with Miss Eva, and so the long night of frustration wore itself out. And at eight o'clock in the morning, Miss Abby, as "chipper" as though she had spent ten long hours in her bed, hobbled into the dining-room to breakfast with her sleep-sodden family.

It was a Sunday they were not soon to forget. Miss Abby, being a very strict churchwoman, insisted on equally strict church attendance for her family, though she was too infirm to attend herself. So while she sat at her window in the living-room reading the service to herself from her own missal, the two girls and Miss Eva dragged themselves to Bruton Parish Church, and sat sleepy-eyed and nodding through the service there. Even the spectacle of the velvet-draped, throne-like chair of old Governor Spotswood, which usually fascinated her, could not keep Bitsy awake during the sermon, and they all wandered home after it was over, promising themselves prolonged naps that afternoon.

"For we've *got* to be awake tonight!" warned Celeste. "Aunt Abby will no doubt go to bed earlier than usual, and we've plenty to do. It's our last chance, for I simply must mail those keys to Uncle Drew early Monday morning. I should really have done it Saturday afternoon."

"I hope we don't have many callers today," offered Miss Eva. "Sunday always seems to be receiving day for all of Abby's friends."

Celeste and Bitsy did manage naps later in the day, Celeste even refusing to go for her usual walk with Duff, so that she could catch up on sleep. But poor Miss Eva was busy all afternoon helping entertain callers, many of whom had come to inquire about the Colonel's unfortunate accident. After an early tea, Celeste went to her fraternity house for an hour or two, and Bitsy did some belated studying, both agreeing to meet with Miss Eva in the living-room when Miss Abby should have at last betaken herself to rest. But even in this their plans were to be delayed. For at nine o'clock, when Celeste returned and Bitsy ran down from her room to keep the appointment, they found there a party of distant

Romney relatives who had driven up from Norfolk to inquire about the Colonel, and whom Miss Abby was hospitably urging to remain for the night, and take the long drive back early in the morning.

Despair settled on the three conspirators, at this last and utterly unforeseen obstruction to their plans! And so the evening wore on, the visitors neither definitely agreeing to stay nor apparently in any hurry to depart. Finally, however, as the clock was about to strike eleven, and Miss Eva was drearily planning in her mind where she would put them for the night, the guests suddenly gathered themselves together and proclaimed that they simply must be getting back, and regretted they could not stay over this time. And when they were finally ushered from the front door to their car, three at least of the house of Romney breathed a heartfelt sigh of relief!

And Miss Eva had no sooner escorted her sister from the room than Celeste made a plunge at the bookcase and extracted a formidable bunch of keys on a ring from behind the second volume of Gibbon's *Rome*. They were of all shapes, sizes and makes, and one particular long, dangling brass one she seized upon, exclaiming in a whisper:

"This is the key to that door over there—right into the record room. We won't have to travel all around by way of the attic *this* time!"

"But which do you think is the key to the secret cupboard?" inquired Bitsy, staring at them curiously. "There seem to be several quite little ones."

"Can't tell till we try them," admitted Celeste. "When Aunt Eva comes back, we'll get together and decide what we'd better do. I think one of us had best stay outside and keep watch on Aunt Abby. No telling but what she might decide she wanted something, right in the middle of our work, and we mightn't be able to hear her thump, because we'd better keep the door closed."

"I'll stay out then," volunteered Bitsy generously, though she was wild with the desire to get in and see the secret cupboard and its contents.

"No, you'd better not," decided Celeste, much to her joy. "It would be far better for Aunt Eva to be on call, and she can tap on the door and let us know if Aunt Abby begins to upset things again. If the worst came to the worst, we can always slip out by way of the attic. By the way, run up and get our electric torches, will you, honey? While you're gone I'll try the key to this door, just to be sure it works all right."

When Bitsy returned with the torches, she found Miss Eva and Celeste with the door to the record room open, staring fascinated into its dim depths.

"I don't know about Abby," faltered Miss Eva. "Strange as it may seem, in spite of her sleeplessness all last night, she seems excited and restless again. I think it was having company so late. She wants me to read to her till she gets sleepy, and I came in to get the book. You'll have to look out, girls—she may get wakeful and decide to come in here again. I've known it to happen! Be as quick as you can about it—for I may not be able even to get away from her and warn you by tapping on the door!" Celeste groaned aloud.

"Can you *beat* it?" she cried in desperation. "I never knew Aunt Abby to be so perverse—and just now—of all times! Tell you what, Aunt Eva!—I've just thought of a scheme. We'll go in this way and lock the door behind us and take out the key. And we'll work as fast as we can. But if Aunt Abby should suddenly decide to come in here, and you can't give us warning, you just speak to her or say something quite loud as you come

along the hall, and we'll hear it and slide out up the attic way. It's a risk, but I think we'll have to take the chance."

With some trepidation Miss Eva agreed, found her book and slipped back to Miss Abby's room, while the girls switched on their torches, entered the record room and shut and softly locked the door behind them.

"Now for it!" breathed Celeste, going straight to the mantel over the fireplace. "Hold the torches, Bits, while I hunt for the opening to that panel. I've kind of forgotten just where it was after all these years."

Beads of the cold perspiration of fear stood out on Bitsy's forehead, her knees trembled and her hand shook, as she tried to hold both torches steady and focussed on the spot where Celeste began her search. Finally she whispered:

"Don't you think I'd better let you hold your own torch and lay the other here on the mantel where it will shine on the place, while I go and listen at the door? From here we might not hear anything till it was too late. It's way across the room."

"Perhaps you had," muttered Celeste, absorbed in groping about the moldings which flanked the paneling of the mantel. "This is going to take longer than I thought. None of these moldings seem to be on a hinge, or give, the way that one did when I explored it years ago. I wonder if Uncle Drew could have done anything with it since—nailed it tight—or something? Just lay one torch right here and give me the other. Your plan is safer!"

The agonizing moments passed while Bitsy listened, her ear glued to a crack in the door, and Celeste fumbled futilely among the moldings over the mantel. Suddenly she uttered a low cry of triumph:

"I've got it—I've got it at last! It wouldn't budge at first, but I pulled it hard—I was *sure* it was the one I remembered—and it came open. See, Bits, here's the little keyhole and I've found the key that fits it!" But at that same instant Bitsy ran over to her, panting:

"Quick—*quick! Miss Abby is coming!* I just heard Miss Eva telling her, quite loud, out in the hall, to be careful she didn't slip! Oh, what *shall* we do?"

CHAPTER XII

THE SECRET CUPBOARD

THEY GOT TO CELESTE'S ROOM—somehow—by way of the attic. Bitsy would always remember the nightmare of that hurried, stumbling, breathless trip. And on the way down the attic stairs to the main upper hall they could hear Miss Abby demanding where the girls were. And when Miss Eva replied that they had probably gone upstairs, Miss Abby had rather querulously remarked that she had not heard them go up. So after they had reached their room, Celeste went out in the hall and called down:

“Is there anything I can do, Aunt Eva?” which was a signal to that perturbed lady that they had reached their destination in safety! Miss Eva had called back:

“Not at present, Celeste. Abby has decided that she will sit up here for a while still, as she isn't sleepy. I'll call you if we need anything.” And Celeste had retreated thankfully back to the room.

“Now tell me—*quick!*—what did you find?” cried Bitsy, who had refrained with great difficulty from asking sooner.

“Here it is,” answered Celeste breathlessly. “I wrapped it in my sweater, on the way, because I was so afraid we might be held up somehow before we got here.”

They both ran to the bed and snatched up the sweater-wrapped bundle where Celeste had thrown it, and she unwrapped it with great caution and intense excitement. It appeared to contain only another scrapbook, similar to several others they had examined, in the record room below. But, to their great joy, this was marked “*Number Four!*”

“We've got it—we've got it at last!” cried Celeste, eyes snapping with satisfaction. “I *knew* we were going to find something there!”

“Yes, but where are those other things—the letters and bills?” questioned Bitsy. “Was this *all* that was in the cupboard?”

“Every single thing,” admitted Celeste. “I flashed my torch all around in it, hurried as we were. This was lying on the first shelf, and there was nothing more in the cupboard. Let's get to it now, and find out what awful things may be in it!”

They opened the yellowed, musty old book and went through it, page after page. And the further they went, the deeper a pall of disappointment settled down on them. And at the end they threw it aside and turned questioning, frustrated eyes on each other.

“What does it all mean?” quavered Bitsy. “There's nothing in the world in it except a lot of old newspaper clippings, all of them about the old *Mexican War!*”

“Don't ask *me!*” groaned Celeste. “If there's anything in that collection of musty old stuff that can have the slightest bearing on our affairs, I've yet to discover it. I suppose old General Sumter Romney was in that war—in fact, I'm sure he was. And I suppose he was deeply interested in it all and made a scrapbook with the newspaper articles, just like a cousin of mine, Chester Romney, who was in the World War, made one about that. But, goodness knows!—why must this particular scrapbook be destroyed and not any of the others? I suppose we might discover something by wading through all this stuff, but it

doesn't seem very hopeful. I'll bet we could have found out a lot more if we could have found those other things!"

"How do you know those other things weren't in there?" persisted Bitsy. "Mightn't they have been lying flat on the bottom and you not noticed them in your hurry?"

"There sure wasn't another thing, Sugar!" mourned Celeste. "I couldn't have helped but see it if there were—it's such a tiny space. But I'll tell you one thing I did which may be a help sometime. I didn't lock the little cupboard when I left it!"

"You didn't *lock* it?" breathed Bitsy, rather aghast. "But—but—suppose someone discovers it?"

"Don't worry yourself, child! Who's going to discover it—that will make any difference? Aunt Abby never goes in there, and Aunt Eva knows about it anyway, and Uncle Drew won't be home again for quite some time. I'd decided about that quite a while before I went in there. You see, I've got to mail the keys tomorrow morning, so we couldn't use them again. I had almost decided to leave the door into the living-room unlocked too, only Aunt Abby's in the living-room so much, and knows it's always locked, but might be tempted to try it sometime. And anyway, we can get in by the other route, although it's more trouble. But if I locked the cupboard it would have to *stay* locked till Uncle Drew got back. And, besides, I think we ought to put this book back in it where it belongs, later. But after the little door is shut and the bit of molding closed over it, no one would know whether it was locked or not—wouldn't even know it was there at all. So it's safe enough."

"Still," objected Bitsy, "after he gets back and perhaps goes in to look in that cupboard himself—he'll find it unlocked. What then?"

"I thought of that," Celeste admitted, "but I had to take the chance. He'd probably insert the key and *think* he was unlocking it and never know the difference. But if he *did*—well, that's something that will just have to be settled later. I suppose we ought to let Aunt Eva know what we've found, as soon as we can get her by herself, for she's wild to know, I'm certain. But oh!—I wish we could just crawl into bed and go to sleep—I'm so tired and discouraged!"

"I'll have to go over my French composition before I turn in," offered Bitsy, "so I'll sit up a while and catch Miss Eva if she comes up. You take a nap. I had more sleep than you, anyway, last night!"

"Good old thing!" murmured Celeste, taking immediate advantage of the offer. She rolled over on the bed, curled up and was soon fast asleep, while Bitsy stirred up the fire, got out her textbooks and settled down to work. An hour later she heard Miss Eva coming slowly and sleepily up the stairs, and she opened the door and softly called her in.

"Abby's off at last!" sighed Miss Eva. "I gave her a sleeping-powder, which she hates to take, and read to her in such a droning way that presently she got to nodding and said she'd go to bed. She'll sleep like a log after this spree! But do tell me, what did you discover?"

Celeste awoke at her entrance, rubbed sleep-sodden eyes, and both girls showed Miss Eva their find and explained the situation and their deep disappointment at the outcome. She leafed over the scrapbook thoughtfully, and at last admitted:

"It doesn't seem to throw much light, does it? I remember now that Grandfather

Romney took quite a prominent part in the affair of the Mexican War, and was always deeply interested in it, because he had been a friend of General Winfield Scott, who went to college here at William and Mary, as a young man. But what it could all have to do with this mystery about him is more than I can fathom. And another question is, where has Drew put those other things he made a note of?" A sudden, awful thought occurred to Bitsy.

"Maybe he's destroyed them already!" she ventured. "Otherwise, wouldn't they have been with *this*?"

"You may be right, honey!" exclaimed Celeste wildly. "I never thought of it. But if it's so, there goes the last chance of our solving this mystery."

"I somehow don't think that's possible," Miss Eva comforted them. "I know Drew better than either of you, and the chances are, he wouldn't destroy anything till the matter is definitely settled. Certainly I think he would have destroyed this scrapbook too, if he had done so to the others. No, I'm practically certain they're still in existence—somewhere!"

"Well, you've given us some hope, anyhow!" sighed Celeste. "Let's all go to bed now. We're so all in we can't even *think* straight!" And the motion being unanimous, they parted for the night, and silence and deep sleep soon settled on the house of Romney.

Next morning, on their way to college, Celeste mailed the little pasteboard box containing the keys to her Uncle Drew.

"There goes the last chance of our unlocking anything!" she murmured to Bitsy as she handed it in at the parcel-post window and insured it. "But then, there probably isn't anything more we can unlock—or ought to," she added, as they left the post office.

During a comparatively free hour that morning she wrote a hasty account of their adventure and its results to Miss Eustacia, and begged her to answer at once and tell them if *she* knew any solution to the perplexing Mexican War scrapbook, and mailed the letter at noon.

Late that afternoon Bitsy announced to her that a friend she had made in the freshman class, one Janet McNabb, otherwise known as "Chubby," had invited them both to a "spread" she was giving in her room at Chandler Hall that night.

"Chub says her mother has just sent her a grand box of eats, roast chicken—and all the fixings—and wants us to join the party. She asked me to stay over night with her, too. Says she thinks I ought to see the fun they have in dorm, when you know a jolly lot of girls. But I don't want to, Celeste. Do you think I ought?"

"Yes, I do—most emphatically!" advised her companion. "You know, honey, it rather worries me at times that you've made so few friends. You stick around with me too much, and it sort of prejudices the other girls, especially as you're not rooming in one of the dorms. It's all right for you this year, when I'm still here. But remember that next year I won't be, and you'll be right lonely then, if you haven't made more friends in your own year. Chub's nice and a good friend for you. You ought to see more of her. You like her, don't you?"

"Yes, I do—quite a lot," admitted Bitsy, "but I'd rather be with *you*—and then—"

there's all that mystery we have to solve at your house. I don't want to be away. I might miss something!" Celeste laughed.

"You won't miss anything tonight, anyhow! I've got a fearful lot of work to make up after all the goings on last week. And I'm still dog-tired after that wild night or two we've just had with Aunt Abby. We'll go to the spread and then I'll leave fairly early, and you stay for the night with Chub. You'll enjoy it. You hear me talking?"

Bitsy agreed, rather dubiously, and that night they went off to the party at Chub's, leaving Miss Eva to get a rather peevish and sleepy Miss Abby to bed, and retire herself to make up on sleep. Chub was doing her party in style, and had invited several of her friends to attend the movies first, among them Bitsy and Celeste. And after a thrilling "mystery" show they had trooped back to Chub's room on the second floor of the "dorm", where a dozen girls disposed themselves on the one single bed and two chairs, chattering excitedly and consuming quantities of roast chicken, olives, cakes, fruit, nuts, candy and doughnuts with impartial and loudly appreciative gusto. To Bitsy's secret joy, they seemed to take her in as one of themselves, and the fun waxed fast and furious for a considerable time, even after all the food had disappeared. Someone started up a chorus and they had all begun to sing college and fraternity songs when suddenly a sophomore poked her head in at the door, with:

"'Scuse everything, but is Celeste Dufresne here? An old darky woman is down at the door and said please to hand her this note. Quite a party you're having here!"

"Come in! Have a doughnut!" invited Chub. "That's about all that's left. Here's the note, Celeste. Hope it doesn't mean any trouble!"

Celeste took the note, read it hastily and handed it to Bitsy.

"Sorry, girls, but I've got to go right back home. Aunt Eva said she needed me. Something's come up. She didn't say what. You stay on, Bits, like you planned."

"No, I'm coming too, if Chub will excuse me this time. I'll come another night, Chub, and stay with you, if you'll ask me, but I think I'd better go with Celeste. I might be needed. Thanks awfully for this grand party!" And, with hasty good nights, the two fled down the dormitory stairs.

"What can be the matter *now*?" groaned Celeste. For all the note had said was:

"Can you come back home at once, Celeste? I need you. *Something has happened.* Explain when I see you.

"Eva."

CHAPTER XIII

MORE TROUBLE AT ROMNEY HOUSE

THE TWO GIRLS sped along Duke of Gloucester Street toward home as fast as their feet would carry them, each wildly speculating as to what new form of trouble had come to perplex their lives.

“Must have been Eliza who brought the note,” muttered Celeste, “but I wonder why she didn’t wait and go back with us?”

“Maybe Miss Eva sent her on another errand,” offered Bitsy.

“Not likely—at *this* time of night, unless it was to the drugstore—or something like that. It’s a wonder she was able to get Eliza to come out at all. Eliza simply hates being around the town after dark.” As there was no solution to this problem, they had to wait till they reached Romney House. There Miss Eva awaited them, anxiously, at the front door. To their breathless questions she answered:

“Abby has been taken with one of her rheumatic heart-attacks. It was just a little while ago. I was afraid something like this was coming, as I’ve noticed that it usually follows one of those rare wakeful spells she has. Eliza and I got her to bed, and then I sent Eliza with that note to you, and right afterward she was to go and get the doctor who lives near the college, as you know. The doctor will probably drive her back. I do hope he isn’t busy or away, but I had to send for him and take the chance. I also thought, Celeste, that you had better be here to help me. It was good of Bitsy to come also.”

At this moment the doctor drove up to the house with Eliza, and he and Miss Eva went in to Miss Abby’s room. Eliza, the inevitable apron over her head, began rocking back and forth and muttering:

“Lawdy, Lawdy! Ain’t Ah done tol’ yo’-all somepin awful gwine happen to dis here fambly wid dat hant walkin’ de way hit done done a while ago? Look whut it done done to de po’ Cunnel—an’ now Miss Abby!”

“Oh, *do* be quiet, Eliza!” cried Celeste wildly. “Aunt Eva may need you any minute, and you only make things worse by taking on this way. You’d better go out in the kitchen and see that there’s plenty of hot water ready, in case it’s needed, and that sort of thing. Go along, *do*, Eliza! It’ll help so much if you can have those things ready.”

Eliza, still groaning, shuffled off reluctantly to her task, leaving the two girls alone in the living-room.

“How serious *is* this, Celeste?” asked Bitsy, overawed by the new calamity that had befallen the family.

“Pretty serious, while they last,” replied Celeste gravely. “She’s had one or two of them that were very nearly the end of her. You see, she’s a very old lady, and her heart hasn’t been strong for years, and even if she pulls through, she has to stay in bed a long time afterward and be very quiet, and it means a lot of nursing and running about waiting on her for the rest of us. They don’t feel they can afford to have a trained nurse, and besides Aunt Eva knows exactly what to do for her—just as well as any nurse. But it’s

always a big strain on Aunt Eva too. I'm glad I'm here to help out this time. Sometimes it has been when I'm away in the summer. Once Mother had to come down and stay all summer to help in one of these attacks. She couldn't do it now because she and Dad are away in France on that business trip. I may have to stay away from college for a while. I can't tell till we see how things go."

"Well, I'll help out all *I* can!" maintained Bitsy stoutly, whereat Celeste gave her a silently appreciative hug for her loyalty.

An hour later, after the doctor had left, Miss Eva came into the living-room and sat down by the fire, sighing with weariness and worry.

"The doctor has given her the digitalis, and she's sleeping now—under a sedative," she informed them. "He says she seems to be responding pretty well to treatment, but the danger is by no means over. It will be several days before we know how it will turn out. Poor Abby!—She doesn't even recognize any one around her. The pain was very bad this time. But the doctor is hopeful. I'm so glad you're here, Celeste. It's never easy—one of these spells, as you know."

"Look here, Aunt Eva, I have an idea!" cried Celeste, suddenly brightening. "Why not send for Cousin Eustacia to come back here from Richmond and help us out? I know she'd be delighted to. Uncle Drew doesn't need her nearly so badly as she's needed here. She's helped us before, you remember, when this has happened."

"I suppose Abby wouldn't like it," hesitated Miss Eva, though visibly impressed by the idea. "Still, she needn't be around Abby, and Abby won't be up and about for some time to come. It would be an enormous help, but I rather feel we oughtn't to put the burden on Eustacia. She's had her own troubles to get through and deserves a rest."

"I think she'd be delighted to come," urged Celeste. "Do you know what she told me before she left? She said she hated to go away as far as Richmond, for she'd far rather be here where she could superintend the revamping of her house. She said she was coming back after a while anyway, and would stay at the Inn as long as she felt she could afford to. But she said also that she'd be so glad to stay right here with us and pay her board, if Aunt Abby only felt less strenuously about her 'going restoration'. Now what have you got to say?"

"Did she really say that?" cried Miss Eva, visibly brightening. "Then I believe we needn't hesitate to ask her. Of course we won't let her pay any board, or do anything strenuous, but she could be here in case of necessity, while you are at college, for you really mustn't lose time there, Celeste!—and she'd be such a comfort to me. I'll write her tomorrow. It'll be hard on Drew, but he's not nearly in such a precarious state as Abby."

"You needn't write, I'll telephone her in the morning," decided Celeste, "and then she can be here before night. It's a grand idea!" They all sat silent for a few moments, digesting this new and disturbing turn of affairs. Suddenly Miss Eva straightened up.

"Oh, I almost forgot to tell you!" she began excitedly. "So many things happened afterward, they drove it out of my mind for a while. But a very strange thing happened just before this bad attack came on. Abby and I were sitting here quietly reading, when suddenly she said to me:

" 'I want to go into the next room a few moments, Eva, where Drew keeps those records. It's a good time while we're alone. Help me up!'

“I was terribly startled, because Abby hasn’t gone into that room literally for a year or two. But I said how could she do it when it was locked and she didn’t have the key? She said she had a key of her own. Drew had had a duplicate made at one time, and gave it to her to keep, in case he lost or mislaid his own. And sure enough, she produced one from some inner pocket she has in her clothes. I was dreadfully upset, but of course I didn’t dare to show it. I couldn’t imagine why she wanted to do such a thing just at this time and I was worried for fear she might have suspected some of our own activities there. However, there was nothing to do but humor her, so I helped her to the door and she produced the key and unlocked it. Then she said:

“‘Bring one of the lamps and put it on the table, for I’ll need some light!’ And when I remonstrated that it was very cold in there and that she oughtn’t to stay, she only said:

“‘Don’t be silly! I can stand a little cold for a few minutes.’ I brought in one of the lamps, and helped her over to a place between the table and the mantel and was going to put her in a chair. But she didn’t want that, it seemed.

“‘I prefer to stand,’ she told me; ‘I’ve got my cane to support me. I won’t be long. Now don’t ask any questions, but go back to the living-room and shut the door, and don’t come back here till I call to you!’ I couldn’t imagine what she was up to, but it was useless to ask or remonstrate, so I did just as she told me and left her there with the door shut. But I stayed right close to it on the other side, listening, so that I could hear if she fell or needed assistance, or accidentally knocked the lamp over, or anything like that. And I was just in a cold perspiration wondering what she was trying to do—or find!

“It seemed hours before she called me, but I reckon it wasn’t more than fifteen or twenty minutes. I went right in and found her standing just where I’d left her, apparently, and she said she was all through what she wanted and to get her back to the living-room and lock the door and give her the key. But somehow I sensed that she was very much excited or upset about something and it worried me properly, I can tell you! She was very silent for a long while after I got her back to her chair, but I didn’t dare to say a thing, or question her. She didn’t even ask me to read aloud, as she usually does. We must have sat there nearly an hour, when all of a sudden she began to speak. But all she had time to say was:

“‘I would like to know what Drew——’ and suddenly she clapped her hand to her heart and groaned and just toppled over in her chair. From that moment, I reckon, she did not know what was going on, and I can’t imagine what she was trying to say, when the attack came on. It’s all very strange!”

“Oh, Aunt Eva,” groaned Celeste, “do you suppose she’s discovered that we’ve been in there—what we’ve done? *Could* she have possibly opened the secret cupboard—and found the scrapbook gone from it? Or what? I’d hate to think I’d been responsible for bringing this on her!”

“We can’t tell a thing about it—till she’s able to talk,” said Miss Eva. “And even then she may not refer to it—and of course we mustn’t. But it surely is a queer thing that she was moved to go in there just tonight. However, I’m certain this attack was coming on anyhow. Her condition lately has pointed that way. So don’t blame yourself for anything about it, Celeste. Now I must go back to her. We’ll have to watch her all night, even while she sleeps. I shouldn’t have been away as long as this, but Eliza was straightening up the room, so Abby wasn’t alone. I’ll sit up till about four, then I’ll call you, Celeste, and we’ll

get through the night that way. Go up now and try to get as much sleep as you can.”

When the girls had gone upstairs, and before they separated for the night, they had a short, serious conference in Bitsy’s room over the whole situation and what Miss Abby’s curious excursion into the record room could have been for. Bitsy declared that the old lady must have heard them in there at some time, become suspicious and gone in to look the situation over, possibly found the secret cupboard unlocked and the scrapbook missing, and been very much upset or puzzled.

“Perhaps, though, she may have thought Colonel Romney had taken it out himself,” she offered. “Maybe that’s what she was trying to say when she became ill!”

“That’s a thought—that last, at any rate!” agreed Celeste. “But just the same, I’m going to go in there myself, some time tomorrow, and look around and see if I can figure out what she had been doing. I believe I could tell it if she had opened the secret cupboard. Poor Aunt Abby!—I hope she weathers this storm all right!”

CHAPTER XIV

BITSY DOES SOME INDEPENDENT THINKING

BUT CELESTE DID NOT GO IN to examine the secret cupboard next day, nor for several days to come. A hectic season prevailed in the house of Romney for nearly a week, in which the life of Miss Abby hung in the balance, and no one had any time to think of anything save whether she would pull through or not.

Miss Eustacia returned from Richmond the following afternoon, and was welcomed with joy and relief by the rest of the household. Her calm, poised, cheerful attitude and helpful advice and assistance went a long way toward relieving the strain for them all. And though the two girls went back and forth from college as usual, most of their spare moments were spent in giving what assistance they could in the disrupted household, and relieving Miss Eva from every duty except that of actually nursing her stricken sister. So for the time the baffling mystery was laid aside, and it was not till the doctor, five days later, pronounced Miss Abby comparatively free from the worst, that they even dared to draw a free breath and think once more about other affairs.

On the first evening when Miss Abby could be left alone, resting quietly and conscious once more of her surroundings, the four dined together for the first time and could chat cheerfully of past and present affairs.

“Does Abby know yet that I’m here, Eva?” Miss Eustacia asked, while they were still at the table. Miss Eva chuckled slightly, and acknowledged:

“Yes, she does. It’s the first sign she’s taken in anything and it was to be expected that she’s not particularly overjoyed, Eustacia. She heard your voice in the hall today, and whispered:

“‘What’s Eustacia doing here? I thought she was safely in Richmond!’ Of course, we’re not letting her know how ill she’s been, so I merely said you’d come back to see what was going on over at your house, and we’d asked you to stay with us while you were in town. If she’d had strength enough I think she’d have snorted! But she merely grunted a ‘Hmph!’ and let it go at that. I advise you to keep out of sight as much as possible, though!”

“Oh, I will, never fear!” smiled Miss Eustacia. “Abby and I understand each other perfectly, and I sometimes think she rather enjoys her differences of opinion with me than otherwise. I am a grand excuse for a good, rousing argument. When she gets round to objecting actively to my presence here I’ll know she’s about ‘out of the woods!’”

Later that evening, when Miss Abby had dropped asleep normally for the night, the four got together again around the fire in the living-room and the talk naturally turned to the subject of their mystery which had been neglected so long. They told Miss Eustacia in detail all that had transpired after she left for Richmond, and then Celeste asked:

“Tell us, Cousin Eustacia, did you get *anything* out of Uncle Drew in all the time you saw him at the hospital, about this affair, except about his keys?”

“Very little, I’ll have to confess,” admitted Miss Eustacia. “I tried a number of times to

get round to the subject, but almost every time he'd shy off and act annoyed, or change the subject, so I realized that I'd probably get nowhere that way, and finally abandoned trying it. There was just one thing, I've been meaning to tell you, that may be some help. It was just at the first, when I asked him one day, point blank, why in the world he'd done such a risky thing, with his lameness, as try to get up and down those steep attic stairs. He was taken off his guard for a moment, I reckon, and said:

“‘It was a matter of necessity. There are things hidden in Romney House that must be found. I cannot solve this hideous problem till they are.’ I asked, ‘What things, Drew? Why not let me help you out? I’m strong and able-bodied—and I can keep your secret!’

“For a moment I almost thought he was going to capitulate, for he said:

“‘Grandfather Romney was a strange man! He kept a very full record of his life—apparently. I should say he had a mania for keeping records and scrapbooks and diaries almost equal to old Samuel Pepys. But there is a break. The record is not complete. Something is hidden. Something is missing. If I could find it—the diary for that one year—who knows—’ Then he suddenly broke off and sighed, ‘But I don’t know why I’m saying this to you, Eustacia. You can’t help. You wouldn’t know what it was all about. If I ever get out of here and back home again, perhaps— But please forget all this, I beg of you, and don’t let us discuss it again!’ And that was all I was ever able to get out of him,” ended Miss Eustacia. “There’s an idea in it though—something about a diary missing. I suppose he kept one for every year. But what year—and where it’s hidden—and why—is something I can’t fathom. I give it to you for what it’s worth.”

“A *diary!*” exclaimed Celeste. “That’s a marvelous idea!—So he kept a diary all his life—probably year by year—just as people do now! But where are all the other diaries, by the way? We never found anything like that among the records in the other room—not to speak of a missing one.”

“I think Drew probably keeps them all locked in his desk,” offered Miss Eva. “I’ve seen things that look like that lying around on the desk. And if you say none are in the record room, then Drew must keep them there. Probably there wouldn’t be anything in them, though, that would be of any help. And in any case, we can’t get at them in the desk. So *that’s* what Drew’s been hunting for!”

Suddenly, in the midst of their absorption, Celeste noticed that Bitsy, who was sitting off in a corner of the couch by herself, had extracted a small notebook from her sweater pocket and was scribbling in it feverishly.

“Whatever are you at, honey?” she demanded curiously. “You act as if you were taking notes at a history lecture!” Bitsy turned a violent red, and tried to stuff the notebook back into her pocket.

“Oh, nothing—really nothing!” she murmured in acute embarrassment. But Celeste would not be satisfied.

“Come on, ’fess up! You’ve got some idea up your sleeve. Out with it!” And Bitsy, still blushing furiously, stammered:

“Oh, it’s not of any account at all—*really!* It’s just that lately, while I had a little time on my hands, I got to thinking that I’d like to do as they sometimes do in detective stories. Get all the facts together—sort of tabulated—and see how far we’ve progressed, and how much we already know, and try to deduce from them something we may not have thought

of yet, or get an idea how it might be possible to work it all out. It's terribly silly! I wouldn't have told a soul about it. I was just putting down this last discovery that seems sort of—important—that's all!"

The whole group, to Bitsy's further consternation, became immediately interested in this new idea, and Miss Eustacia remarked:

"That's really an excellent scheme, I think, Bitsy. The rest of us have been too stupid or too lazy or too busy to have any ideas about it at all. Would you mind reading to us what you have already got down there? It might be a good deal of help."

"Why—if you—if you really care to hear it," quavered Bitsy, "of course. But I'm afraid it isn't very interesting and it doesn't get us very far—yet. Only it was sort of fun to me to try to work it out like a problem in mathematics. I've just put down a list of the queer things we can't puzzle out, as they've come to my own notice. Sometimes I've added little questions of my own. That's all it amounts to."

"Well, do get on with it!" cried Celeste excitedly. "I never had brains enough to do such a thing myself. I'm wild to hear what *you* make of it—and so are the rest of us!" Bitsy was just about to comply with the request, when there came the faint tinkle of a bell from Miss Abby's room that caused them all to start guiltily.

"What's that?" demanded Miss Eustacia. "I thought Abby was sound asleep."

"It's the little table-bell I put beside her in place of her cane which she's too weak to use just now," explained Miss Eva. "She's ringing it for something. I'll go see what she wants." She hurried away, and the others waited impatiently, anxious to get on with Bitsy's résumé of their problem. Presently Miss Eva came back, smiling hesitantly and rather apologetically.

"Abby was awake," she explained, "and demanded what we were all chattering about in here. Said it was keeping her from getting to sleep and asked if we'd kindly stop it and go to bed. I reckon we'll have to give it up for the night. Abby's certainly improving—getting to the 'cranky convalescent' stage fast, I should say!"

Consternation seized them all at this pronouncement, for they were by now too much absorbed in the unravelling of their mystery to be baffled by the erratic dictates of even the invalid Miss Abby. Suddenly Miss Eustacia had an idea.

"Let's all go up to my room—I mean Eva's room, which I'm occupying while Eva still sleeps on the cot in Abby's room—and we'll go over Bitsy's notes there, where it won't disturb Abby. You can tell her, Eva, that you're coming up to undress there, as you usually do. Hurry up, everyone!" It was while they were creeping as noiselessly as possible up the stairs that Miss Eustacia whispered, chuckling, to Bitsy:

"Do you know, it just tickles me to pieces, sometimes, the way we allow Abby to herd us all around like a pack of bad children! I get so much fun out of it that I've long since ceased to feel any annoyance. I wish Eva could manage to take it the same way. It would make things so much easier for her!"

When Miss Eva had quieted her older sister, and they were all settled cosily about the roaring fire that Miss Eustacia had built up in the bedroom, Miss Eustacia commanded:

"Now Bitsy, dear, get to it! Do your stuff, child, and let's see how good a detective you'll make!" And Bitsy, rather flurried still at being the focus of attention, took out her notebook and began, hesitantly:

“I suppose you’ll laugh—but I’m trying to work this out like an algebra problem—”

“I studied algebra once—in the far, far past,” murmured Miss Eustacia, “and have long since thankfully forgotten all about it. But I reckon I can remember enough to know what you’re getting at, Bits!”

“Well, like all algebra problems,” went on Bitsy, “I’m letting ‘X’ stand for the unknown quantity—and of course that’s what happened about General Sumter Romney that Colonel Drew is so worried about. If we can work out ‘X’, we’ll probably be able to solve the mystery.”

“And wouldn’t *that* be easy, if Uncle Drew would only ‘come across’ and say right out what it was!” supplemented Celeste impatiently.

“Maybe he doesn’t even know *all* about it himself!” commented Miss Eva. “In fact, we’re sure he doesn’t—or he wouldn’t be hunting for that diary!”

“Well, it would go a long way if he’d tell us what he *does* know,” Celeste still insisted.

“That’s all part of the problem,” pointed out Bitsy. “Now, I’ve divided what we do know and what we don’t know into two lists. Here are what we *do* know:

“A. *General Sumter Romney was murdered and the murderer was never definitely found.*

“I don’t know whether you’ll think this has anything to do with this affair,” Bitsy interrupted herself to supplement, “but, to me, it seems to be part of the mystery surrounding him.”

“I never thought of it that way,” said Miss Eustacia, “but it might—at that! I remember hearing that they found two bodies or skeletons in the Dismal Swamp some time afterward, and they were thought to be two of his slaves that had run away and hidden there and probably starved to death because they never dared to come out. They were twin brothers, I’ve understood, and both were rather ‘bad actors’. He had them working on his tobacco plantation further up the James River, and he had had to punish one of them for insubordination of some sort. The theory was that they had both come down from the plantation that night, and killed him for revenge, and then ran away. I imagine this theory satisfied the authorities and the subject was dropped. I never heard any other explanation. But there’s a chance you might be right in guessing that this other affair had some bearing on it. Go ahead, child! This is getting more interesting every minute!” Bitsy continued:

“B. *There is a queer stone in the cellar with a strange mark on it. Celeste saw Colonel Drew examining it one night and it has since been covered up by rubbish—she thinks Colonel Drew did it. Therefore it must have some connection with the mystery.*”

“Bless us all!” cried Miss Eustacia. “I’ve never seen that stone or even heard of it! What does it look like? I must certainly see it tomorrow.” Celeste described it to her and offered to escort her down there next day, if they could find a time when their excursion would escape the watchful eyes and ears of Miss Abby. Then Bitsy once more consulted her notebook.

“C. *We know there is a sixth stairway in this house because Colonel Drew in one of his ‘memos’ said it was on an old plan of the house.*”

And I thought maybe someone might know about that old plan or where to find it. It might help a lot if we could get hold of it.”

“I believe it might be in the record room!” cried Celeste excitedly. “I have a faint recollection of seeing something like that among Uncle Drew’s papers when I used to help him. He must have thought that stairway was important, or he wouldn’t have run the risk of tumbling downstairs looking for it! Bitsy, you sure are the cat’s mittens! Proceed, *mon ami!*”

“D. *We have found a secret cupboard in the record room, and in it a scrapbook, one of many that General Romney kept. The scrapbook is one about the Mexican War, and Colonel Drew hid it because he wanted it ‘ultimately destroyed’. Therefore the Mexican War must have something to do with the mystery.*”

This was such a self-evident proposition that they let it pass without comment, except to nod vigorously, and Bitsy proceeded to the next item.

“E. *There is a diary missing from among the many the General kept, and that is evidently what Colonel Drew has been hunting for. It no doubt holds the key to the mystery. Judging from other facts, I think it must be one of the period when the General was in the Mexican War or perhaps just before his death. It must be hidden somewhere about the house.*”

“And that’s all about the things we positively know,” commented Bitsy. “Now we come to the list of things we don’t know or ought to find out. I’ve begun at the other end of the alphabet for them.

“Z. *Where are the bills marked ‘Starr, N.Y.’ and the letters from ‘B. G.’ that Colonel Drew wants ‘ultimately destroyed’? They should have been, one would think, with Scrapbook 4, but weren’t. Why hidden separately?*”

“Y. *What is the meaning of the queer mark on the stone in the cellar?*”

“W. *Where is the sixth stairway and why is it important? Can we find it by consulting the old plan of the house, provided we can find that?*”

“I don’t see how we can—if Drew couldn’t!” commented Miss Eva on this item.

“There’s a chance!” said Celeste, “seeing we’re all better fitted physically to explore around than he is!”

“We’ll give it a try, anyhow!” exclaimed Miss Eustacia, enthusiastically. Bitsy nodded and went on:

“V. *What is under the stone in the cellar, and can we raise it or dig it up, or find out somehow?*”

“That’s the most hopeless item of them all, I figure,” commented Celeste. “That stone

looks as if it had been just as it was for a couple of hundred years!”

“I know,” mourned Bitsy. “But I put it down just the same, because it seems to have something special to do with the mystery. Now this next is the last.

“U. *Why did Miss Abby want to go into the record room the night she was taken ill? Did she suspect we had been in there? Did she look in the secret cupboard? What had she meant to say just before she had the attack?*”

“I’ve tried to find out ever since,” began Miss Eva. “I’ve hardly dared to question her because I mustn’t excite her the least bit. But I did remark to her today that I thought it was too bad she tried to go in there that night, as it may have overtired her or chilled her, standing up in that cold room. The only comment she made was:

“‘Stuff and nonsense!—Don’t be an idiot, Eva! I had my reasons and I don’t have to explain them to you!’ And then she clamped her lips shut and wouldn’t say another word. Personally I think she may have only been looking over the books and letters on the table, for I noticed afterward, when we were getting her to bed, that her fingers were very dusty, as if she’d been handling them. I think if she’d suspected we were tampering with things there she’d have said so. I doubt if she looked in the secret cupboard. We aren’t even sure that she knows of its existence. Drew may not have told her. But she went in for *something*, of course, and probably it had to do with the mystery.”

“Well now, Bits,” remarked Celeste, “you’ve outlined your algebraical proposition. But what do you expect to do with it? Add A, B, C, D, and E, and subtract U, V, W, Y, and Z and make it equal X? According to the rules, that ought to furnish us with the answer!”

Bitsy looked slightly embarrassed for a moment at Celeste’s teasing, but she replied very soberly:

“No, of course you can’t carry the thing out like that. But I did study it all over very carefully—what we did know and what we didn’t, and I came to the conclusion that there was just *one thing* that ought to be done right away, one thing that we actually had in our hands.”

“What’s that?” the other three demanded simultaneously.

“Well, the only thing we actually *have* that has a direct bearing on the mystery was Scrapbook Number Four. Therefore it ought to be examined very thoroughly, before we give *that* clue up as hopeless.”

“Well, all right!” sighed Celeste. “It looks like a thoroughly hopeless, boring job, but I suppose you’re right. Let’s get at it!” And it was then that Bitsy’s eyes danced jubilantly, as she quietly remarked:

“Oh, I guess you all needn’t bother about the actual work of going over it, bit by bit, because, just lately, while you’ve all been busy, I did it myself—read every word. You see, Celeste keeps it under her bed, and I could get at it, and thought I might as well get it over with.”

“But did you discover anything?” again demanded three simultaneous voices eagerly.

“I found something *very queer* about it,” acknowledged Bitsy. “I can’t explain so well what it is. You’ll have to see it for yourselves and decide what to do!”

“Well, for Pete’s sake let me get it!” exulted Celeste, diving from the room to extract the scrapbook from under her bed. And while she was gone, Miss Eustacia threw her arms around Bitsy in an ecstatic hug and exclaimed:

“You utterly *surprising* child!”

CHAPTER XV

SCRAPBOOK NUMBER FOUR

AFTER MISS EUSTACIA'S OUTBURST (which had greatly embarrassed Bitsy, though it secretly pleased her more than she could have expressed) there was a breathless wait for Celeste to return with the scrapbook. The minutes passed and somehow it began to seem as if she were taking much longer than was really necessary. Suddenly she came flying back, her dark, curly hair awry, her face dusty, her beautiful gray eyes wide and startled.

"There's something wrong!" she panted. "I've hunted everywhere under that bed—groveled around in the dust till I'm filthy—and *it isn't there!*" A stunned silence seized them all, till presently Bitsy began to giggle.

"Oh, Celeste—I'm so sorry! I remember now that the last time I was looking it over, Miss Eva suddenly called me from downstairs, and I was so afraid something had happened and she needed me right away, that I didn't stop to go across the room and shove it way under your bed, but opened one of your bureau drawers and stuffed it under your stockings for safety, and flew downstairs. I never happened to think of it since, because I've always put it back under the bed before."

With a low laugh of relief, Celeste hardly waited for her to finish before she had dashed again to her room, and this time returned with it triumphantly.

"Now, sugar," she exclaimed, placing the book in Bitsy's lap, "just let up on this horrible suspense and show us what you've found!"

Bitsy opened the ancient scrapbook and began slowly to turn its leaves.

"In order to show you just what I mean," she explained, "I'll have to tell you just a little about the articles it contains and how I happened to discover just what I did. All these old newspaper clippings are about the Mexican War, from the time it first began. Give daily accounts of the movements of the United States troops, and General Taylor and General Winfield Scott and the big battles of Vera Cruz and Palo Alto and Chapultepec and all that, and besides there are lots of editorials and letters that were printed in the papers from all sorts of people and their opinions about what was going on and—oh, I don't know what all! But everything had something to do with that war. Several of the articles mentioned General Romney's name and where he was and what his particular soldiers were doing, and so on. But there was not one thing in all these that had the slightest hint of any mystery about it.

"After I'd gone all through it and read everything once, I started in again and looked carefully over it, page by page, noticing everything about the scrapbook *itself*, as well as what the articles were about. And it was just doing that, that made me stumble on something very curious about the book. You see, this scrapbook, as well as all the others, seems to have been made out of some sort of big account-book. The pages underneath the articles are lined and columned like an account-book or business ledger. And, here's the most important thing,—*the pages are all numbered!*"

Bitsy passed the book around among the others, so that they could all see what she

meant. Then she went on:

“Just for curiosity, I kept an eye on these numbers as I went through it. I don’t know why I did that. I hadn’t any special reason, except that I’d promised myself I’d notice *everything* about the book, and was curious to see whether any pages had been cut out or torn out. And it was just this that led me to make a discovery. About two thirds through the book, I came to page ‘47.’ Here it is!” She turned the pages of the scrapbook till “47” appeared. They all stared at it curiously.

“Now,” continued Bitsy, “you can imagine how startled I was when I turned over—you see ‘47’ is on the *right* hand side of the book—and discovered that the other side of that same leaf, instead of being numbered ‘48’, as it naturally should be, was numbered ‘50!’” She turned the leaf to illustrate her point.

“I couldn’t imagine why this should be. It couldn’t be because a page was torn out, because any leaf that had ‘47’ on one side ought to have ‘48’ on the other. And a page that had ‘50’ on the opposite side should have ‘49’ on the first side. Just for a minute I thought that perhaps there’d been only some mistake in printing the numbers on the pages. But after I’d looked at it closely again, I made up my mind that it was something very different. Now see if any of you can discover what *I* did!”

She handed the book to Miss Eva, who scrutinized the pages in question carefully, but shook her head at last and handed it to Miss Eustacia, saying:

“You’re smarter than I am, child, if you can see anything except a possible mistake in printing the numbers!” Miss Eustacia spent a little more time over it, fingered it and examined the edges, then, with a knowing smile, she passed it on to Celeste.

“I’m ‘on!’” she chuckled. “But I’d never have noticed it for myself if Bits hadn’t shown me the way!”

Celeste, on her mettle, examined it with extreme care, then handed it back to Bitsy with a grin of appreciation.

“I’m ‘on’ too, but I’ll say you’re a clever kid, Bits, to have doped it out! I could have looked over that book a thousand years without ever having lit on it myself.”

“Well, do tell me,” cried Miss Eva, “what it’s all about! I must be extremely stupid not to have seen it—when all the rest of you did!” It was evident that she felt very much chagrined over her failure, so Bitsy explained patiently:

“It’s only because you didn’t try long enough, Miss Eva, and feel it, and compare it with the other pages. Here’s just what it all amounts to. Someone has taken the leaf marked ‘47’ on one side and ‘48’ on the other, and *pasted it*, very carefully, all along the edges, to the leaf marked ‘49’ on one side and ‘50’ on the other. That makes ‘48’ and ‘49’ disappear completely—do you see?” Miss Eva did see, and said so, adding vigorously that she was completely disgusted with herself for not having noticed it.

“But *why* was it done?” clamored Celeste. “What object would anyone have for pasting those two pages together? Do you suppose old General Romney did it?”

“There’s one thing more that maybe you haven’t noticed,” pointed out Bitsy. “If you take that 47-50 page between your hands and feel it, and take any other page and feel it, you’ll notice how much thicker 47-50 feels than even two pages pasted together would seem like. It’s something more than just scraps of paper pasted on the pages would make. It’s as if something else were *in* there. And, as I figure it out, those two pages were pasted

together to conceal something else that was hidden in between!”

This theory simply took their breath away.

“What do you suppose it can *be*?” breathed Miss Eva in a hushed whisper. But Miss Eustacia had another question:

“Do you suppose Drew knows it?” And then Bitsy gave them the biggest surprise of all when she sat back and announced calmly:

“I think he *did* it!”

CHAPTER XVI

A NIGHT IN "DORM"

BITSY HAD REDEEMED her promise to stay over night at the dormitory with Chubby McNabb. It had happened the very night after the exciting discoveries concerning Scrapbook Number Four. It was strange, she thought, to be staying away from Romney House right after so much had happened, and so much that was still to happen, but it had come about in this wise:

After the astonishing statement of her conviction that Colonel Drew Romney had himself done the pasting of the two pages together, she had been greeted, first by an amazed pause, and then by a clamoring chorus of, "Why? What makes you think so? How do you know?" She had answered seriously:

"Of course I'm not *certain*—but everything rather points to it. Don't you think so? In the first place, we're sure that there's something else inside those two pages besides just the scraps or articles pasted on the pages. It feels so. What those things are, we can't be sure, but wouldn't it be rather likely to be those letters and bills we've never been able to find?"

"My hat!" commented Celeste, enthusiastically. "*There's* a thought for you!"

"You see," went on Bitsy, "it would be a very possible thing for him to have done. You couldn't think of a better way to conceal them, even in case the scrapbook were found—and he hid *that* in the safest hiding-place in the house! It looks to me as if he'd pasted those two pages together with the other things in between. But if he'd left them just that way, they would still have formed a pretty bulky affair and might have been too noticeable. So after he had done that, I think he must have pressed the pasted pages with a hot iron to make them smoother and less thick. The reason I think this is that there's a queer, brown sort of mark down in this lower corner where perhaps the iron scorched it a bit. It's rather the shape of the side of an iron. Do you see?"

"Bitsy, child, you must be a lineal descendant of the original Sherlock Holmes!" exclaimed Miss Eustacia admiringly, as they all bent to gaze at the brown mark. "I'd never have thought of that in a hundred years!"

"And now that I think of it," cried Miss Eva, "I believe she's hit it exactly! Because I remember once, more than a year ago, Eliza complained to me one morning that someone must have been, as she put it, 'messaging around with her irons and ironing-board' the night before, because she'd found the cloth on the board badly scorched and the irons—or one of them—pretty well gummed up with wax. She accused *me* of it. (You weren't here at the time, Celeste.) But as I was quite innocent, the mystery went unsolved, for we never dreamed of pinning it on *Drew*. That settles it, though *Drew did it*, without a doubt!"

"Well, then, what are we going to do about it?" demanded Celeste impatiently. "We've just *got* to see what's between those two pages! Dare we tear them out?"

"Oh, no!" cried Miss Eva in horror at the suggestion. "How would we ever explain such a thing to Drew? Those things are just *sacred* to him. I—I couldn't allow *that*!"

"I've thought of a way," Bitsy ventured, "that it could be done and the things put back and pasted just as they were. If we could manage to dip just that one section—page 47-50—that's pasted together, into warm water for a while, I believe the whole thing would come *unpasted*. Of course, all the newspaper articles and so on would come off too, but we could first make a diagram of where they belong, and after everything is dry, we could paste them right back in the same places again. It's the only way I can think of to get those things out. And afterward, everything would be back, practically the same as it was."

"That's the Little Wise One!" exulted Celeste. "You do have the grandest ideas, Bits! Let's get to it right away. You surely won't object to *that*, Aunt Eva!"

"Oh, I don't *know!*" murmured that lady distractedly. "I—I can't decide such an important thing—right away. You must give me time to think it over. Anyway, it's too late tonight. I've been here a long while, and if Abby wakes again and finds me gone, she'll surely make a fuss."

"Well, tomorrow night—*surely!*" Celeste had begged, but Miss Eva had reminded her:

"You've forgotten that tomorrow night I have to go to that meeting of our Women's Club. I'm secretary and have a very important report to make. I promised faithfully to be there, if Abby were enough better to allow it, and you know, you promised me today, Celeste, that you'd sit with Abby while I'm gone and keep watch that she's all right. Eustacia can't. Have you forgotten?"

"Yes, I remember now," admitted Celeste, "but couldn't we get at it when you come back?"

"No, it will be late, and Abby, if she's awake, will want me to tell her all about the meeting at once, as she usually does. We can't do it tomorrow night. And besides, I want time to think this all over carefully. After all, the responsibility of this rests on *me!*" So Miss Eva had decided, and the others had to abide by her decision and betake themselves to bed with this most teasing crisis of the mystery unsolved, and no prospect of elucidating it for at least forty-eight hours!

Thus it had come about that, next morning, walking across the campus from one classroom to another with Chub, Bitsy had consented to spend the night with her at the dormitory, at her urgent invitation.

"Not so much going on tonight," said Chubby apologetically, "sort of an off-night, you know. But still, we'll probably be able to scare up *some* racket, and I do want you to see what life in dorm is like, Bits! If you get to like it, maybe you'll plan to room with me next year. I believe we'd get on well together, for I like you best of all the freshmen—do you know!" Bitsy was immensely flattered, and admitted that the plan appealed to her. In her heart she dreaded to think of the next year, with Celeste—her beloved Celeste!—gone from college forever, and life in Romney House over for her. If Chubby liked her as much as she said, and wanted to room with her, it would go far toward easing the pain.

"Bring your books," Chub advised her before they separated, "and we'll do some studying—if we get a chance. We've that heavy Math test on for tomorrow!"

Bitsy left the house shortly before seven and walked briskly through Botetort Street, to Duke of Gloucester Street, then strolled more leisurely along that wide thoroughfare, glorified by the intense brilliance of a full moon. Almost unconsciously she noted the charm of the little gem of a Colonial Courthouse, and the beauty of Bruton Parish Church,

dreaming in its quiet churchyard behind the brick wall. Farther up the street toward the College and business end, lights twinkled, and there was a stir of life quite in contrast to the hush and moonlit serenity through which she was passing.

“Strange—that only three months ago I hated this place so!” she thought. “Now it seems almost like home to me. I really believe I’ve begun to love it!” Another figure came striding toward her and she recognized that it was Duff.

“Hello!” he called. “Where you bound for—all by your lonesome?” She explained, as they each halted.

“Any chance of my seeing Celeste tonight, do you think?” he questioned. “Thought it was such a dandy night, I might whistle for her and get her out for a walk or to the movies. We don’t seem to have a minute together any more, nowadays!” Bitsy explained the situation to him further, outlining how Celeste had been obliged to spend the evening at home, while her aunt was away.

“Oh, heck!” was his only comment. “Then I might as well walk back to campus with you.” And he turned to accompany her toward college. “Any more developments in the mystery thriller?” he questioned. And Bitsy hurriedly detailed to him the latest happening, as they strolled along. “Hm!—clever, you are!” was his only comment. “Maybe we’re going to get to the bottom of this thing yet. I’d about given up hope!” They passed the octagonal Powder Horn, sharply etched in the drenching moonlight, and Bitsy asked:

“What’s that queer little brick building, way in back there on the next block? I don’t think I ever noticed it specially before. The moonlight sort of brings it out.”

“That’s the old Colonial ‘Debtors’ Prison’, I believe,” Duff answered. “Queer little building, isn’t it! They say the Restoration hasn’t got it yet, but they’d like to. But the most interesting prison is the one over on Nicholson Street near the Hall of Burgesses. Ever seen that?”

“No, I haven’t,” acknowledged Bitsy. “I’m learning something new about this town every day!”

“Well, that was the really big prison of the Virginia Colony,” Duff enlightened her. “That one was described by someone way back in 1724 as ‘a strong, sweet prison for criminals’! Grand description, what? It looks about as big as a peanut, compared to most modern prisons, but I suppose it was sufficient for those times. They say that among others the pirate Blackbeard’s crew were imprisoned there for quite a while before they were all hanged!”

“Blackbeard!” exclaimed Bitsy. “Was he connected with Williamsburg? I never thought of it, somehow, though I remember reading several stories about him when I was younger.”

“Used to stroll around here quite a bit in his off moments, I’ve heard,” said Duff. “Picturesque old rascal, he must have been.”

They had by this time reached the heart of the business section, and Duff halted at the movie theatre, inviting Bitsy to come in and see the show with him. But she excused herself, saying that Chub would be expecting her, and sped on toward the campus. Groups of students were hurrying hither and yon to their various evening engagements and amusements. From one of the buildings there drifted out the high, swelling music of some glee-club or chorus at practice. Wren Hall, glorified in the moonlight, loomed stately and

serene, and even old noseless Botetort was touched by the magic spell and stood, a dignified and imposing figure from the long past. Bitsy hugged herself, with a new thrill of interest and loyalty.

“Oh, I *like* it!—I’m beginning to like it a *lot*!” she told herself. “I believe I’ll never feel lonely here again—even after Celeste’s gone. Nobody’ll ever be quite like *her*—but Chub is certainly a dear!”

The night in the dormitory, now that she was an accepted and welcome member of Chubby’s group instead of a lonely and unpopular newcomer, out of key with all her surroundings, was a revelation to Bitsy. Used as she was to the ordered regularity and early retiring hours at Romney House, and the still stricter regime of a private boarding-school where all lights had been out at ten, and darkness, silence and sleep, thereafter, she was amazed at the freedom and late hours, and jolly, unrestricted camaraderie that prevailed in the dorm. She had expected to chat a while with Chub, then get down to cramming for the next day’s test, and retire not later than ten-thirty or eleven at latest. But such was not Chubby’s idea.

“Come along!” she had cried, the moment Bitsy appeared at her door. “Spiff Jackson, that Soph who rooms on the next floor below, is planning a party and I’m told we can both ‘muscle in’ if we like. Let’s hop out and get some pastries at the Coffee Shoppe to take as our share.” They dived out, accordingly, into the moonlit night, and were presently back in “Spiff’s” room, where a milling crowd of girls were laughing, chattering, singing and consuming enormous and heterogeneous quantities of food. The pastries were welcomed with appreciative shouts, and it was not till some time later that Bitsy realized the presence of her old enemy, Rita Spence, across the room, perched on the edge of a table, and eyeing her with speculative surprise. Presently she slid round the room to the vicinity of Bitsy’s and Chub’s corner.

“Who let *you* in?” she muttered to Bitsy, between mouthfuls of cream pie. “Here to give the dorm the once-over? Maybe you think your old Romney House is superior to this!” The challenge was like a red rag waved at a bull, to the hot-tempered Bitsy. The blood flamed to her cheeks and her eyes snapped as she was about to make a contemptuous retort. But just at that moment she felt the pressure of Chub’s warning fingers on her arm, and Chub herself intervened:

“Bitsy’s here as my guest tonight, Rita! We’ve got to show her all the hospitality of the house!” Bitsy’s only reply was to pass the box of pastries to her enemy, with the invitation:

“Won’t you have one? They’re rather nice and fresh tonight.” But it had taken all the self-restraint of which she was capable to say as much—and no more. Rita grudgingly accepted a chocolate éclair and, finding for once that baiting Bitsy brought no spectacular results, she moved away to join her friend, Elsie Crane.

“Good old scout!” whispered Chub. “You’re learning the ropes at last!”

They drifted away from the party about ten o’clock to Chub’s room, where Bitsy supposed they would now settle down to study. But they had no sooner donned their pajamas and made themselves comfortable than two Freshmen and a Junior dropped in—one Freshman to get some pointers in algebra and the others to talk about the play that was soon to be given. The one Freshman being in the minority, they discussed the play for an

hour, then veered to life in general and their friends in particular, and the mathematically inclined Freshman finally went to sleep on the bed in sheer discouragement. It was midnight before the room was finally cleared of visitors.

“Now let’s get to work!” cried Chub, clearing the desk of three empty ginger-ale bottles, one glass and a plate of crumbs. “If we have any more visitors tonight I’ll pass out! They never seem to go to bed, in this dorm, and give you a chance to work. We’ll be at this job till three in the morning, or I miss my guess!”

They dug away for an hour, till Chub finally pushed the books aside and moaned:

“I’m dead! I can’t keep my eyes open! What do you say if we go to bed now and get up early and do our cramming then?” Bitsy, who was half asleep herself, heartily agreed, and so they left their books and decided to call it a day. Just before they dropped off, Chub murmured:

“Tell me, Bits, one thing I’m crazy to know! They say that old Romney House is *haunted*—that awfully queer things happen there. Did you ever see anything of that kind?”

“No,” answered Bitsy, “I never did. I think that kind of talk is all tosh!” But she carefully refrained from mentioning what she had *heard*! “I thought so!” muttered Chub, and dropped off into dreamless slumber.

Bitsy herself slept but fitfully, as a result not only of the exhilaration and excitement of her evening, but also from the quantities of rich food she had consumed. It was well toward morning before she fell into a deeper sleep, in which she had a horrid nightmare that the pirate Blackbeard was standing on her chest, a great, old-fashioned pistol in each hand, both pointing down at her. She could plainly see his ugly, broken nose, his wicked black eyes, and his beard braided into several strands and thrown over his shoulders!

Struggling awake, she found the cause of her trouble to be the plump Chubby, who in her restless sleep had thrown herself straight across Bitsy’s chest and was there reposing, blissfully unconscious of her companion’s discomfort. With a sleepy giggle, Bitsy dislodged herself and scrambled out of bed to look at the time. Discovering it to be well after six, she decided to get up, dress and do her studying.

“Now *what* made me have that silly dream about Blackbeard?” she thought, as she scrambled into her clothes. “Oh—I remember now!—It must have been what Duff was telling me last night. That and all those indigestible *éclair*s I ate! I remember seeing pictures of him that looked just like my nightmare. Wonder if I ought to wake Chub and get her to studying too?” She went over to the bed and shook the sleeping girl tentatively. But Chubby only sighed and remained dead to the world. Bitsy gave it up at last, turned on the light over the desk, and got down to her work. Curiously enough, the Blackbeard nightmare lingered about in the back of her mind all day.

When she met Celeste at noon, the latter inquired:

“Well, how did you enjoy it? Did you have a good time, honey?” Bitsy gave her an enthusiastic response and then demanded:

“But what happened home, Celeste? Did anything unusual turn up? I was so afraid I’d miss something!”

“Not a thing,” said Celeste. “Absolutely all quiet along the Romney front! Aunt Abby went to sleep like a lamb, and Aunt Eva had a good time at her meeting, and Cousin

Eustacia and I talked till midnight. But I've got a piece of news for you!"

"What?" cried Bitsy. "Don't keep me in suspense!"

"Aunt Eva's capitulated at last," announced Celeste. "She's agreed to explore the mysteries of Scrapbook Number Four. We're all to be on hand tonight for the grand show-down, provided Aunt Abby doesn't do anything to upset our plans!"

CHAPTER XVII

REVELATION

“LOOK OUT!—Handle it carefully! Don’t let the other pages get into the water!” Miss Eva hovered anxiously about the pair, Miss Eustacia and Celeste, who were leaning over a large basin of warm water on a table, each holding gingerly the two open halves of Scrapbook Number Four, keeping one section alone, pages 47-50, soaking in the basin. Bitsy was standing by to rescue any of the ancient articles that might come loose through the soaking, and lay them on carefully diagrammed sheets of paper, to correspond with their rightful places on the leaves of the scrapbook.

It was after eleven o’clock that night, and they were all assembled in Miss Eva’s room, while Miss Abby slumbered peacefully in her own domain downstairs. Everyone was tense with excitement, suspense, and the anxious desire to do as little harm as possible to the scrapbook.

“One edge is coming loose!” cried Celeste exultantly. “Maybe we can get them apart before all the other things fall off!” It looked as if her prediction might be coming true, for the more modern paste that the Colonel had evidently used, was yielding to its warm water soaking more readily than the ancient glue or mucilage of the General’s day. Whatever *he* had pasted in seemed put there to stay!

“I feel as mean as if we were doing that horrid trick I’ve heard of—steaming open letters to read their contents!” murmured Miss Eva, guiltily. “And yet, I couldn’t see any other way that we could find to get at the bottom of this mystery. I could only console myself by the thought that we have as much right as Drew and Abby to know about this thing, and we may be helping them in the end, if we can find a solution to it.”

“This lower edge is all clear,” warned Miss Eustacia. “Suppose we try to slip out what’s inside, without bothering to unglue the other edges?”

“It would probably be hard to get them out,” suggested Bitsy, “when the whole thing is so wet. They might stick and we’d tear something. I should say we’d better unsoak it all around.” They all agreed with her and the process went on. One ancient article on page 47 came loose and floated into the basin. Bitsy picked it up gingerly and laid it in its appointed place to dry on the separate piece of paper. After what seemed an interminable interval, in which Miss Eva refilled the basin with fresh warm water, the front edge came unsealed, and was later followed by the top edge.

“Now what shall we do?” demanded Celeste, so excited that she could hardly stand still.

“Better take it all out quickly and try to get things dry, before we examine anything,” counselled Miss Eustacia. “If we handle these things much in this moist state, we’ll tear them to pieces!”

“Oh, dear!” moaned Celeste. “Do we have to wait for *that*? I thought we could get right down to brass tacks at once!”

As they lifted the soaked pages from the water, several sheets of sodden paper fell to

the floor.

“I told you so!” Bitsy could not help but exclaim. “There *was* something hidden in between! You pick them up, Miss Eva. You are the one that should see them first.” Miss Eva stooped and delicately gathered the water-logged papers and laid them on a fresh, clean piece of wrapping paper that Bitsy had provided for this very purpose. Her eyes were wide and startled, her manner nervous and excited, as she pointed to something printed on one of the sheets.

“Bitsy, you were right, child—right as rain! See what’s printed at the top of that sheet, ‘*Joseph T. Starr, Fulton Street, New York!*’”

Now that they had actually come upon what they had so long been seeking, they could scarcely believe the evidence of their own eyes. What it all meant, they had still not the slightest idea, but they knew beyond a peradventure that they were on the verge of enlightenment.

“Here’s something else!” almost shouted Celeste, looking over Miss Eva’s shoulder, as she straightened out the water-soaked treasure-trove. “Here’s what looks like the page of a letter, and it’s signed *Bernard Gunther!* That’s ‘B. G.’, of course. Oh, I’m wild to read what it says!”

“You can’t do that till they’re dry,” warned Miss Eva. “Put some more wood on the fire, and we’ll lay these papers as near as we dare, so they’ll dry out quicker. Oh, see! The water has blurred the writing some! What will Drew ever say!” The discovery distressed her mightily.

“Never mind, Aunt Eva,” Celeste tried to comfort her. “By the time he discovers it, we’ll probably have this affair all cleaned up and can tell him all about it, anyway. Don’t you worry yourself!” Nevertheless, Miss Eva was not reassured, being still none too positive of the outcome.

It proved a difficult matter to arrange the scrapbook and the various contents that had come from it, so that all might dry with the greatest possible speed and the least damage to the papers. All took turns in holding the articles as near as they dared to the roaring blaze Celeste had created in the open fireplace. Their faces were red, their very eyebrows almost singed, as they bent over the precious material spread to dry, but they scarcely noticed these discomforts, so absorbed were they all in accomplishing the task as quickly and thoroughly as possible. Once Miss Eva ran down to take a peep in at the unpredictable Miss Abby, but came back to report that she was still mercifully in the land of dreams.

“For *once*,” sighed Miss Eva, “we haven’t Abby’s wakefulness to cope with!”

It was long past midnight when anything was at last dry enough to handle. And when both Miss Eva and Miss Eustacia had tested them and found it possible, they all clustered about the long-sought display, laid out carefully on the table where they should have the least handling. For after their wetting, they seemed particularly brittle.

“Now, Eva,” said Miss Eustacia gravely, “you look them over first. You are the eldest member of the family that is responsible for this, and you’ve offered to assume the responsibility. Go ahead, for we’re all waiting breathlessly to hear the results!”

Miss Eva gathered herself together with a shrug of resolution, walked over to the table and began, very cautiously, to turn over and examine the dried papers, and Celeste arranged the lamp so that she should have all the light possible on the cramped and

somewhat blurred writing.

“Don’t keep us in suspense too long!” she begged, and stood by with the others, watching earnestly every expression on her aunt’s rather tense face, bent over to see more clearly. It seemed a long, long time that Miss Eva took to finger over the papers, returning ever and again to certain ones, consulting them with puzzled eyes and wrinkled frown of concentration. Bitsy brought a chair for her finally, and gently pushed her down in it, so that she should not become weary of standing bent over her task. At last she let them lie, and turned to the others waiting to hear her speak:

“I can’t make sense out of it entirely,” she murmured, “but these two letters seem very—well—*threatening*, to say the least. You’d better all read them now, and see what you can make of them. Suppose you read the letters aloud, Celeste, then we can all hear them at once.”

Celeste took the letter gingerly in her fingers and read aloud, slowly, from writing that was cramped, blurred and more than a little indistinguishable, the following, which began without preamble:

This is to warn you, General Romney, that your activities have been traced, and the source of your revenue from N.Y. identified. I am acting for the Mexican church that was despoiled. You have reaped the benefits of your ill-gotten treasure, but you will not go unpunished, if it is not retrieved and returned where it properly belongs.

Mexican vengeance awaits you if you delay too long.

I sign myself with a name that is not mine, but which will do as well as another, and by which you may communicate with me.

*Bernard Gunther,
Vera Cruz, Mexico*

“What does it all *mean*?” demanded Celeste, in the astonished pause which followed.

“Read the rest of the things,” advised Miss Eustacia. “We can judge better after we’ve heard them all.” Celeste laid down the missive and took up the second one, which was even shorter and more terse.

My first warning went unheeded. I have been advised that a second shipment has reached N.Y.

This is the final warning!

B.G.

“That sounds ominous!” observed Miss Eustacia. “But what can it be all about? What have those bills or lists of things got to do with it? Look them over too, Celeste.”

“They seem to be from a ‘Joseph T. Starr’ in New York, who has below his name on the billheads, ‘Dealer in Antiques, Jewelry, Rare Coins, Furniture, etc.’,” read Celeste, “and one is dated Feb. 14, 1858, and the other, March 3, 1858. Each list has items on it like ‘One cross, six inches, emeralds and diamonds; Ten yards rare Spanish lace, One ruby encrusted gold coronet; One tapestry, six feet by eight, probably early Renaissance, subject The Holy Innocents. And a lot more similar things, mostly jewelry of some kind.

Then at the bottom of the bill it says, ‘Probable value of lot, \$15,000. Auction may bring more.’ That’s one bill. The later one has similar things on it and valued at \$2,500. What can it all be about?”

“The inference is rather plain, isn’t it?” said Miss Eustacia gravely. “It looks to me as though these articles, which General Romney must have shipped to New York to this dealer for disposal at auction, came from somewhere down in Mexico, judging from the ‘Bernard Gunther’ letters, and were originally stolen from some church or cathedral down there. Since General Romney was in Mexico during the war, some years before, the suspicion must have pointed at his having obtained them there. The thing seems absurd on the face of it—but that’s all I can make of the puzzle.”

A shocked silence prevailed among them all. Suddenly Miss Eva burst out:

“Does this mean then that Grandfather Romney *stole* those articles down there? I’ll never believe it as long as I live! No wonder Drew was so terribly upset over discovering this!”

At this moment, Bitsy, who had been examining the inner, pasted together pages of the scrapbook, now fairly dry, exclaimed:

“There are a couple of articles pasted in here that seem to have something to do with that subject. See!—this editorial says that in spite of General Scott’s explicit orders against pillaging homes and churches during the war in Mexico, evidence has come to light during these recent years that much of it was done, possibly before the orders were issued. Attempts have been made to dispose of such booty through jewelers and auctioneers, principally in New York, and in a few cases the guilty parties have been traced. Then here’s another article—a letter from some officer in the Mexican War, denying that such vandalism ever occurred. He declared that the American army was practically above reproach in that respect. Then here’s one more from another officer, who says he personally had to court-martial two wild volunteers of the earlier days of the war for exactly such breaches of military conduct. I suppose the General must have pasted those articles in there. And Colonel Drew concealed them by pasting those pages together, with the letters and bills in between.”

This fresh intelligence only seemed to deepen their bewilderment. Finally Celeste put in impatiently:

“Well, even supposing it *did* happen!—While I’d rather hate to think one of my ancestors was mixed up in a thing like that, still, it’s all long gone and past, and we’re living in the present, and that’s the only thing that concerns *us*. I can understand Uncle Drew being awfully upset about finding this thing out about his grandfather, but can you tell me what it all has to do with the present problem—having the house ‘restored’—and that sort of thing?” She looked around questioningly at the others.

“Remember, he’s hunting for something *else*,” Bitsy reminded her “Probably it’s the diary that’s missing. In fact, Miss Eustacia said he told her it was. And then, don’t you think there might be something else besides that?” They all stared at her with questioning eyes.

“What else could there be?” breathed Miss Eva softly.

“Isn’t it just possible,” suggested Bitsy, “that there might have been more of that treasure—or loot that had been taken away from Mexico? Perhaps he still had more of it

to dispose of and hadn't a chance to do it before he—was killed. It might be hidden somewhere in this house. Perhaps it might come to light when they dismantled the house, and questions would be asked about it. And Colonel Drew would have to answer them. Or it would be found out about them."

Again Bitsy had scored a "bull's-eye." Miss Eustacia turned to her and cried, "I never thought of it! Of course that's probably the reason. And I can see quite well why Drew would hate to have such a questionable matter come to public notice." Suddenly Celeste had an idea of her own and sat up straight and tense.

"Look here!—Maybe—maybe this all explains something else, too. Perhaps this thing was the cause of Great-grandfather Romney's death? Don't you see? Those letters threatened vengeance if he didn't return the loot. He didn't, evidently, and he was murdered in a mysterious manner when he was all alone here. They pinned it on a couple of runaway slaves—but it may have been the other all the time!"

Miss Eva and Miss Eustacia shuddered, but Bitsy's eyes shone excitedly. "Good for you, Celeste! I never thought of that! That may explain everything."

"Poor, poor Drew!" suddenly exclaimed Miss Eva. "How the shock of this discovery must have affected him! He's so sensitive about all that concerns his family and its history—always been so proud of its unstained record. I can well understand now, how this thing must have made him suffer." Her own beautiful gray eyes filled with sympathetic tears. "But what we are going to do about it all, I'm sure I don't know!"

"The answer to that seems to me fairly simple," suggested Miss Eustacia. "From his actions, and the little he said, I judge that Drew must have been convinced that these things were hidden somewhere about the house. He tried searching for them, pretty unsuccessfully, because he was so hampered by his lameness, and evidently didn't want to take anyone into his confidence to help him out. But if he thought *he* could find them, we have even a better chance. Two of us are young and active, and all of us are comparatively strong and able-bodied. *We've* got to do the hunting! And we'll never have a better time than we have now, with Drew away in Richmond, and Abby safe in bed, which she can't leave for some time to come!"

And it was then that Miss Eva exploded an unexpected bomb in their midst by announcing:

"Oh, that reminds me!—I had a letter from Drew this afternoon, and he says he's horribly tired of it and lonely, in the hospital, and the doctor says he can safely return home now, if he promises to go about with extreme care. He asked if you, Eustacia, could possibly come up to Richmond Saturday and bring him back? The doctor does not wish him to travel alone, as his arm is still in a sling."

The shock of this announcement staggered them all.

"And this is Wednesday!" groaned Celeste. "Only *two* days left to comb this house from attic to cellar! We'll never be able to do it in that time—never, *never!*" There was no getting around this appalling deduction. With the Colonel in the house, they knew that they could not conceal their secret activities in searching, no matter how careful they might be. They all sat speechless, till Celeste demanded imploringly:

"Can't *someone* think of *something*? How about you, Bitsy? You did such a marvelous job puzzling out about that scrapbook. Can't you cook up some plan—some way we can

go about this quickly? My mind's a complete blank!" A sudden shyness at being thus appealed to by her elders made Bitsy stammer and hesitate.

"Oh, I—I don't know! It's—I can hardly think of anything. This has all sort of taken my breath away. But if you ask *me*—I believe it would be best to do as you do in a mathematical problem—start to work from what you actually *know*—to the thing you don't know. I—I think I'd take anything—or any fact—I have before me to go on, and do what I could about *that*—not just rush around hunting all over the place—sort of hit-or-miss!"

"Well, I agree with you there," admitted Celeste, "but what would you say we 'actually know or have to go on,' I'm sure *I* don't know anything! Do the rest of you?" Miss Eva and Miss Eustacia could only shake their heads dolefully. Bitsy went on to outline her idea:

"There are three things we actually have to work on, as far as I know anything about it. One is that secret closet in the record room. Mightn't it be possible that that hasn't been thoroughly explored? There just *might* be some other compartment in it that hasn't come to light yet. Then there's that old plan of the house, that the Colonel said indicated something about a hidden stairway, didn't he, in that 'memo' we found? If we could get that map and study it, we might discover something about it that would give us a clue. And then, as a last resort, there's that strange stone in the cellar. That, I think, is our best bet, but it's harder to do anything about than the others. Perhaps we might try to work them out first. That's the only thing I can think of."

"Hurrah!" cried Celeste, springing up to rush over and hug Bitsy enthusiastically. "I might know we could depend on you—every time! Let's get right about it at once. We can't afford to lose a minute. We'll all go down into the record room right now, and look over the secret closet thoroughly, and see, too, if we can find that old plan. I'm sure I saw that there among the records, some time or other. Come along, everyone!"

"You'll do nothing of the sort—tonight!" commanded Miss Eva. "Look at that clock!" It pointed to twenty-five minutes past two!

"If Abby wakes up now and finds I'm not in bed at this ungodly hour, she'll most certainly raise sand!" went on Miss Eva, to Celeste's great disgust. "What's more, we've got to get this scrapbook and its contents together and put it safely away somewhere. And we're all too tired, and *I'm* certainly too disheartened by what we've just learned, to do any more without a night's rest. I insist that every one of you go straight to bed, after we've cleared up here!"

And against that ultimatum she would hear no further argument.

CHAPTER XVIII

AN ALARM IN THE NIGHT

HALF AN HOUR LATER, Miss Eva, in her wrapper and night attire, crept wearily down the dark stairs, felt her way along the hall and into Miss Abby's room. She had determined not to risk lighting any lights, not even a candle, lest Miss Abby be disturbed and wake to inquire the time. Noiselessly she crept into her bed on the couch, drew the covers over her and tried to go to sleep.

But somehow, sleep would not come. She lay listening to Miss Abby's heavy breathing, sometimes interspersed with snores, or light puffing sounds. And try as she would, she could not disentangle her thoughts from the discoveries that had materialized that night. She did not know just what she had imagined this unknown mystery about old General Romney to be, but whatever her vague imaginings had been, they certainly had been far from the disgraceful and sordid revelations they had come upon hidden in the old scrapbook.

It was all very well, she thought, for Celeste to urge that the doings of a bygone generation had little or no bearing on the affairs of the present ones. That was the attitude of the youngest generation, of course! They gave no thought to the past, they lived only for their own comfort and welfare and interests, usually quite regardless of the peace of mind of their elders or any consideration for family tradition or history. Celeste was rather better than most of them, she had to admit, but even *she* had been comparatively unmoved by this discovery of apparently grave disregard of public and private honesty in one of her most prominent ancestors.

Miss Eva felt that now she herself could understand better the blight that had fallen on the Colonel, when he had made this unfortunate discovery, and also his urgent reasons for not wanting the house tampered with by outsiders till he could convince himself by the missing diary, which more than likely would contain the General's own account of the affair, that it was true. And, as Bitsy had suggested, there might be still some of the ill-gotten treasure concealed about the house in some secret hiding-place of which only the General had known. How explain *that* to the Restoration Committee, which investigated so carefully every slightest discovery in its work of reorganizing the ancient houses?

Two hours dragged by in these sad and bewildered speculations, and still Miss Eva had not closed an eye. At length, when the clock had struck five, she felt herself growing drowsy and her thoughts somewhat incoherent, and she had almost sunk into sleep when she was suddenly shocked and startled into a bolt upright position at the sound of a distinct and resounding *crash* echoing through the silent house! Her sister was also suddenly awakened and cried in a loud, indignant voice:

"What's *that*?"

"I—I don't know!" faltered Miss Eva. "I haven't the slightest idea—but—but something must have happened in the living-room. It sounded as if it came from there."

"Get up immediately—and go see what has happened, Eva!" commanded Miss Abby.

“It sounds as though a whole wall had fallen in!”

“All right, Abby,” faltered Miss Eva, struggling to get into her wrapper and find her slippers in the dark. In another moment she had lighted a candle, and was hesitantly making her way through the dark hall. To her infinite relief, Celeste and Miss Eustacia came scurrying down the stairs, clamoring to know the origin of the awful sound. It heartened her considerably to have company on her quest, for in her secret soul Miss Eva had always been desperately afraid of burglars or night-marauders.

“I don’t know,” she informed them. “Abby and I heard the crash, and I came to see what was the matter. The sound seemed like it came from the living-room. Oh, I’m *glad* you’re both here with me!”

Made bold by their united numbers, they went forward to the door of the living-room, and Celeste bravely elected to open it and be the first to enter. She had caught up her electric torch on her way downstairs, and now boldly flashed it about the room, while the two others clustered behind her. The room, much to their amazement, was absolutely quiet and peaceful, with nothing disturbed, and no sign of anything having fallen or any midnight intruder about.

“Must have been in the dining-room then,” muttered Celeste. “Come across the hall, all of you, and we’ll look in there.” They crossed the hall to the dining-room door, opened it cautiously and peered inside, but were rewarded by seeing nothing but the same undisturbed condition of peace within its precincts.

“It might have been in the kitchen,” volunteered Miss Eva, “but somehow the sound didn’t seem to come from that direction. However, we’d better go and see.” Accordingly they went through the dining-room to the kitchen, only to find the same ordered regularity in which Eliza always left it.

“Come back to the living-room,” cried Celeste. “I *know* that sound came from somewhere around there, and we’ve simply got to locate it, if we stay up till breakfast.” They streamed back to the living-room, and stood bewildered and uncertain in the middle of it, wondering what to do next. Suddenly Celeste held up a warning finger, murmuring:

“Listen!—I’m certain I heard a faint sound coming from in *there!*” She pointed to the door of the record room, and they all tiptoed toward it, and Celeste, who had reached it first, put her ear against one of the panels of the door. She was rewarded by hearing a faint, scraping sound, and another that might have been a stifled moan. Suddenly she turned to Miss Eva:

“Hurry, Aunt Eva!—go back and get the key of this door from Aunt Abby—somehow! Make any excuse you can think of—but we’ve got to get in here at once—the quickest way!”

“Oh,—I don’t know whether—” faltered Miss Eva, but at an imploring look from Celeste, she hurried out and back to Miss Abby’s room. On her way, she determined to ask no questions and answer none, but simply go straight to the skirt which hung in the closet, in the pocket of which she knew Miss Abby kept the key, take it, and walk out again so quickly that her inquisitive sister would have no time to ask a question or forbid the key being used. But Miss Abby was too quick for her. As she opened the room door and made a dive for the closet, the old lady demanded:

“What was the trouble, Eva? What has happened? What are you fussing around in that

closet for? I *insist* on being answered!” Driven to desperation, Miss Eva replied in a muffled voice that she was getting the key of the record room door from Miss Abby’s pocket, as they thought the crash might have come from there. No sign of it had appeared anywhere else. At this moment she found the key and dashed out again, leaving a fuming, spluttering and impotent Miss Abby behind!

Celeste, without apology, and without wasting a moment, grabbed the key and flew to unlock the door. And about it they all clustered, staring in with astonished eyes, at a singular scene presented to their gaze.

In the light of the torch Celeste was flashing about, they perceived that the huge mahogany top to one of the high bookcases had become dislodged and had fallen to the floor, where it now lay, half balanced against an armchair that was standing directly in front of the bookcase. The falling of this massive piece of woodwork explained the terrific noise they had heard, and for the moment they observed nothing further.

“Well, whatever caused *that* thing to——” began Miss Eustacia, when a low moan from behind the large table in the center of the room arrested her in the midst of her remark. Rushing around this table, Celeste and the others came upon the cause of all the commotion.

“Look here!” whispered Celeste to the others, and joining her, they beheld on the floor a dusty, disheveled and frightened Bitsy Bates, stretched at full length, moaning a little and holding her hand to a cut on her forehead that was bleeding quite profusely. Utter astonishment and confusion rendered them dumb for a moment, in which Bitsy murmured painfully:

“Oh, *please* forgive me, Miss Eva—all of you! I know I did a terrible thing—but I had an idea—I wanted so much to try it—right away. I—I came here—by the attic way—when you were all asleep—and—and I—climbed up there—on that bookcase—and I was hunting in the top—behind that big molding—and holding on to it—and it suddenly gave way—and it fell—I fell too—and—and I guess I hit my head—on something——”

Celeste could scarcely repress a giggle at Bitsy’s dust-streaked and begrimed countenance and her abject expression. But Miss Eva dropped to her knees beside the humiliated girl and exclaimed:

“Oh, my dear child—you must be hurt! It must have bruised you badly to take such a fall—and that bad cut on your forehead!”

Bitsy struggled to her elbow and exclaimed, “Oh no! I’m not badly hurt. You mustn’t worry about me. I’m just so *sorry*——” But at that moment Miss Eustacia held up a warning finger.

“Hush—everyone!—Listen!—I do believe Abby’s gotten out of bed and is coming along the hall!”

A new consternation seized them all. “Heavens, what shall we *do*?” breathed Celeste, hearing the slow tap-tap of Miss Abby’s cane. But Miss Eva cried distractedly, “Oh, how did she *ever* do it? She’ll kill herself! She almost never walks alone—and in her condition——” She hurried out to try to intercept her sister, and those who remained in the room could hear a violent argument going on.

“Abby, how *could* you! You must go back! Let me help you!”

“Eva, I shall do nothing of the sort! I’m going to see for myself what all this

commotion's about!"

"The doctor said he wouldn't answer for the consequences if you——"

"Fiddlesticks! I'm tired of lying in bed anyway——"

Celeste bent over Bitsy and whispered,—“I'm afraid Aunt Eva can't stop her, honey! They're almost here. You mustn't be seen. I'll fix everything. Can you crawl under the table?” Bitsy nodded, and dragged herself across the short space that separated her from the edge of the big center-table, loaded with books and documents. In a moment she was underneath it and quite well concealed by a heavy cover that had long ago been placed on the table to protect its handsome mahogany surface from being damaged by the load it bore. The cover hung down almost to the floor on each side, and formed a comparatively well-concealed hiding-place. She was not a moment too soon, for she was no sooner out of sight than Miss Abby stood in the doorway, staring about with curious gaze.

“So *that* was it!” she exclaimed, as her eyes fastened on the heavy cornice of the bookcase, lying tilted against the chair. “I'd like to know the explanation of such a remarkable accident!” Miss Eva, who had edged over toward the table, glanced wildly about for Bitsy, whom she still firmly expected to see lying prone on the other side. Not perceiving her there, she cast imploring eyes at Celeste who answered firmly:

“Yes, that was it, Aunt Abby. It *does* seem queer that it should have fallen so suddenly, but perhaps it was glued on or something, and the glue has dried in all these years. It's very top-heavy, anyway, and probably worked loose and suddenly fell. Anyway, no harm's done! We can have it fixed up again and it'll be just as good as ever. Hadn't you better get back to bed? It's cold, and awfully late, and we've found out now what all the commotion was about. I say let's all go back to bed!”

But Miss Abby was not satisfied by this unconvincing explanation. Assisted by the unwilling Miss Eva, she limped further into the room and around the table to survey the fallen bookcase-top at closer quarters. And an odd picture she presented, muffled in a heavy dressing-gown that she had managed to huddle around her, her white hair hanging down her back in a long, thin braid, her cane clutched in a bony but determined hand. Suddenly she horrified them all by declaring:

“I think that is a perfectly silly explanation. There's something back of all this!—Someone has been in this room and disturbed that thing—though I can't imagine why. Celeste, did you do it?” She turned toward her grand-niece and fixed her with a piercing look.

“No, truly, Aunt Abby, I haven't been near it! I never thought of such a thing!”

“Then it must have been *you*, Eva!” The old lady fixed her black, accusing eyes on her trembling sister.

“You know better than that, Abby! I was asleep in your room when it happened! Have you forgotten?” retorted Miss Eva, with so logical an answer that Miss Abby was forced to apologize:

“That's so. I had forgotten. I'm sorry. Then, Eustacia, I am forced to conclude that you have so far forgotten your obligations as a guest in this house as to be guilty of this intrusion. There's no one left but you, for that child Bitsy is asleep in her bed and hasn't even been wakened by this fracas. And of course it would be reasonless to suppose she would be likely to intrude into this room, anyway. So it can only be you!”

“Abby,” said Miss Eustacia, “I should hate to have you think me guilty of such an intrusive and utterly unreasonable act. And I must remind you of one thing. *You* are the only one who has the key to this room in your possession. So how could any of us have gotten in here?”

And for once Miss Abby was utterly nonplussed by this argument. Every one of the others in the room was hoping madly that she would not happen to think of the other, roundabout mode of reaching the apartment, and evidently she did not. Perhaps it had been so many years since she had taken it herself—if she *ever* had—that it had long since escaped her mind. With a half-apologetic nod at Miss Eustacia, she replied:

“You’ve got me there, I’m afraid, Eustacia!—Unless some outsider got in by the window, I’ll have to admit I’m stumped for an explanation. And as the windows seem all intact, we’ll have to give it up for tonight. But I shall get to the bottom of this, be sure of that!”

On her way around the table toward the door, she passed so close to Bitsy’s hiding-place, switching at the cover with her cane, in her progress, that the hearts of all four were in their mouths, till she reached the door.

“Give me the key, Eva!” she commanded. “I’ll see this place locked up myself, and after this the key stays under my pillow!” She waited inexorably by the door for them to file out. They had hoped she would go on off to bed, and let them get Bitsy out later, from her uncomfortable concealment, but such was not to be. One by one they walked out into the living-room, and Miss Abby locked the door with grim determination, placed her hand on Miss Eva’s arm and limped away, with a parting:

“Let’s hope there’ll be no more unexplained disturbances tonight!” She had no sooner disappeared into her room than Celeste frantically grabbed Miss Eustacia’s arm, whispering:

“Follow me,—quick—Cousin Eustacia! We’ve got to get Bits out of there, the long way round. I may need help. The poor child must be nearly dead with fright and worry and that bad fall. Don’t make a noise if you can help it. Just come right up after me. Wasn’t it fortunate that Aunt Abby never thought of looking under the table!”

“I think the biggest luck was her calmly taking it for granted that Bits was still sound asleep in her bed!” chuckled Miss Eustacia. “I almost laughed aloud! Poor little Bitsy! I reckon she’s scared to death.”

As silently as was possible, the two sped through the dark attic, down the more remote stairways, and at length gained the record room through the opposite door. They found that Bitsy had crawled out from under the table, but was still frozen stiff with apprehension, and had dared make no further move.

“Oh, I’m so glad you came!” she breathed. “I didn’t know what to do. I thought maybe I’d have to stay here all the rest of the night, for fear Miss Abby might hear me getting out. I’m so stiff and lame, I can hardly move!”

Somehow, without making any undue disturbance, they managed to assist her through the long journey up and down the stairs and through the dark attic, and at last had her safely seated on her bed, where the first thing to be done was to bathe the wound on her forehead and bandage it. This Miss Eustacia did, with gentle yet firm fingers, and while she was doing it, Bitsy explained in whispers the reason for her strange, unexpected solo

expedition and catastrophe.

“After we’d gone to bed,” she faltered, “I just lay here and tossed and tumbled and couldn’t somehow get to sleep. I kept thinking how short the time was that we’d have to explore, before the Colonel came back, and where we’d better look, and if there was any place we hadn’t thought of, where something might be hidden. Then I tried a queer stunt, something like I did before when I thought out about that scrapbook. I was thinking then about the diary, and I just put myself in General Romney’s place, and wondered what I’d do, under the circumstances—or rather, what *he* would do, if he wanted to hide something like that.

“I thought of him as he used to be, using that record room as a bedroom, like you said he did, Celeste. I know some of the furniture in it now is different, but you said those bookcases were always there. So I tried to see the room just as it was when he used it. I know the secret cupboard was there, and it was a very good hiding-place, but he evidently didn’t use it—for *one* thing, anyway. I don’t know why. So I tried to figure out where another good hiding-place might be. I could see it all, as I lay here in bed, in my mind’s eye, and somehow those bookcases kept coming into my thoughts, especially that big one with the great, overhanging top. I couldn’t get away from it. I kept thinking that up there behind that big top piece would be a grand place to conceal something—*Ouch!*” she interrupted herself to groan, as Miss Eustacia applied some iodine to the freshly bathed wound. And for a moment she sat speechless, holding her head and trying to stand the peculiarly trying smart without crying out again or making any undue fuss.

“Yes, I know that’s horrid, but it’s very necessary,” Miss Eustacia soothed her. “It’ll be better in a moment, but we don’t want you to get any infection in it from the edge of that dusty old molding, which I imagine is what struck you there.” Presently Bitsy was at ease enough to take up her tale once more.

“Well,” she continued, as Miss Eustacia applied the bandage, “finally I got so nervous about it and couldn’t sleep, that I decided I couldn’t stand it any longer but must investigate it for myself. I thought I’d just look it over without disturbing anybody, and apologize to Miss Eva in the morning for disobeying her orders. I knew I shouldn’t have—and just see what happened!”

“Oh, never mind *that!*” cried Celeste impatiently. “Tell us the rest of what happened!”

“I took my torch and wrapped up warmly,” went on Bitsy, “and got around there without making any noise. I was too interested in what I was going to do, to be scared about going through that dark attic alone—and everyone else in the house seemed sound asleep. When I got into the room, I didn’t waste any time, but just got a chair as close to the bookcase as I could, and climbed up on it. But it wasn’t high enough for me to reach the top, so I pushed in the books on one of the shelves a little, and got my toes in there, and by balancing myself with one hand on an upper shelf, I could reach the cornice quite well. (I had laid my torch on the table with the light turned so it would be on the place I was searching.)

“I felt around on top as well as I could, but there didn’t seem to be anything there except a lot of dust. I was horribly disappointed, but as I was taking hold of that big molding I noticed that it *moved* a bit—that I could sort of swing it aside! Then I tried moving it further out, so that I could get my hand under it and feel around in a vacant space there seemed to be there. And then I started to move it back, and all of a sudden I

sort of lost my balance and grabbed it too hard and down it came, and I with it! I guess the edge of it must have struck me on the head, for I sort of lost consciousness of everything for a few minutes. When I came to I was moaning with the pain but I knew where I was and what had happened, right away, and I was simply frightened to death because I knew Miss Abby couldn't help but hear it—and I was sure I'd spoiled everything. Then you all came in, and you know what happened after that. I never had such a five minutes in my life as the ones I spent under the table while Miss Abby was in there! It seemed like five centuries—and I was certain every minute of it that she'd poke her cane under there and discover me!”

“Well, she didn't,” said Celeste, “so everything's all right. But it's a pity you couldn't have discovered something to repay you for all that adventure.” And then Bitsy gave them the surprise of their lives.

“Oh, but I *did!*” she chuckled. “Underneath that molding, when I'd moved it aside, I felt something bulky—like a *book!* I got it out somehow, and then I didn't dare drop it, and I couldn't climb down with it in my hand, so I stuffed it way inside my sweater. You see it's an old sweater with a tight belt and would hold it. It was trying to do this that made me lose my balance.” She ceased for a moment and fished out a dusty, bulky little volume from her sweater and laid it on the bed.

“I don't know what it is yet,” she added. “I didn't have a chance even to look at it!”

With a suppressed whoop of excitement, Celeste sprang at it, opened its first page to the light and read:

“ ‘*Sumter Romney,*

“ ‘*Diary—1858*’ ”

CHAPTER XIX

AMENDE HONORABLE

AT THIS TENSE MOMENT the door opened and Miss Eva entered. She had tiptoed upstairs so quietly that none of them had heard her approach.

“I wanted to see how Bitsy was,” she explained. “I was so worried about her, for I knew she must have been under that table and we all had to go out and leave her. I couldn’t imagine how she’d be able to get back to her room, hurt as she must have been——” Then she took in the situation from Bitsy’s bandaged head to the general wild excitement that seemed to possess them all.

“What’s the matter? Has anything hap——” But she never had a chance to finish, for they all began talking at her at once. But out of the general mêlée she only gleaned that the long-lost diary had come to light at last, when Celeste had laid it in her lap. And the next five minutes were spent in explaining how Bitsy had discovered it. When the confusion and excitement had somewhat quieted down, Celeste voiced the question:

“Well, now we have the diary—what are we going to do about it? Go over it right now and settle things once and for all? Personally, I can’t wait another minute!” It was then that Miss Eustacia, who, unnoticed by the others, had been rather quiet for the last few minutes, not taking so active a part in the general excitement, very seriously remarked:

“I want you all to listen to me a moment. I’ve been doing some serious thinking, and I want you to consider an idea that’s come into my head.” They looked toward her, inquiringly.

“Probably you’ve all felt very much as I have,” she continued, settling herself back comfortably in Bitsy’s rocking-chair, “that our consciences haven’t been entirely comfortable about all this interference we’ve been guilty of, in what Drew has always considered his own private affair. I know we have a great deal of justice on our side to explain it and condone it, but, whatever the outcome may be, Drew is bound to feel more than a little—well—singular—about the affair! And, besides that, we’ve got to explain our intrusion into it, somehow, and it isn’t going to be an easy matter for the one who has to do it! I’m sure you agree with me, Eva, don’t you?”

“I certainly *do!*” agreed Miss Eva. “To tell the truth, I’m just shaking in my shoes about his return on Saturday—and what we’re going to tell him. I hope *I* don’t have to be the one!”

“You needn’t,” declared Miss Eustacia. “You have enough to cope with, considering the difficult job you have with Abby. No, I’ve thought it all over carefully, and I’ve made up my mind that it had better be *I* that breaks the news to him. I’m not in the immediate family, I don’t feel the least bit ‘under his thumb’—or Abby’s—and he and I have always had a very sympathetic understanding of and respect for each other’s opinions.

“Now here is what I’ve been thinking about the whole matter—and that diary in particular. We’ve found it, to be sure—or rather Bitsy did, thanks to her ingenious mind!—but the *examining* of it belongs to Drew. If I can take it to him and explain the whole

affair, not concealing anything, but place the book in his hands and tell him no one has yet so much as glanced at anything but the title, I believe it will greatly help to soften the blow of the discovery that we've all been mixed up in his private research and family secrets. I think I can make him come to feel that it was all for the best. We've found what he couldn't discover himself—yet we have left the final discoveries to him. What do you think?"

"I think it's a *marvelous* idea!" breathed Miss Eva, thankfully. "It takes the greatest weight off my mind. And it's fine of you, Eustacia, to be willing to undertake this difficult task!"

"Oh, but where are the rest of us coming in, then?" wailed Celeste. "You know Uncle Drew!—I don't believe he'll *ever* tell us what was in the diary, when he finds it out. And we're all just dying to know!"

"He'll tell you—or he'll tell *me*, don't worry!" Miss Eustacia reassured her. "He'll see himself that it would not be either fair or kind if he didn't—especially since we know the worst, anyway. You leave all that to me!"

"But what about Abby?" faltered Miss Eva. "Must she know it all, too? Drew is sensible and less rigid in his ideas. But Abby would never forgive any of us, as long as she lived, if she knew what we'd been at—no matter what the outcome!"

"I've thought of that, too," admitted Miss Eustacia. "In Abby's precarious state of health, it would do her no good to be excited and upset by that knowledge, apart from anything she might make us suffer in consequence. So I feel that she ought to be kept out of that part of it, unquestionably, no matter what the end may be. And I've thought of a way that it can be done without involving our part in it at all. After Drew has seen the diary, and is home, he can tell Abby that the diary has been found, up there underneath the molding. The molding has got to be put back, somehow, and after it is done, Drew can show her the diary and say it was found up there. It will be the strict truth, and I venture to say she'll be so interested in its contents that she'll forget about everything else.

"Now, here is my plan. Instead of waiting to go to Richmond Saturday, I'm going today, if you can get along for a day or two without me. That will give Drew time to look over the diary thoroughly before he gets back, and me time to do all the explaining and make the *amende honorable* for all our delinquencies! What do you say?"

There was universal approval and not a little relief that Miss Eustacia was willing to take upon her shoulders the appalling task of "telling Drew"—a matter that had weighed on all their minds more than a little.

"And now," sighed Miss Eva, "it's after six o'clock, but we might all manage to get a little sleep before breakfast, if we crawl in right away. I feel absolutely as limp as a rag!"

"Same here!" yawned Miss Eustacia. "Give me that diary and I'll wrap it up and put it right in my suitcase. Bitsy, you be a good child and sleep if you can. You've done yeoman's service *this* night, and we all thank you more than we can express!" She gave Bitsy a pat, and slipped out of the room. But when Celeste was left alone with Bitsy, she gave Bitsy a tremendous hug, kissed her bandaged head and exclaimed:

"Bits, you old trump, this is the best night's work you ever did!"

Miss Eustacia left that morning, which was Thursday, for Richmond, and the time till her return with the Colonel on Saturday seemed to the three conspirators at home interminable and filled with almost unbearable suspense. Yet they all went about their personal affairs, outwardly as calm as though no portentous event were pending.

Bitsy crawled out of bed and dressed for college that morning, aching in every limb. The swelling on her forehead had gone down, and Miss Eva had helped her conceal the healing wound with adhesive tape.

“I can wave my hair down further over it,” Bitsy had said, “and I’m sure it won’t be noticeable.” Nothing would induce her to stay at home for the day, though she felt more weak and wobbly than she would have dared confess.

“Game child!” commented Celeste to herself, noticing the girl’s pallor and rather shaky steps. “Hope she doesn’t overdo it, though. She had a nasty tumble last night!” That afternoon, Bitsy had a piece of news on her own account, and retailed it to Celeste just before dinnertime.

“What do you think of this?” she demanded of Celeste excitedly. “You know the Pageant that the whole college is going to have next Monday?”

“Well, rather!” smiled Celeste. “Don’t you remember—three other girls and myself are going to represent the Phi Thetas by riding bicycles, all of us dressed in old-fashioned bicycle-costumes? We’re calling ourselves ‘The Gay Nineties’.”

“Oh, I know!—I’ve been envying you and all the others that are going to take part in the parade through Duke of Gloucester Street, because, as usual, I was out of it and didn’t have a part in anything. But listen to this! Chub told me today that the Freshman class is having a fit because they were going to be represented by four Freshmen on horseback, dressed as cowboys—or cowgirls!—and just today, Carol Dana—sne’s one of the four—sprained her ankle at basket-ball, so of course she’s out of it. And they couldn’t find anyone to take her place. They hated to give that idea up, and three seems too few. And they couldn’t find anyone else who could ride—or was willing to. So Chub asked me if I could ride and would I be willing to do it, and I said yes. I tried on Carol’s costume and it’s a bit big, but I can make it do.”

“But Bits,” cried Celeste, wide-eyed with astonishment, “I didn’t know you could *ride*! Why did you never say anything about it?”

“Oh, I learned to ride years ago,” Bitsy enlightened her. “Dad wanted me to, and sent me to a good riding-school. But lately, since I’ve—well, since I was so sick, they thought it wouldn’t be good for me, so I had to give it up. But just this one time won’t matter. They hardly do more than just walk or trot down the length of the Street and back. It’s the long rides I’ve been forbidden to take. It’s been hard for me though when I’ve seen you go off riding with Duff and the others. I wanted so terribly to be on a horse again! That was why I never said anything about it.”

“You blessed child!” cried Celeste. “I discover something new about you every day! But honestly, I’m tickled to pieces to think you’re going to be in the Pageant. It’s going to be one of the biggest events this year!”

“So am I glad,” admitted Bits, and added,—“There’s just one drawback though. Rita Spence is one of the others who are going to ride!” She made a wry face and Celeste chuckled:

“Oh, what do *you* care? Don’t let her bother you! I’m glad she’s going to have to swallow the fact that she isn’t the only bead in the necklace!”

The evening passed quietly, and everyone retired early to make up on much lost sleep. But in the minds of three of the household was wild speculation as to what was going on in a certain hospital in Richmond!

To the complete astonishment of the girls when they returned from college Friday afternoon, they found Miss Eustacia sitting calmly in the living-room. To their amazed exclamations she explained:

“It’s all right! Don’t worry! Drew wanted to get back as soon as possible, and as long as I was there, he elected to come home today, instead of waiting for tomorrow. We just got in a while ago. Drew is upstairs in his room now. He seems very much better and quite happy to be home!”

“But what *happened?*” demanded Celeste breathlessly. “Did you tell him? Did he examine the diary? Was he very angry at us? What did he discover in it?”

“Mercy!” cried Miss Eustacia. “You take my breath away! How do you expect me to answer all those questions at once?” Then, seeing their expressions of acute disappointment, she relented and said:

“Drew is lying down now, resting after his trip, and Abby is taking a nap too, after the excitement of his return. Eva is up in your room, Celeste, waiting for me to bring you both up there, and while we’re all together and quiet, I’ll tell you the whole story!”

They rushed up to Celeste’s room, where Miss Eva awaited them, and disposed themselves on the available chairs and the bed. When they were comfortably settled, Miss Eustacia, smiling somewhat cryptically, began:

“I have a rather curious story to tell, and I want to tell it in my own way. So don’t interrupt me till I get through, and then you can ask all the questions you want, and I’ll answer them—if I’m able. We’ve solved the worst of this tangle, but there are one or two questions yet unsettled.

“I got to the hospital by noon, yesterday, and of course Drew was rather surprised to see me ahead of time, but pleased too. I didn’t waste any time on preliminaries, but told him at once that I had something very important to tell him—and give him—and I put the missing diary right into his hands. He was absolutely stunned, and could only ask where and how it had been found—and if anyone had read it. I told him that no one had looked at anything but the title, and *his* eyes would be the first to see its contents. He seemed relieved at that, but still quite bewildered by the whole thing, and demanded to know where and how it had come to light. I answered:

“‘Drew, I want you to have a little patience while I tell you the whole story. You may not approve of it all, but there’s been reason and right in the meddling that some of your family have done in this affair, and I want you to hear all sides of it before you judge us too harshly. And then, when I’m through, you can draw your own conclusions.’

“And while he sat there and listened, I made a clean breast of it and told him everything. I think the whole thing astonished him so much that he hadn’t even time to be annoyed or indignant about our having delved into what he considered his private affairs! When I had finished with the tale of Bitsy’s exploit two nights ago, I ended by saying:

“‘There it is, Drew! I’ve hidden nothing. Now you have what you were looking for

for so long, and worried so much about. Read it at once, and see if it solves the difficulties. I'm going out now. I've a lot of shopping to do—and I won't come back till this evening. Then you can tell me what you like—or nothing, if it seems best to you. Goodbye!' And I left him, sitting there staring at that old diary as if he couldn't believe his senses!

"I didn't return till evening, and I almost dreaded to go back, for fear he'd found something that would cause him more worry and grief than ever. But when I came into the room, I found him positively *radiant*! And you can well imagine how *my* mind was relieved! All he said at first was:

"'Eustacia, you've given me the happiest day I've known in years!' I said:

"'Don't thank *me*, Drew! Thank your determined grand-niece, Celeste, and that darling little Bitsy Bates who had the cleverness to unearth this thing for you. You'd never have found it on your own, in a million years! But now, do you feel like telling me what you've discovered from it?' And he proceeded to get down to business at once.

"I'm not going to go into the whole thing with you, in this explanation. It isn't all to the point, so I'll confine myself just to the matters that are. It wasn't so very long, that diary—we read it all through together that night—for you see, the General died in April of that year. But he had written a pretty full account for each day. The first half of January contained nothing bearing on our affairs, but about the sixteenth we came upon a startling entry.

"First he noted that his wife and young son had gone on a prolonged visit of several months to her relatives in Charleston, and that he was taking that opportunity to have some alterations made in the house and a general cleaning up of the cellar. He had brought two of his slaves from his tobacco plantation to help with the work. Then he wrote that he had made a curious discovery in an old stone in the cellar. He said he had never noticed it or paid any attention to it before, but that after his two slaves had cleared a considerable amount of rubbish away from that corner where it was, he looked it over and got to speculating on why it was rather different from the other stones in the cellar flooring. Then he brought down a couple of candles and examined it more fully, as it was in a dark corner. Thinking it might cover some hitherto undiscovered room or storage place, he began to prod and dig around its surface with a pocketknife, scraping away the clay and dirt that had accumulated on its surface and around its edges through the years.

"Suddenly he was astonished to feel it give and rise slightly, when his knife was pressed in a certain spot. He felt certain then that it worked on some hidden leverage, and would open if he pressed there hard enough. And after working at it some time longer, it *did*, swinging sideways like a trapdoor. And to his further astonishment, it disclosed a tiny flight of stone steps that appeared to lead down into some hidden room or closet! At once he suspected that it had originally been one of those secret hiding-places or refuges that were not uncommon in colonial houses in early Virginia. They were often highly necessary in those days, as retreats from Indian raids or from other enemies, and were sometimes used to confine and punish refractory slaves. He noted that he had always thought it rather singular that no such retreat had ever come to light in a house as old as this one.

"Then, with the help of his crutches, he had lowered himself into it—and here he met with his most amazing surprise. He had expected to find it empty—or filled with useless

rubbish. Instead he found crates and bales and bundles lying crowded together in the tiny space, and one small but heavy metal chest or casket. What they were or how they had come there, he hadn't the faintest idea, but he was certain they had lain undisturbed for well over a hundred years. As he had no tools with which to break open the chests and boxes, he decided to wait till the next night, as it was late, and explore them then. The small casket or iron chest he took with him, however, when he got himself out of the hidden room and shut down the stone door after him.

"Before he retired that night, however, or even wrote in his diary, which he seemed to do every night as regularly as clockwork, he determined to discover the contents of this padlocked old metal chest. So he procured a hammer and chisel, and after considerable difficulty got it open. And there, before his gaze, lay a quantity of jewels and precious stones and gold ornaments that fairly dazzled his eyes. What their history was, he had no means of knowing, but he sensed at once that they were of considerable value. He hid them in his room till morning, and then wrote this account in his diary, and retired.

"But next night he made a thorough examination of the hidden room in the cellar, after his slaves had departed, and his own personal body-servant or valet, whom he calls in the diary 'Reuben', had gone for the night to his own quarters outside—evidently the cabin Eliza now has. And what he found there astonished him still further. For the crates and boxes contained an amazing assortment of miscellaneous articles, most of them of considerable value, tapestries, old laces, rolls of ancient velvets and silks, curious old gold watches, and I don't know what all. After he had examined them all, he returned the casket to its early hiding-place, as the safest spot to keep it, and went back to his room to think it all over, and try to figure out where this assortment of treasures had come from, and how they happened to be there—of all amazing places! He could think of no ancestor who had ever been likely to accumulate such a treasure or hide it in such a mysterious fashion—nor any one in the past to whom it was likely to have belonged. He noted in this entry of his diary that it looked to him exactly like the pirate loot he had read of in early days. And that thought, apparently, led him all at once to a new idea.

"'Pirate loot' apparently suggested the only character of that type who had ever been connected with Williamsburg—the infamous 'Blackbeard'!"

"*Blackbeard!*——" suddenly cried Bitsy, and then clapped her hand over her mouth, as she had promised not to interrupt. Miss Eustacia smiled at her and remarked:

"Yes, Bits. That was *one* character you didn't unearth in your detective work! But to continue. The General said that though he knew that piratical old rascal had been at one time intimately connected with Williamsburg—used to be in and out of the town quite frequently, and was later captured and hung not so far from here, and his companions were imprisoned here in the town for a while before they were hung——"

"'Strong, sweet prison'!" Bitsy could not refrain from murmuring softly.

"How did you know *that*?" demanded Miss Eustacia, turning to her in surprise.

"I'll tell you later," replied Bitsy. "What you're telling us is much more important."

"Amazing child! I believe you *have* worked up some connection with Blackbeard, after all! But I'll go on with my story. Where was I? Oh, yes! The General had read—or heard—that Blackbeard used to flaunt himself around the town occasionally, and even gambled at times rather heavily at the Raleigh Tavern, sometimes with some of the less

conscientious gentry. He was quite honest too about paying his gambling debts—when he owed any—though it was usually the other way round! The General wondered whether any of his own family might have been mixed up in any such affair with him, or whether perhaps Blackbeard's own crew had at any time access to this house and hidden some treasure there temporarily, perhaps just before they were caught and executed, and never had a chance to carry it away. He never discovered what the true inwardness of the matter had been, and nobody else will either, I imagine.

“At any rate, he finally gave up speculating about it, so we gleaned from his diary, and accepted it as a fortunate find, belonging then exclusively to himself. A little later the diary notes that he was considering sending some of the more valuable stuff up to New York to be appraised for its value. He speaks of being in debt for a considerable amount, owing to the failure of the past year's tobacco crop, and the unwarranted extravagance of his family in their way of living. He thought he saw the way to rid himself of this debt by disposing of this wildly unexpected find, which would be of no use to him in its present form. That explains the lists we found from ‘Starr’, the antique dealer.

“Now comes the most curious part, and we can see from it where all the trouble began. He noted in his diary that a short time after he disposed of the first lot of pirate loot, he received a threatening letter from one ‘Bernard Gunther’. But he was evidently not upset by it, only rather indignant at its reception, for he writes, ‘I shall not even gratify him by so much as an answer!’ But he goes on to explain in his entry that he thinks he knows the explanation of this strange threat. While he was in Mexico, during the first part of the war there, he had, as an officer, to hold a court-martial on the case of a young volunteer who had so far forgotten himself as to pillage some of the treasures from a cathedral in the town they were occupying. He went into quite some detail about it, but I need only tell you that the private was severely punished and he ordered the loot to be returned to its proper place. Immediately after this affair they were ordered to move out of the town to another location, and though the General had been assured by his under officers that the matter had been attended to, he was never personally able to verify it for himself. He thought now that possibly, through some deliberate oversight, it may not have, and thus formed the basis for this ridiculous threat against himself. Possibly the valuable loot may have been watched for by detectives hired by the Mexicans, and as some of it may have undoubtedly resembled articles he had sent to New York, they had jumped to the conclusion that he had been, if not the actual thief, at least a receiver of the stolen goods. As added ground for this, they probably knew he had been commanding officer in that district when the theft had occurred.

“At any rate, you now see the connection with the Mexican affair. And, of course, his entire innocence in any part of it. Which was, naturally, the greatest relief to Drew's mind! Still ignoring the threat, the General sent a second installment to New York, and apparently reaped a satisfying return for it. A little later, he speaks of getting the second threat from ‘B. G.’, and only comments, ‘If he thinks he can intimidate me in any such silly way, let him go ahead and try it!’ And that's the last entry that has any bearing on our affairs. Just a week later, the diary breaks off, the day before the date of his sudden end. And now, my dear fellow-conspirators, you know as much about the subject as I do!”

They all sat silent, rather stunned by the abrupt ending to the enthralling account. Miss Eva was the first to speak, in her gentle, earnest manner.

“But, Eustacia, this doesn’t explain why the diary was found in that almost inaccessible hiding-place. Who put it there? Surely not the General, if he was lame and had to walk with crutches, he never could have reached it in the world!” Miss Eustacia laughed.

“I was wondering when that problem would dawn on you all. It does seem out of all reason, doesn’t it? But the General explained that in one of his entries in the diary, shortly after he made the discovery in the cellar. He said he had been forced to find some place to secrete his diary, especially since he had made the important find. Said the lock on his desk was broken, so that receptacle was no use. It seems that his servant, Reuben, had been taught to read as a child—unusual for most of the slaves of that day—and while trustworthy in many ways, was of a rather inquisitive disposition. The General had once caught him thumbing over his diary, and didn’t propose that it happen again, especially since it now contained so important a secret. So he wrote—‘I’ve found a rare good hiding-place for it, although a little difficult to get at!’ Then he described how he had long known, from once climbing up on it as a boy, that that bookcase-top was movable, and that there was a convenient space underneath. By practicing a little, he found that he could use the end of the crutch to move aside the molding, and then, balancing the book also on the end, which he says he had purposely made fairly broad, for safety’s sake, he could raise the book and drop it in its hiding-place, moving the molding back afterward. Getting it out was a more difficult matter, but he arranged some sort of a hook that he could fasten temporarily to the crutch and fish around with it till he dislodged the book and it dropped to the floor. He must have been a rather eccentric and genial old fellow, for he seemed almost to chuckle over the way he was outwitting his inquisitive valet!”

“I wonder why he didn’t use the secret cupboard?” put in Celeste “It would have been so much more easy and convenient for him.”

“Drew and I both spoke of that,” commented Miss Eustacia. “Drew thinks that either Reuben must have known about that place, or else the General *didn’t* know about it. Like the stone in the cellar, it might have been forgotten and escaped the family’s knowledge many years before. Drew says it was empty when he discovered it himself, and had no keyhole, either. He fixed that lock up on it himself, for added safety. He said he was much annoyed when you discovered it years ago, as a child, Celeste, but thought you had forgotten about it long ago! Drew says the General never mentioned anything in all his diaries about that secret cupboard, and he wrote of just about everything else, so it’s likely he didn’t know of it himself.”

Suddenly Bitsy had a question to put. “You told us once, I remember, Miss Eustacia, that your father had said, as a small boy, he remembered hearing some rumors after the General’s death, that were—weren’t quite creditable to him. Do you suppose anyone else knew about this?”

“I asked Drew about that too,” Miss Eustacia answered, “and he said he thought it was likely that there had been talk about the General being in financial difficulties, and then suddenly being able to pay his debts, though no one knew where the money had come from. And when he was killed, they sort of linked it up with that—and gossiped about it. But undoubtedly no one knew the real inwardness of the matter.”

“By the way,” put in Celeste, “does Uncle Drew think he was killed by this Bernard Gunther, or someone connected with him—or by his slaves?”

“Drew thinks it might have been possible that it was some fanatic foreigner—he’s always thought there might be a possibility of that, ever since he made the discovery about the Mexican mix-up. But it’s one of those questions that is useless to speculate about now. Better let it rest in the mystery that has always shrouded it!”

“I wonder why no one ever discovered those letters and bills?” questioned Miss Eva. “Seems to me if they went over his effects, as is usual after a person dies, they’d have come upon them and it would have raised a question.”

“That bothered me, too, at first,” said Miss Eustacia. “But Drew says he found them slipped into Scrapbook Number Four, when he came to examine it, just where we found them, right by those articles about looting during the war. Probably the General had slipped them in there at some time, and never thought to take them out. And no one ever thinks of going over *scrapbooks*, in examining anyone’s effects!”

At this point, Celeste, who had been quietly doing a bit of independent thinking, suddenly exclaimed:

“Do you know, folks, I believe I’ve solved another one of the vague riddles connected with this thing. I think I know the explanation of the ‘ghost’—at least the ‘tap-tapping’ Bitsy heard soon after she first came here. I’ve never thought of it before. But don’t you suppose it must have been Uncle Drew that night, making one of his expeditions to the attic or cellar? She heard the tap-tapping, apparently on the main stairs, and she was looking straight down those stairs in the moonlight, but couldn’t see a thing. If he were going down the *cellar* stairs, for instance, and bracing himself with his cane, that would have made the sound, and yet he’d have been completely out of sight! How about it?”

“I guess you’ve hit the nail on the head, Celeste,” chuckled Miss Eustacia, “and that lays our family ghost forever!”

“Well, I reckon we’ve settled up everything,” added Celeste. “Now tell us, Cousin ’Stacia, how Uncle Drew feels about what we’ve done. Was he fearfully upset?”

“I think he was too stunned by the whole thing—the discovery of the diary and the relief in what it revealed, to give it much thought, at least at the first. Afterward he told me that he was amazed at the ingenuity we’d shown in tracking the thing down—especially Bitsy’s work, and now that it was all satisfactorily settled, he could have nothing but commendation and heartfelt thanks for what we had accomplished. He said he had literally expected he and Abby would both probably go to their graves with the horrid family mystery still unexplained, and it would all come out later and disgrace the family’s fine traditions.

“And I’m going to tell you something else. He wants you to know, Celeste, that he hasn’t the slightest objection, personally, to your engagement to Duff. We got to talking of that, after a while. He thinks he’s a fine young man, and intends to persuade Abby to give up her foolish objections to him, and allow him to come to the house as he used to. And, more than that, he wants to know if Duff can get off tomorrow sometime, and come here and help him investigate the stone in the cellar. He needs a man’s help at it, but doesn’t want to call in an outsider. And as I’d told him Duff knew a good deal about this affair, anyway, and had given us some help, he thinks Duff is the best one to do it.”

“Oh, yes,” exclaimed Celeste breathlessly. “Duff’s off tomorrow. It’s Saturday—and there isn’t any football game on. He’ll come, I know. Oh, isn’t Uncle Drew a *trump!*” And

to the great surprise of everyone, she rolled over on the bed, buried her head in the pillow, and shook with sobs of sheer joy and relief!

It was with considerable trepidation that Bitsy faced the thought of meeting the Colonel that night, after all that had transpired. But she came upon him in the lower hall, just before dinner, and greeted him timidly, saying only how glad she was that he was better and able to be at home again. Leaning on his gold-headed cane, he responded to her greeting with his customary courtesy.

“I want to thank you, my dear, from the depths of my heart, for what you have done for us,” he said, and his eyes twinkled under their bushy gray brows. “I can never express it adequately, but my gratitude is very deep!” He passed on into the dining-room before she could find words to respond, but she knew then, that there would never be any further need for explanation or excuse.

The meal that night was an unusually gay one for Romney House, though no word was said of the matter foremost in all their minds. Directly after it was over, the Colonel requested Celeste to come into the record room with him for a few moments, as he needed her assistance. Wondering greatly what he wished of her, she was a bit startled to have him place the General’s diary in her hands and command:

“I want you to take this small step-ladder, which I obtained from Eva just before dinner, and climb up and examine the top of that bookcase, before I have someone come in and replace the molding. Incidentally you might just lay this book where it was before, and then fetch it down again. I am expecting to show that diary to Abby very shortly, and explain its contents, and it might be to the best interests of us all, if I can truthfully say that I asked you to look about up there and you came upon this!”

Seeing the point without further explanation, Celeste grinned delightedly and went about her task.

“I can’t find a thing up here,” she called down to him, “except this old book—and a frightful lot of dust!”

“That will do then,” he answered gravely. “Bring the book down and be careful where you step. I think I have found all I want to know about. Now you may run out and join your beloved Duff!” She kissed him ecstatically and ran out of the room.

He returned to the living-room and sat alone for an hour or two, for at his request Miss Eva, Miss Eustacia and Bitsy had departed to the movies. Then, with the diary under his arm, he got up and limped away to Miss Abby’s room, where he knocked, entered, and closed the door.

CHAPTER XX

PAGEANT

ELIZA NEEDED POTATOES for dinner. The basket of them that she usually kept under the sink was entirely empty.

“Lawdy, lawdy!” she muttered to herself. “Hab Ah got to go down de stairs into dat ol’ cellar? Ah got de misery *bad* dis mo’nin’!” She stepped cautiously about the lower floor, peering into every room, but there was no sign of anyone about save Miss Abby, reading the morning paper, propped up in bed. No one to help out! “Ah sho’ ’nuff got to go mahself!” muttered Eliza, and crept, discouraged, back to the cellar door and down the stairs. Nearly at the bottom, she uttered a stifled shriek, for over in that hated corner near the “hanted stone,” as she was wont to call it, she perceived lights bobbing about and a strange group. Someone whirled about at the noise she made, and she saw that it was Miss Eva.

“What’s the matter with you, Eliza?” Miss Eva called out.

“Whut you-all doin’ aroun’ dat grave?” whimpered the terrified Eliza, perceiving to her enormous astonishment not only Miss Eva, Miss Eustacia, Bitsy and Celeste, but the Colonel himself, leaning on his cane, and Celeste’s Duff, grubbing about with hammer and chisel, plainly trying to force his way into the horrific secrets covered by the stone.

“Grave—*nothing!*” laughed Celeste. “You’re all off the track. What do you want? Some potatoes? Here, I’ll get them for you and carry them upstairs! Go along up and don’t worry yourself!” She hurried over and filled Eliza’s basket from the barrel at the foot of the stairs, and followed the protesting old colored woman into the kitchen.

“Yo’ sho’ all gwine disturb dat body—an’ it means bad luck fo’ dis house!” moaned Eliza, plumping herself in a chair and panting with terror. But Celeste had not waited to hear her prophecy, and had flown back to the quest, which so far had proved most discouraging. Duff had prodded and poked all about the edges of the stone, and had experimented on most of its surface, without producing the slightest result.

“Maybe it’s out of order now,” suggested Miss Eustacia. “Maybe the works are so rusty or something of that sort, that they’ve given out.”

“I don’t think that’s probable,” commented the Colonel. “But if it’s so, we’ll just have to get someone to pry it up, in which case it will probably spoil the workings of it, and I should like to preserve that, if possible, as a curiosity.”

“There’s just one place I haven’t tried, sir,” suggested Duff, pointing to the curious and inexplicable little mark in one corner. “Suppose I prod with the corner of this chisel all about the crevices in that little device? I’ll dig out the dirt and dust in it first, and then press all over it harder.”

“Go ahead, Duff!” commanded the Colonel. “We won’t give up till we’ve tried everything.”

“Wonder what that little sign means, anyway?” questioned Celeste. “Must mean *something*, or it wouldn’t have been put there! That criss-cross thing with the loops at the

end looks like a braid—and why the figure four above it?” Suddenly Bitsy clapped her hands together and exclaimed:

“A *braid*?—and a four over it? That must mean *four braids*—I’ve got it—*Blackbeard!*—he wore his beard in *four braids*! Why didn’t we ever think of it before?”

“We probably wouldn’t have thought of it *now*—if it hadn’t been for your clever wits, my dear!” said the Colonel. “But I think you’ve struck it. It can’t mean anything else.”

“Do you think old Blackbeard put it there himself?” cried Celeste, excitedly.

“No, I’m sorry to disappoint you—but I don’t!” smiled Colonel Romney. “You see, I’m certain that if this mark had been here all along, the General would have mentioned it in his diary. He seldom omitted items of interest like that. But he had quite a bit of humor, apparently, and I can imagine him scratching it here himself, just as a sort of joke. He must have felt pretty certain no one would——”

“Hi!” suddenly exclaimed Duff. “Look out! I’ve struck it, I reckon. See—it’s beginning to rise!” And it was. One side was slowly lifting, pulled by some hidden spring or pressure.

“What did you do? Where did you hit it?” demanded the Colonel, bending over to observe the phenomenon.

“Right there,” pointed out Duff. “Right in the middle of the bowknot—at the end of the braid. She started to rise as soon as I pressed down on it.”

“That explains the mark then,” cried the Colonel. “Probably there had been a slight depression at that place in the beginning, to indicate the spot where the spring could be released. It’s likely the General thought the spot too noticeable, now that he’d discovered it himself, and concealed it further by scratching this little emblem around it. And it pleased his fancy to carve it in the form of old Blackbeard’s braid! Look!—it’s open to its full extent now!”

The stone stood upright on its edge, supported by two curved iron hinges, and looked exactly like the trapdoor which in reality it was. It revealed beneath it a narrow flight of stone steps leading down into a dark space like a room.

“And here is where I make my one contribution to the recent discoveries,” remarked the Colonel whimsically. “Here is the *sixth* flight of steps I’ve been hunting for so long! It was indicated on that old original plan of the house, merely by a note written at the side, saying, ‘Sixth stairway—to be built.’ It didn’t say where, and I had no means of locating it. I thought all along it must have meant some concealed wooden stairway somewhere in the upper part of the house. Will you go down first, Duff, and just light the way for the rest of us to follow—provided you don’t find there any reason why we had best stay out?”

Duff took one of the torches and ran down the steps, flashing his light about when he got to the bottom.

“It’s O. K.,” he called back, “only you can’t all get in here at once—the space is too small. Can I help you down, Colonel? You ought to be the first to see it!” He assisted the Colonel down, and they both stood staring at the curious enclosure and its contents. Miss Eva and Miss Eustacia hung back, saying they’d go last. But Celeste and Bitsy could not resist the temptation to clamber down and survey it at once. But if they had expected to find it still bulging with pirate loot, they were doomed to disappointment. A few empty boxes and broken crates lay about, and off in one corner two rolls of some damp and

mildewed material that later proved to be the remnants of ancient velvets, now musty and faded almost beyond recognition.

“Why, there’s nothing here at all—worth looking at!” wailed Celeste, in keen disappointment.

“No, there isn’t,” admitted the Colonel, “and to tell the truth I’m rather pleased that it’s so. I quite dreaded finding anything more of old Blackbeard’s loot—if it *was* his! I wouldn’t have known what to do with it—how to explain it. The General evidently disposed of everything that was worthwhile, and I’m thankful he relieved me of the task. After all, we’ve made the one discovery that meant most to us—for which we have to thank Miss Bitsy! This hiding-place is just one more problem solved—and from now on an intriguing curiosity!”

At this moment the voice of Eliza, still quavering with terror, called down the cellar steps:

“Miss Abby done tol’ me to tell yo’-all please come right to her room an’ tell her whut yo’-all done foun’!”

“Not *me!*” Duff whispered to Celeste. “I’ll depart right now. Miss Abby would rather see old Blackbeard himself than my face appearing in the doorway!”

“Nonsense!” Celeste laughed at him. “You come right along with us. Aunt Abby’s had a change of heart. I don’t know how Uncle Drew did it but he had a long talk with her last night, and must have worked a miracle, for she told me this morning that if I insisted on having you, ‘at least you were a very personable young man, and in your way quite worthy.’ And that’s high praise from Aunt Abby! So come along—you’ve got to break the ice *sometime!*”

It was Monday—a crisp, magnificent autumn afternoon of brilliant sunshine, and the College Pageant was on!

Down the mile-long Duke of Gloucester Street it came, occupying the width of that broad avenue, while the sidewalks were lined with a gay and admiring throng, many of whom were Alumni, returned to their Alma Mater to witness the big spectacle of the year.

Bitsy, on her beautiful bay mount, had never felt so gay, so free, so important. She and her three mounted companions arrayed as cowgirls were almost at the head of the procession, Bitsy herself riding second from the end of the group of four. The presence of Rita Spence, on her right, could not mar her enjoyment. Even Rita’s remark when they had mounted their horses, “I wonder how they came to let you in on this? Do you really think you’re big enough to ride?”—had ceased to rankle. She had come to expect remarks of this order from Rita, and no longer rose to the bait as she had once invariably done. “Rita can’t help it!” she told herself. “She’s just made that way!”

Once Bitsy spied Miss Eva, Miss Eustacia and the Colonel in the crowd, and waved to them excitedly as she passed. The college band ahead of the procession was playing inspiring marches, the crowd cheered and laughed as every gaily or whimsically dressed group or individual passed. A prize was to be given at the banquet that night to the most beautiful, odd or arresting group in the parade. Bitsy hoped madly that Celeste would receive it. She did look so quaint—so daring—on that old bicycle, dressed in a long-gone-

by hat and costume of Miss Eva's that they had resurrected from the attic!

Reaching at last the Hall of Burgesses at the other end of the street, the parade passed around it and began its progress back to the College. Bitsy reached over and patted the neck of the lovely bay mare she was riding. "You beautiful!" she whispered to her. "I wish I could ride you forever. Why has this got to end so soon!" The mare whinnied softly and shook her handsome head as if she understood. Rita's mount also shook her head, as if in sympathy with her companion, and at that moment Rita herself gave a short, sharp cry.

"Oh, heavens! my rein—it's come *loose!*" she shrieked to Bitsy. "What shall I do?" Rita was not an experienced rider, as Bitsy had guessed very shortly after the start of the parade, and had several times jerked her mount unnecessarily and thereby made it rather nervous. Bitsy looked over and saw that Rita's rein had evidently slipped loose from its buckle on the other side.

"Be carefull—Don't jerk it!" she called to Rita, realizing that the situation was a serious one for any but an experienced rider. But her warning came too late. Rita had jerked wildly at the only portion of the rein in her hands, and her mount, frightened by her scream and the jerk combined, bolted swiftly ahead of the group, and turning into the sidewalk at a clear space between the Inn and the Courthouse, plunged through the wildly scattering crowd in its way, and on into the open field.

Automatically, almost without conscious will, Bitsy dug her heels into her own mount, turned and galloped madly after Rita. "I must catch up with her—I *must!*" was the only thought in her mind. Over the rough stubble of the field she galloped, putting every ounce of will-power she possessed into urging her mount to its fullest capacity.

"Grab the saddle, Rita!" she called, edging nearer. "Don't grab her round the neck! *I'm coming!* The panic-stricken girl in front, having now dropped the rein, was clinging with both hands to the front of the saddle and swaying dangerously from side to side. In another instant Bitsy had forged ahead so far that she had come up with Rita's mount, and edged close enough to insert her hand into the bridle around the runaway horse's head.

"Hold on! hold on, Rita!" panted Bitsy. "Don't let go now!" Remembering with utmost thankfulness, her instructions back in her riding-school days, she thought: "If I can only get that horse off her straight course!—If I can only get her turned—she'll *have* to slow down!" Closer and closer she pressed, forcing her own mount in against the panicky runaway, till she compelled Rita's horse to circle in, slowly diminishing its speed. Spasmodically Rita forsook her hold on the saddle and made a grab at Bitsy, who cried peremptorily:

"Don't do that, Rita! Hold on to your saddle! She's slowing down—don't you see?" The frightened runaway, forced further and further into a curving turn, its gait thus necessarily slackening, came gradually to a panting, shuddering halt, almost back at the point of the Duke of Gloucester Street from which it had started on its mad career. And Bitsy, cool and self-controlled up to this point, suddenly felt everything turn black before her eyes. She was conscious only that someone slipped up and caught her, as she slid, almost unconscious, from the saddle. And after that she remembered nothing.

She never knew till afterward that it was Duff, who, as a member of the college band, had been directly in front of her when the trouble had started, and had forsaken the parade

and dashed madly after the fleeing horses out into the field. So rapidly had it all happened that not five minutes had elapsed between the time that Rita had lost control of her mount and the dramatic ending. And as there had been no casualties, the parade gradually reorganized and went on to its close, with the thrilled crowd reassembled to watch its progress. But of the mounted cow-girl Freshmen there remained only two, Rita having been escorted to the dormitory to recover from her shock and fright, and Bitsy, still unconscious, having been gently removed in someone's car to Romney House.

It was toward evening when she came to herself and realized that she was in bed in her own room, with the doctor sitting beside her holding her wrist, and Celeste and Miss Eva bending anxiously over her. Of what had taken place in between, she had no notion.

"How's Rita?" she murmured. "Did she—come through—all right?"

"That's the girl! She'll do now!" laughed the doctor. "Pulse all coming around normal again. But you stay in bed a day or two, young lady! No gallivanting around to banquets and college-lectures and things! You'll be right as rain by day after tomorrow." He rose to leave, giving some instructions to Miss Eva and Celeste on his way out. But when he had gone, Celeste knelt down by the side of the bed and whispered:

"You blessed old trump, you! I never saw anything finer than what you did today! Don't you worry about Rita! She's perfectly O. K. I heard that from Chub, who came a while ago to inquire about you. She's probably dolling up this minute to go to the banquet. But Chub said she did have the grace to say you were a 'peach' and that she could never thank you enough for saving her from being dashed to pieces under that horse's hoofs. And that's a lot—for Rita!"

"I wish *I* could go to the banquet!" sighed Bitsy. "But I seem to feel so—all in, I don't sort of care—*much!*"

She dozed and woke and dozed again all evening, with Miss Eva and Miss Eustacia looking in on her at intervals, till at eleven Celeste came in from the banquet, and slipped in with a good night message.

"Everyone was terribly sorry you couldn't be there, old dear!" she said. "You surely made a hit with that wild rodeo you put on! And now, I've got a surprise for you. You've been awarded the prize for the most expert bit of riding ever seen here. You little rascal, I never thought you'd put foot in a stirrup before! You're so quiet and unassuming about your achievements." Bitsy sat up with a start of surprise, but Celeste pushed her down again, exclaiming:

"Lie low, doctor's orders you know. But I've not done with you yet. Will you promise to lie absolutely motionless if I tell you something else?" Bitsy nodded wonderingly.

"Well, here it is. Elsie Crane came to me tonight and said she'd withdrawn every objection to your becoming a Pi Theta Phi! She's the only one who stood out against you, so it's settled. You'll be voted a 'pledge' at the next business meeting. Your scholarship's all right, I'm certain. You usually having nothing under ninety on your records, so you can count on being initiated to full membership next February! Now, *quiet!* I'll do all the shouting, for I consider we'll have a jolly good prize in the old Pi Theta when we gather you in!"

Bitsy obeyed orders and lay perfectly still, only breathing an—"Oh, *Celeste!*—" But Celeste was not through yet.

“Maybe those are shocks enough for one night,” she went on, “but if you can stand it, I have just one more. Don’t let it bring on a collapse! I stopped in to say good night to Uncle Drew and Aunt Abby before I came up. He was still in Aunt Abby’s room, and they were talking hard and fast. And what do you think Uncle Drew told me? He said they had decided at last to *turn the house over to the Restoration!* They’ve got the plan all fixed up. They’re going to wait till Cousin Eustacia’s house is finished and then, at her invitation, all move over there while this house is going through the process. They’re as excited as can be over it all!

“Well, I could scarcely believe my ears, and after I’d said good night to Aunt Abby, I got Uncle Drew outside and asked him how in the world he’d ever got her to consent. And what do you think he said?” Bitsy shook her head in utter bewilderment.

“He told me that she almost bowled him over by suggesting the thing *herself!* And when he asked her why she had changed her mind so completely, she said that it was all on account of that bookcase-top falling off and finding the diary underneath it. She said it seemed like a sheer *miracle!* And then she told him that the night she had been taken ill, just before it, she went into the record room, all by herself, and just stood there for a while, thinking and thinking where that diary could be hid—yes, even *praying* that it be found sometime. And she said she promised herself then and there, that if it were ever found, and cleared the old General of that stigma against him, she wouldn’t stand out any longer against allowing the house to be restored, especially since the rest of us wanted it so much.

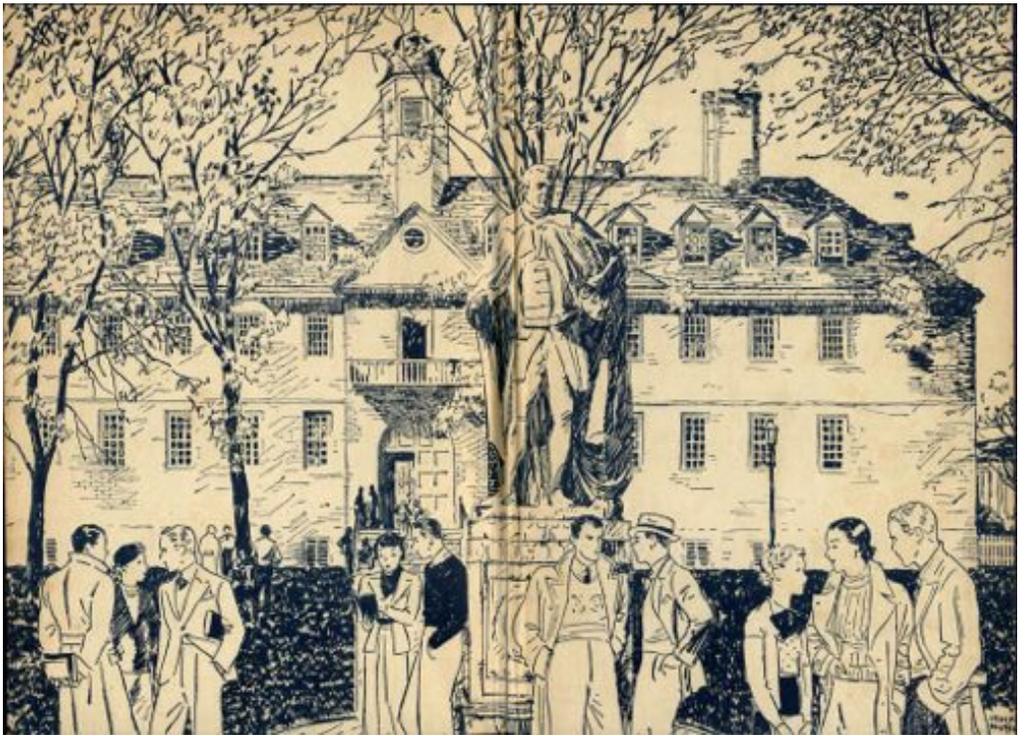
“Rather dear of her, wasn’t it! And so let me tell you, my miracle-working friend, that you never did the Romney family a better turn than when you executed that nose-dive off aforesaid bookcase!”

Before Bitsy could make any adequate response, Celeste had kissed her and run out of the room. But she turned when she had reached the door and remarked:

“Oh, by the way, I nearly forgot. Aunt Abby told me to tell you she hopes you’ll be better very soon and sends her best love, and congratulations on what you did today. She says you are a ‘remarkably efficient young person’! But *I* say that doesn’t express *half* of you, Bitsy!”

And with a chuckle she had vanished down the hall, leaving Bitsy Bates alone with her astonishing thoughts.

THE END



[Endpaper]

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *Bitsy Finds the Clue* by Augusta Huiell Seaman]