

Norton Carol

The Seven Sleuths' Club



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Содержание

CHAPTER I.	5
CHAPTER II.	7
CHAPTER III.	9
CHAPTER IV.	13
CHAPTER V.	15
CHAPTER VI.	18
CHAPTER VII.	20
CHAPTER VIII.	23
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

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CHAPTER I. ENTER THE S. S. C

A musical gong, resounding through the corridors of the Sunnyside seminary, was the signal for the opening of doors and the trooping out of girls of all ages, in twos and threes and groups; some with ribboned braids, a few with long curls but most of them with saucy bobs. It was a ten-minute recreation between changing classes. Had it been summer, one and all would have flocked out on the wide green lawns to play a game of toss ball for a few merry moments, or to rest on benches under the great old elms, or to saunter up and down the flower-bordered paths, but, since it was a wild, blustery day in January, the pupils of Miss Demorest's school for select young ladies contented themselves, some of them with opening the heavy front door and uttering little screams of pretended fear or of sincere delight when a snow-laden gust brushed past them, leaving those nearest with wind-tossed hair.

Six of them, having no curiosity, it would seem, concerning the weather, gathered about the wide fireplace in the library for a few moments of hurried gossip.

"Where's Merry?" Peggy Pierce asked as she glanced toward the open door that led into the music-room. "She said we were to come in here and wait for her. She's made a wild and wonderful discovery, she told me in class. If Miss Preens didn't have eyes in the back of her head, Merry would have told me what it was, but, just as she was starting, around whirled that living skeleton and pointed an accusing bony finger at us as she moaned in that deep, uncanny voice of hers: 'Miss Marion Lee, one demerit for whispering. Miss Peggy Pierce, one demerit for listening.' Say, *can* you beat that?"

"I don't think she's human," Rosamond Wright declared, her iris-blue eyes, round and serious. "Honest, true, I think she has demoniacal powers."

"That's too much for me!" laughed little Betty Byrd. "Where do you learn such long words, Rose? I'm still using monosyllables."

"Sounds like it!" Bertha Angel commented.

"To return to the subject under discussion, where do you suppose the president of the 'S. S. C.' is?" Peggy Pierce glanced at her wrist watch, but, as usual, it had stopped running.

"Time, Peg? According to my old reliable there's just five minutes more of recess and –" Doris Dreel broke off to exclaim gleefully:

"Here she comes! Here's Merry!" Then to the girl who, laughing and towsled, appeared in the doorway leading from the corridor, Rosamond cried: "What's the big idea, Merry? Didn't you call a fireplace meeting for the very minute after the gong rang, and now it's time for the next gong and we haven't heard what you have to tell us."

But Merry, although she tried to look repentant, was laughing so hard that still another moment was wasted while she made an effort to compose herself. Down on a comfortably upholstered chair she sank, thrusting her feet out toward the blaze. She had laughed herself limp.

"What, pray tell, *is* the joke? I suppose you are aware of the fact that this is January the tenth and not April the first?" Peggy could be quite sarcastic at times.

"O, I say, Peg, have a heart! I did mean to be here, but just as I was leaving class the Living Skeleton laid a bony hand on my shoulder and told me to remain in my seat through the recess and think of my sins, and of course I had to, but all I could think of was the peach of a news-item

which I have to impart, and so, the very minute she left the room, I broke through that mob out in the corridor and here I am.” Then, twinkling-eyed, she looked up at the others who were standing about her. “In a thousand years, not one of you could guess what I’ve found out.”

“Heavens, Merry! Don’t start that old gag of yours, trying to keep us in suspense. Out with it or the gong will – ” Peg’s conclusion was not heard, for the gong, evidently hearing its cue, pealed out six malevolent strokes.

“Tragic fate!” The culprit was too mischievous-looking to seem sincerely repentant. “Terribly sorry, girls, but I’d hate to spoil the thrill you’ll all get when you hear my news by rattling it off in such a short time.”

“Well then, after school. What say?” Betty Byrd asked, but the gold-brown bobbed curls were being shaken. “Can’t be done, my love. I’ve got to practice with Professor Long-locks. Hadn’t opened my music book since last week, and say, but didn’t he lay down the law! If I won’t practice by myself,” says he, “then I shall practice in his presence.” She drew a long face. “Heaven pity me!” Then hurriedly, as they joined the throng in the corridors, she whispered to Rose, who was next to her: “Tomorrow will be Saturday. If I live till then, round up the crowd and come over to my house after lunch and be prepared to hear *some* news.”

“Merry Lee, *are* you whispering again?”

“Yes’m, Miss Liv – er – I mean, Miss Preens, but it was awful important. Please excuse me this time and I will try not to again offend.”

Such penitence was in the brown eyes that glanced beseechingly up at the spindlingly tall monitress that for the moment Miss Preens was almost inclined to accept the apology. Herding forty girls to the study hall and being sure that none of them whispered *was* rather of a task, and, right at that very moment she was sure that she saw two heads near the front suspiciously close together, and so she pushed through the ranks, at least a head and a half taller than any girl in the school.

“What a wife she’d make for an ogre!” Merry turned, laughing eyes, toward the girl following her.

It happened to be one of the seniors, and a blue ribbon one at that, and so the humorous suggestion was not met with appreciation.

Merry’s mental comment was, “When *I* get to be a senior, at least I’ll be human.”

Just as they were entering the study hall for a brief moment Betty Byrd was close. “I just can’t wait till tomorrow,” the youngest member of the S. S. C. whispered.

Merry put a warning finger on her lips. Betty glanced up and saw the sharp eyes of Miss Preen turning in their direction.

“Poor Miss Preen!” Merry thought as she sank into her seat and drew a French book from her desk preparing to study. “I wouldn’t be her, not for a million!”

CHAPTER II. SNOW MAIDENS

The picturesque village of Sunnyside had one main road, wide, elm-shaded, which began at a beautiful hill-encircled lake, and which from there climbed gently up through the business part of town to the residential, passed the orphanage, the fine old seminary for girls and the even older academy for boys, and then led through wide-open spaces, fertile farms, other scattered villages and on to Dorchester, a large, thriving city forty miles away. Merry Lee's father was a builder and contractor whose offices were in Dorchester, but whose home was a comfortable old colonial house on the main thoroughfare in the village of Sunnyside.

The large, square library of the Lee home was warm and cheerful on that blustery, blizzardy Saturday afternoon. A log was snapping and crackling on the hearth and a big slate-colored Persian cat on the rug was purring loudly its content. A long lad, half reclining on a window seat, was reading a detective story and making notes surreptitiously now and then. At a wide front window, Merry Lee stood drumming her fingers on the pane and peering out at the whirling snow. A chiming clock announced that the hour was three. "And I told the crowd to be there by two-thirty at the latest." Although the girl had not really been addressing him, the boy glanced up to remark: "Might as well give up, Sis. Girls wouldn't venture out in a storm like this; they are like cats. They like to stay in where it's warm and comfy. Hey, Muff?" The puss, upon hearing its name, opened one sleepy blue eye, looked at the boy lazily and then dozed again.

Suddenly there was a peal of merry laughter. "Oh, Jack," his sister exclaimed gayly, "do look out of the window. Did you ever before see such a funny procession?"

Jack looked and beheld coming in at the front gate five maidens so covered with snow that it was impossible to tell which was which.

Merry whirled to defy her brother. "Now, sir, you see girls aren't afraid of a little blizzardly weather. I'm certainly glad they came. I'd burst if I had to keep my secret any longer."

"Secret?" Jack's voice held a rising inflection and he looked up with interest, but Merry was on her way to open the front door that Katie, the maid, need not be summoned by the bell.

A gust of wind and a flurry of flakes first entered, then, what a stamping as there was outside on the storm porch.

"Hail! Hail! The gang's all here!" Merry sang out, but quickly added: "Oh, don't mind about the snow. Come on in. Katie put matting over the carpet." Then as she looked from one ruddy, laughing face to another, the hostess exclaimed: "But you aren't all here. What's the matter with Rose? Why didn't she come?" Then before anyone could reply, Merry guessed: "O, I suppose her lady mother was afraid her precious darling would melt or be blown away! I don't see how Rose ever gets to school in the winter. Her mother coddles her so!"

"Drives, my dear, as you know perfectly well, but it seems that today the snow-plough hasn't been along Willowbend Lane, and her mother won't hear to having the horses taken out. Rose tried to call you up, but your 'phone is on the blink, so she called me." Peg paused for breath, then went on: "She's simply heart-broken; she said she'd give us all the chocolates we could eat and a nice hot drink if we'd beg, borrow or steal a sleigh somewhere and hold our meeting out there at her house."

Merry's face brightened. "Say, that's a keen idea! I was wondering how I could divulge my secret with Jack hanging around in the library, and I couldn't turn him out very well, being as it's about the only warm spot in the house except the kitchen. What's more, I'm crazy to go for a tramp in this snow storm. Wait till I get on my leggins and overshoes."

They had not long to wait, for in less than five minutes Merry reappeared from the cloakroom, under the wide, winding stairway, a fur cap hiding her short curls, a fur cloak reaching to her knees

and her legs warmly ensconced in leggings of the same soft grey. She opened the door to the library and called to her brother, who was again deeply engrossed in his book: "The 'cats' are about to leave. We've decided to hold today's *most* important meeting of our secret society in the palatial home of the Widow Wright. I am enlightening you as to our destination, Brother dear, so that if we happen to be lost in a snow drift, you will know where to come to dig us out."

Jack had leaped to his feet when he saw the merry faces of the five girls in the hall, but before he could join them, they had darted out through the storm porch, and the wind slammed the door after them.

The boy laughed to himself, then shrugged his shoulders as though he was thinking that the modern girl was beyond his comprehension. Then he returned to the fireplace, dropped down into the comfortable depths of a big easy chair and continued to read and scribble alternately. He was preparing a paper to be read that night before the secret society to which he belonged: The C. D. C. The boys had long ago guessed the meaning of the letters that named the girls' club "The S. S. C."

"Dead easy!" Bob Angel had told them. "Sunny Side Club, of course." But the girls had never been able to guess the meaning of the boys' "C. D. C.," nor did they know where the secret meetings were held. These meetings were always at night, and, although Sunnyside girls were modern as far as their conversation went; due to their parents' antiquated ideas, perhaps, they were not considered old enough to roam about the dark streets of the town at night unless accompanied by their brothers or someone older. And, of course, they couldn't find out the secret meeting-place of the boys when the members were along, and so up to that particular date, January 11, 1928, the seven "S. S. C." girls had not even a suspicion of where the boys' clubrooms were located.

They had vowed that they would ferret it out if it took a lifetime.

CHAPTER III. A MERRY ADVENTURE

The snow-plough had been along on the wide street and sidewalks of the main thoroughfares of the town and the girls had no trouble at all in making headway through the residential and business parts of Sunnyside, but when they turned toward the hills, on the west side of the village, they found that the snow-ploughs had not been so accommodating. Willowbend Lane was covered with deep, soft snow and when Bertha Angel, who chanced to be in the lead, tried to stand on it, she sank down to her knees. Wading was out of the question. Willowbend Lane was on the outskirts of town and it was fully a mile back to the main road. They looked ahead of them across the unbroken snow to where, on a low hill, stood the big brownstone, turreted house in which lived the wealthy Mrs. Irving Earle Wright and her daughter, Rosamond.

"I wish we'd brought along some snowshoes," Merry remarked. "I hate to let a storm stump me. Brother will certainly tease us well if we go back without having reached our destination."

"I don't think snowshoes would have helped us much," Bertha Angel commented. "It's quite a feat to walk on them until one gets on to the trick of it."

"Hark ye!" Merry exclaimed, lifting a finger of her fur-lined glove. "I hear sleigh bells! Somebody is coming, and if that somebody's destination happens to be up Willowbend Lane, we'll beg a ride."

"What if it's somebody we don't know?" little Betty Byrd ventured to inquire, to which Merry "How *could* it be? Wasn't I born here, and don't I know everybody within a million miles?"

"That sounds rather like hyperbole," Bertha exclaimed.

"Like which?" Doris Drexel teased; then added: "Wouldn't Miss Preen be pleased to hear her prize pupil rattle off that fine sounding word in –"

"Ssh! Ssh!" Merry's hand was on Dory's arm. "Our victim is now in sight. My, what a swell turnout! Some cutter that, isn't it?" The six girls had stepped to one side of the road and were watching with interest the approach of a large sleigh which was being drawn at a rapid pace by two big white horses perfectly matched. The driver, as they could discern as it drew nearer, was a young man who was almost hidden in a big brown fur coat and cap, but his eyes were peering out and he was amazed to see a bevy of girls standing by the unbroken lane, so evidently in distress.

Stopping his horses, he snatched off his fur cap and revealed a frank, boyish face that had not been seen in that neighborhood before.

"Young ladies," he said courteously, "can you direct me to the home of Colonel Wainwright? In the village they told me to follow this road for a mile and then ask someone which turn to take."

"Oh, yes, we can tell you," Merry replied. "This lane is a short-cut to the Colonel's place."

The lad thanked her and was about to drive on; then he hesitated and turned back.

"Young ladies," he said, "I have always told my sister never to ride with strangers, but if your destination is in this direction I would be glad to convey you to it. I am Alfred Morrison of Dorchester."

"Oh," Merry exclaimed brightly, "my brother, Jack Lee, is acquainted with you, I am sure. He goes to school in the city."

The boy's good-looking face plainly showed his pleasure. "Indeed I know old Jack well," he exclaimed. "We're doing college prep work together. I planned looking him up as soon as I had finished my business call on the Colonel."

Feeling sure that their mothers could not object, since the strange boy was so well acquainted with Merry's brother, they swarmed into the luxurious sleigh, sitting three deep, which but added to their gaiety. The horses were obliged to travel slowly through the drifts, but they soon came to

a part of the lane where the wind had blown the snow from the road to be caught at the fences, and then they made better time. In a very few moments the sleigh was turning in between two high stone gate posts, as Merry had directed, and shortly thereafter the six girls were tumbling out under a wide sheltering portico. "We're terribly grateful to you, Mr. Morrison," Merry exclaimed. "Maybe we'll be able to pick you up some time when you're stranded somewhere."

The boy laughed good-naturedly. "I hope I won't have that long to wait before I can see you all again." He included the group in his smiling glance, then, because the spirited horses were restive, he lifted his fur cap and turned his attention toward the prancing span.

Laughingly the girls climbed up the stone steps and were about to ring the bell when the door was thrown open and their "prettiest member," as Rose was often called, welcomed them effusively.

"Say, but you missed the time of your young life," Peggy Pierce informed her as the girls removed their overshoes and leggins in the storm vestibule. "Such a handsome boy as we had to drive us up the lane."

"O, you don't have to tell me," Rose laughingly replied. "I was standing in the drawing-room window watching you from the time you appeared at the foot of the lane. If you had turned back, I should have been simply heart-broken. Mother thinks that I have a cold, and she wouldn't let Tony drive me to town, and, of course, I can't use my runabout in weather like this." Then, when cloaks and caps had been removed and they were gathered about the wide fireplace in Rose's very own sitting-room, that maiden passed around a five-pound box of chocolates to keep the first part of her promise; then she demanded: "Merry Lee, you haven't told the others your exciting news yet, have you?"

Bertha Angel answered for their president: "Nary an inkling of it. Truth to tell, we didn't even ask her. I guess we all thought we'd rather wait until the meeting was called."

"Oh, I say, let's cut out formality, for once, can't we?" Peggy Pierce implored. "Why read the minutes of the last meeting when all we did was entertain the little orphans with a big Christmas tree?"

"All?" Gertrude West lifted her eyebrows questioningly. "I believe, if you left it to the orphans, they would tell you that we did a whole lot to add to their Christmas cheer."

"Sure thing we did, I'll acknowledge that, but –"

"Come to order, if you please!" the president tapped on the arm of her chair, which was upholstered in rose-colored brocade as were the other chairs and the gilt-framed sofa piled high with silken pillows. "We'll omit reading the minutes, because we really mustn't stay long. It gets dark so early this month and we'll have to wade back through the lane. And we won't call the roll, because, of course, we know that we're all here, so, since I believe you are properly curious, I will now tell my news-item. I, Marion Margaret Lee, have discovered the meaning of the letters 'C. D. C.,' and, what is mere, I now know *what* the boys *do* at their secret meetings."

"Merry, do you really? How ever did you find out? I've asked Bob over and over to tell me, but he has always refused and has actually declared that we girls never would know."

"Well," their president said, "we *do* know, at least in part. I hate eavesdropping just as much as anyone, but when Jack himself shut me in the stuffy little room off the library where we store our old magazines and books, and where I had gone to hunt up an article I needed for a composition, *how* could I help hearing? Two or three of their 'C. D. C.' club had come over for a special session, I guess. I was just about to burst out when I heard Jack say, 'Yes, we're alone, all right! Sis went to the library, I think, to do some reference work.' Then, before I really could do anything (I was so wedged in among piles of magazines). Jack had announced: 'Say, fellows, but I've got the keenest Conan Doyle book. Best ever. I call it!'"

Merry paused and looked around the group, her eyes sparkling triumph. For a moment there was silence, then, with a wild Indianish whoop, Peggy, her dark face glowing, cried gleefully: "I tumble!" After glancing about at the others, who were looking rather more puzzled than intelligent,

Peg demanded: "Don't any of you get what Merry is driving at? Bertha, *you* surely know what the boys mean by their 'C. D. C.'"

"Of course. How beautifully stupid we are!" Bertha acknowledged. "The Conan Doyle Club! O, wouldn't the boys rage and tear their hair if they knew we had guessed even that much."

But, it was quite plain to the group that Merry had still more to divulge.

"Who is Conan Doyle, anyway?" their youngest asked. "What kind of books did he write?"

"My child," Bertha said condescendingly, "hast never heard of Sherlock Holmes, the great detective?"

"O, of course, I have," Betty Byrd replied. "Then the boys have a detective club. Is that it, Merry?"

The girl addressed finished eating an especially big oozy chocolate before she noddingly replied: "That's it, all right. I gathered from the little I heard that each member of that club *wants* to become a detective when he is of man's estate, and the thing they do at their club is to take turns making up a mystery and the other boys have to try to solve it."

"Say, *what* fun that would be! I wish they would let girls join their club," Doris Drexel remarked, but Merry put in: "You wouldn't wish it, young lady, if you knew, as I do, how little they think of *our* intelligences. One of them, I couldn't tell which, had written to a lawyer uncle in New York, telling about *their* club, and in reply their uncle had told about some young woman detective in his employ and how clever she was. At which Jack sniffed: 'Well, *she* must be an exception all right. I can't imagine *my* sister Merry or any of *her* crowd solving a mystery, not if the clues were spread out right in front of them.' Bob laughed at that in his good-natured way and replied that there wasn't much danger of *any one* getting a chance to solve a mystery in *this* little lakeside town where nothing ever happened that was in the least unusual. Then he said: 'That's why we have to make up our own mysteries, since we can't unearth any real ones to practice on.'"

All the while that Merry had been talking, Peg had been sitting on the edge of her chair looking as though she would burst if she didn't soon get a chance to say what was on her mind. The moment their president paused, she leaped in with: "Girls, I've thought of the most scrumbunctious idea! Let's have a detective club of our own, and let's find a *real* mystery to solve and show those boys a thing or two. Won't they be humiliated, good and proper, when they learn that *we*, seven mere girls, without intelligence, have solved the greatest mystery that ever occurred in the village of Sunnyside."

"Hold on, Peg! Your imagination is running away with you. Anyone would think you had already found the mystery to solve. I'm of the opinion that Jack is right, or Bob, whoever said it, that there never is anything mysterious happening in this quiet, sleepy old town, and if there isn't, *how*, pray, can we solve it?" Bertha was always logical and practical. Their "balance wheel," she was sometimes called.

"I bet you I find a mystery." Peg stood up as though she were going to start right out on the search. "I've always been wild about mystery stories; read every one at the library, and I'll know *just* how to go about solving one, when it's found."

"Sit down, friend sleuth, and tell us your plan. There *are* possibilities in it, I'll agree." Merry smiled up into the olive face of their most energetic member, as she continued reminiscently: "In the beginning we named our club The S. S. C. because we lived in Sunnyside; then we gradually added a second meaning to please our saintly Gertrude –"

"You're a tease!" The sweet-faced girl, their minister's daughter, smiled lovingly at the speaker, who continued as though unconscious of the interruption, "which was 'Spread Sunshine Club.' We proceeded to sew for missionary barrels, though heaven help the heathen who had to wear the clothes *I* made if they care anything about a stylish fit."

A burst of merry laughter proved that her listeners were recalling some garment made by their president that had not come up to specifications. "Then we decided to center our spreading

sunshine efforts on our home orphanage. Shh! Don't say anything, Trudie! I know we've done nobly, and all that, but *now* I feel about the way Peg does, that if we keep on being *so saintly*, I'll be drawn up heavenward before I've had a real fling, so what I am going to suggest is that we add a third meaning to our club letters, which shall be – ”

“Oh, Madame President, may I say what?” Peggy was again on the edge of her chair waving a frantic hand as though she were a child in school.

“Sure thing! Shoot!”

“How would ‘Seven Sleuths’ Club’ do for the new meaning?”

“Actually inspired, I should say. Now, all that is left is to find a mystery to solve. Peggy Pierce, I appoint you and your twin friend, Doris Drexel, a committee of two to find a mystery before our next meeting, which is to be held at Bertha Angel's home one week from today. If, by that time, you have failed, I will appoint – ”

“Fail? Dory and I don't know the meaning of the word.” that slender maid retorted.

Bertha, who was nearest the window, then exclaimed: “Someone is driving in. Why, if it isn't that nice Alfred Morrison.”

“Great!” Merry declared. “Now we can get a ride out of the lane. I do believe that is why he is coming.”

And she was right. Rose answered the ring before a maid could appear, and the youth, cap in hand, informed her that he had happened to think that since the young ladies had had no way to get into the lane, perhaps they had no way to get out. Rose replied in her pretty manner that she knew the girls would be glad to go with him. Then she invited him in to have a cup of hot chocolate, which, even then, a maid was passing to the club members, having been told to appear at that particular hour.

Without the least sign of embarrassment the boy joined the girls in the cosy little sitting-room off the big library, and drank a cup of chocolate as though he really enjoyed it. Half an hour later, as the sun was setting, Merry said with apparent solemnity, “We will now adjourn the meeting, which I believe has been most satisfactory, and let me urge each and every one of our members to remember that all that has passed today is *most secret* and that no matter how the boys of the ‘C. D. C.’ may *pry*, not an inkling of what has here occurred is to be divulged to them.” Then, twinkling-eyed, she changed her tone to one more natural. “Won't they have the surprise of their young lives, though, if we do succeed?”

“No ifs!” Peg interjected with determination. “*We will!*”

CHAPTER IV. INTERESTING NEWS

The midwinter blizzard continued, and so intense was the cold and so unceasing the cutting, icy blast that Miss Demorest, at the request of several parents, sent forth a messenger to inform the day pupils that classes would not be resumed until the storm had subsided. But wind, ice and snow had no terrors for the members of the "S. S. C.," and, since important matters were afoot in the reorganization of their club, it was decided, by those whose 'phones had not been put out of use by the tempest, to beg or borrow a sleigh and hold the meeting at the home of Bertha Angel on Monday instead of the following Saturday. Mr. Angel, being a grocer, possessed several delivery sleighs, and since Bertha could drive as well as her brother Bob, Merry, whose 'phone was out of order, was amazed to see such an equipage draw up in front of her door at about two on that blizzardy afternoon. Her first thought was that Bob was delivering groceries, but why at the front of the house, since he always went in at the side drive? Then, as the snow curtain lifted a little, she discerned the forms of several persons warmly wrapped and actually huddled on the straw-covered box part of the delivery sleigh. The driver was tooting on a horn and looking hopefully toward the house. Then it dawned on Merry that it was Bertha who was driving, and not Bob, as she had supposed. In a twinkling she leaped to the door of the storm vestibule and called that she would be right with them. And she was, clad in her warmest; an Esquimaux girl could not have been more hidden in fur. How her brown eyes sparkled as she climbed up on the front seat by the driver, which place had been reserved for her since she was president.

"Of all the grand and glorious surprises!" she exclaimed, glancing back at the laughing huddle, as Bertha drove out of the gate. "Why, I declare to it, you've even got our rose-bud. How did you manage that? I didn't think her mother would let her out of the house again until next summer."

"It took lots of loving 'suasion', I can assure you." Rose replied. "And I don't even know if *that* would have worked had it not been that an old friend whom Mother hadn't seen in years arrived in a station sleigh to spend the afternoon, and in order to be freed from my teasing, the lovely lady said, 'Wrap up well and take a foot-warmer.'"

"Three cheers for the friend!" Merry said; then added, drawing her fur coat closer: "My, how dense the snow is! Give me that horn, Bursie; I'll toot so that other vehicles will know that we are coming."

The comfortable old white house set among tall evergreen trees that was the Angel's home was in the center of town on the long main street and not far from the Angel grocery, the best of its kind in the village. Bertha drove close to the front steps, bade the girls go right in and wait for her in the sitting-room while she took the delivery sleigh back to the store, but hardly had they swarmed out when a merry whistle was heard through the curtain of snow and the form of a heavy-set boy appeared. "Oh, good, here comes Bob!" his sister called. "I'd know that whistle in darkest Africa. It outrobins a robin for cheeriness."

"Hello, S. S. C.'s," a jolly voice called, and then a walking snowman stopped at the foot of the steps and waved a white arm to the girls who were standing under the shelter of the porch roof. "Going to spread some more sunshine today? Well, it sure is needed."

Bertha, having climbed down, Bob leaped up on the high seat and took the reins, then with a good-natured grin on his ruddy, freckled face, the boy called: "It was shabby of us to guess what your S. S. C. meant, wasn't it? Boys *are* clever that way, but girls aren't supposed to be very clever, you know. If they're good looking and good cooks, that's all we of the superior sex expect of them."

"Indeed, *is that so*, Mr. Bob?" Peggy just could not keep quiet. "I suppose you think *we* never could guess the meaning of your 'C. D. C.'"

"I know you couldn't," Bob replied with such conviction that Merry, fearing it would tantalize Peg into betraying their knowledge, changed the subject with: "S'pose you'll take us all home, Bob, before dark sets in."

"Righto!" was the cheery response as the boy started the big dapple horse roadward.

Fifteen minutes later the girls were seated about the wide fireplace in the large, comfortably furnished living-room. This home lacked the elegance that was to be found in the palatial residence of Rose, nor did it have the many signs of culture that Merry's father and mother had collected in their travels, but there was a homey atmosphere about it that was very pleasant.

Mrs. Angel, short, plump, cheerful, whom Bob closely resembled, appeared for a moment to greet the girls and then returned to a task in another part of the house.

Bertha, who had disappeared, soon returned with a huge wicker basket. "I thought we might just as well keep on with our 'Spread Sunshine' activities," she explained, "even though we have added a new meaning to our 'S. S. C.'" She was taking out small all-over aprons of blue gingham as she spoke. The name of a girl was pinned to each one.

"Sure thing." Merry reached for her garment. "Our fingers can sew for the orphans while our tongues can unravel mysteries if –" her eyes were twinkling as they turned inquiringly toward Peggy Pierce, "our committee of two has unearthed one as yet."

"Of course we haven't!" was the maiden's indignant response. "How could we find a mystery in a snow-storm like this?"

"True enough!" Merry said in a more conciliatory tone. "I really had not expected you to."

"In truth," Rose, curled in the big easy chair near the fire, put in teasingly, "for *that* matter, we don't expect a real mystery to be unearthed in this little sound-asleep town of Sunnyside. Goodness, don't we know *everybody* in it, and don't our parents know *their* parents and their grandparents and –"

"Well, somebody new *might* come to town," Doris, the second member of the sleuth committee, remarked hopefully.

"Sure thing, someone *might*," Merry said with such emphasis on the last word that Bertha dropped her work on her lap to comment: "You speak as though you *knew* that someone new is coming."

"I do!" Merry replied calmly, bending over her sewing that the girls might not see how eager she was to tell them her news.

"Stop being so tantalizing, Merry! What in the world do you know today that you didn't know Saturday?" Peg inquired.

"Oh, I know, I know!" Rose sang out. "It's something that handsome boy, Alfred Morrison, told you when he went to call on Jack. Out with it, Merry; don't keep us in suspense."

"Of course! How stupid we didn't think to ask what happened after you and Alfred Morrison had left us at our homes," Doris put in. "We knew he was going with you to call on Jack. Is *he* coming to live in Sunnyside? Say, wouldn't it be keen if he did?"

"Well, you are all warm anyway," Merry conceded. "The someone who is coming to live in Sunnyside; I mean the someone to whom I am referring, is a girl, but I guess *we won't* want to cultivate *her* acquaintance at all, at all."

"Merry Lee, if you don't tell us, I shall come over there and shake you until you do." Betty Byrd was so tiny that this threat made the girls laugh gaily, but it had the desired effect, for their president ceased teasing and told them a story which interested them greatly.

CHAPTER V. A MISCHIEVOUS PLAN

"Well, to begin at the beginning, Jack was pleased as punch to see Alfred Morrison, and for the first fifteen minutes they talked of nothing but college prep, athletics, fraternities and the like. Then Mother called me and I left them alone in the library. When I returned, half an hour later, Alfred was gone, but this is the tale Brother told me. It seems our new friend has a sister about our age, Geraldine by name."

"Oho," Bertha put in, "then *that* is who the newcomer to our town is to be."

Peg laughed. "We'll have to put you on the sleuth committee, Bursie, but do hurry and tell us the worst."

"Perhaps it's the best," Gertrude suggested, but Merry shook her head. "Worst is more like it. But here goes: Mr. Morrison, their father, lived in this village when he was a boy. He was mischievous and wilful and he had trouble with his father, who was stern and unrelenting. When he was sixteen he ran away to sea and was gone three years on a voyage around the world. When he returned he went West, where he married and made a good deal of money in railroads and mines. During this time he had often written to his Mother begging to be forgiven, but his letters were always returned to him and so he supposed that his parents no longer cared for him. At last, however, when his wife died, leaving him with two small children, he came back to Dorchester only to find that his father and mother were gone and the old home falling into rack and ruin.

"Sad at heart, he settled in the city where Alfred and his sister were brought up by tutors and governesses."

"Oh, the poor things!" Doris Drexel said pityingly. "My heart aches for any boy or girl brought up without knowing the tenderness of a mother's love."

"That brings the story up to the present," Merry continued. "Last week Mr. Morrison left very suddenly for Europe in the interests of his business and he may be gone all winter. He did not want to leave his son and daughter alone in the city house with the servants, and so he sent Alfred down here to see Colonel Wainright, who was his pal when he was a boy, to ask him if they might remain with him for a few months. The Colonel was delighted, Alfred told Jack, and so they are both coming to our village to spend the winter."

"But, Merry, *why* do you think that is *not* good news? I think it will be jolly fun to have another girl friend. There's always room for one more."

Gertrude said this in her kindly way, but Peg protested: "There certainly isn't room for one more in the Seven Sleuths' Club."

"Indeed not!" Merry seconded. "But don't worry, the haughty Miss Geraldine won't *want* to associate with simpering country milkmaids."

"*With what?*" Every girl in the room dropped her sewing on her lap and stared her amazement.

Merry laughed as she replied: "*Just that*, no less. I knew how indignant you'd all be. I would, too, if it weren't so powerfully funny. I'd pity the cow I'd try to milk."

"What reason have you for thinking this girl, Geraldine, will be such a snob?" Gertrude asked as she resumed her sewing.

"Reason enough!" Merry told them. "Alfred said that his sister was very angry when she heard that her father was going to send her to such a 'back-woody' place, meaning our village, and she declared that she simply would not go. She, Geraldine Morrison, who was used to having four servants wait upon her, to live in an old country house where she would probably have to demean herself by making her own bed? No, never! She raged and stormed, Alfred said, and declared that she would go to visit some cousins in New York, but to that her father would not listen. He told

her that he wanted his little girl, who is none too robust, to spend a winter breathing the country air in the village where he was a boy. Of course, since Geraldine is only sixteen, she had to give in, and so next week she is to arrive, bag and baggage. She told Alfred that he needn't think for one moment that she was going to hobnob with silly, simpering country milkmaids! Alfred said that he hated to tell Jack all this, but he liked us so much he wanted us to be prepared, so that we would not be hurt by his sister's rudeness."

There were twinkles appearing in the eyes of the mischievous Peggy. "Oh, girls," she said gaily, "I've thought up the best joke to play on this haughty young lady who calls us simpering milkmaids. Let's pretend that is *what we really are*, and let's call on her and act the part. We're all crazy about private theatricals. Here's our chance."

"Say, but that's a keen idea!" Merry agreed chucklingly.

Then they chattered merrily as they laid their plans. They would give the new girl a few days to become used to the village, then, en masse, they would go up to Colonel Wainright's and call upon her.

There was so much laughter and such squeels of delight in the next half hour that Mrs. Angel, appearing in the doorway with a platter heaped with doughnuts, was moved to inquire: "What mischief are you girls up to? I never before heard so much giggling." Her beaming expression proved to them that she was not displeased.

"Oh, Mrs. Angel, you surely were well named."

"*Such* doughnuts! Do leave the platter, please; this one has melted in my mouth already!"

"I do hope Bob won't come before we have them eaten!" were among the remarks that were uttered as the doughnuts vanished. Bertha, her eyes brimming with laughter, had disappeared to return a second later with a tray of glasses and a huge blue crockery pitcher. "This drink is appropriate, if nothing else," she announced gaily as she placed her burden on the long library table and began to pour out the creamy milk.

"It didn't take *you* long to milk a cow," Peg sang out "Yum, this puts the fresh into the refreshments."

"Oh-oo, Peg, *don't* try to be funny. Can't be done, old dear," Merry teased, then held up a warning finger. "Hark! I hear sleigh bells coming. It's Bob, and Jack is with him. Alak for us and the six left doughnuts."

"Oh, well, they deserve them if anyone does, coming after us in a storm like this," Gertrude remarked as she folded her sewing. "I'm glad they have come, for Mother doesn't feel very well and I wanted to be home in time to get supper."

A second later there was a great stamping on the side porch and the boys, after having brushed each other free of snow, entered, caps in hand.

"Bully for us!" Bob said. "Believe me, I know when to time my arrival at these 'Spread on the Sunshine' Club meetings. However, wishing to be polite, I'll wait until they're passed." Courteous as his words were, he did not fit his action to them, for, having reached the table, he poured out a tumbler of milk for Jack and tossed him a doughnut, which Jack caught skillfully in his teeth.

The girls, always an appreciative audience, laughed and clapped their hands. "Bertha, it was nice of you to provide a juggler to amuse your guests," Rose remarked.

"Jack must have been a doggie in a former existence," Peg teased.

"Sure thing I was!" the boy replied good-naturedly. "I'd heaps rather have been a dog than a cat."

"Sir!" Peg stepped up threateningly near. "Are there any concealed inferences in that?"

"Nary a one. I think in a former existence *you* girls must have all been sunbeams."

"Ha! ha!" Bob's hearty laughter expressed his enjoyment of the joke. "That's a good one, but do get a move on, young ladies; I've got to deliver groceries after I have delivered you."

The girls flocked from the room, leaving the boys to finish the doughnuts. In the wide front hall, as they were donning their wraps, they did a good deal of whispering. “Meet at my house tomorrow afternoon.” Peggy told them. “Bring any old duds you can find; we’ll make up our milkmaid costumes and have a dress rehearsal.”

CHAPTER VI. MILK MAIDS AND BUTTER CHURNERS

The next day arrived, as next days will, and, as the blizzard had blown itself away and only a soft feathery snow was falling, the girls, communicating by the repaired telephone system, decided to walk to the home of Peggy Pierce, which was centrally located. In fact, it was on a quiet side street “below the tracks,” not a fashionable neighborhood, but that mattered not at all to the girls of Sunnyside. The parents of some of the seven were the richest in town, others were just moderately well off, but one and all were able to send their daughters to the seminary, and that constituted the main link that bound them together, for they saw each other every day and walked back and forth together. Peggy’s father owned “The Emporium,” a typical village dry-goods store.

Peg threw the door open as soon as the girls appeared at the wooden gate in the fence that surrounded the rather small yard of her home.

“Hurray for the ‘S. S. C.’!” she sang out, and Merry replied with the inevitable, “Hail! Hail! The gang’s all here!”

When they were in the vestibule and Peg, with a small broom, had swept from each the soft snow, they flocked into the double parlors which were being warmed by a cosy, air-tight stove. On the walls were old-fashioned family portraits, and the haircloth furniture proclaimed to the most casual observer that it had seen its best days, but, as in the home of Bertha, there was an atmosphere of comfort and cheer which made one feel pleased to be there. A dear little old lady sat between the window and the stove. She pushed her “specs” up on the ruffle of her lavender-ribboned cap, and beamed at the girls as they entered. Then, laying down her knitting, she held out a softly wrinkled hand to Gertrude, who was the first at her side.

“I hope you girls won’t mind my being here,” she said, looking from one to another. “I could go somewhere else, if you would.”

“Well, Grandmother Dorcas, I’ll say you’ll not go anywhere else,” Peggy declared at once. “For one thing, there *isn’t* another real warm room in this house except the kitchen, and secondly, we all want you to help us plan this prank.”

The old lady, who had partly risen, sank back as she looked lovingly at her grandchild. To the others she said: “It’s mighty nice of Peggy to want me to share her good times. Some young folks don’t do that. They think grandparents are too old to enjoy things, I guess, but I feel just as young inside as I did when I was your age, and that was a good many years ago. Now go right ahead, just like I wasn’t here.” The dear old lady took up her knitting, replaced her glasses, and began to make the needles fly dexterously.

“Did you all find suitable costumes?” the hostess asked. “I didn’t,” Betty Byrd declared. “You know when Mother and I came up from the South to keep house for Uncle George, we only brought our newest clothes, and nothing that was suitable for a milkmaid costume.”

“Well, don’t you worry, little one,” Peggy laughingly declared, for Betty’s pretty face was looking quite dismal. “My Grandmother Dorcas has saved everything she wore since she was a little girl, I do believe, and now she is eighty years old. There are several trunks full of things in the attic. I told Grandma about our plan, and she was so amused, more than Geraldine will be, I’m sure of that. I thought we’d go up there to dress. It’s real warm, for Mother has been baking all the morning and the kitchen chimney goes right through the storeroom and it’s cosy as can be.” Then to the little old lady, who was somewhat deaf, the girl said in a louder voice: “Grandma, dear, when we’re dressed, we’ll come down here and show you how we look.”

The sweet, wrinkled old face beamed with pleasure. “Good! Good!” she said. “I’ll want to see you.”

All of the girls except Betty had bundles or satchels and merrily they followed their young hostess upstairs to the attic.

They found the small trunk-room cosy and warm, as Peggy had promised. On the wall hung a long, racked mirror, and few chairs that were out of repair stood about the walls. Several trunks there were including one that looked very old indeed.

For a jolly half hour the girls tried on the funny old things they found in the trunks, utilizing some of the garments they had brought from their homes, and at the end of that time they were costumed to their complete satisfaction.

In front of the long, cracked mirror Rose stood laughing merrily. "Oh, girls," she exclaimed, "don't I look comical?"

She surely did, for, on top of her yellow curls, she had a red felt hat with the very high crown which had been in vogue many years before.

This Peggy had trimmed with a pink ribbon and a green feather. An old-fashioned calico dress with a bright red sash and fingerless gloves finished the costume. The other girls were gowned just as outlandishly, and they laughed until the rafters rang.

"Peggy, you are funniest of all," Merry declared.

"That's because she has six braids sticking out in all directions," Betty Byrd said, "with a different colored piece of calico tied to each one."

"Honestly, girls, I have laughed until my sides ache," Doris Drexel said, "but what I would like to know is how are we ever going to keep straight faces when we get there? If one of us laughs that will give the whole thing away."

"We had practice enough in that comedy we gave last spring at school," Bertha Angel said. "Don't you remember we had to look as solemn as owls all through that comical piece? Well, what we did once, we can do again."

"I did giggle just a little," their youngest confessed.

"Betty Byrd, don't you dare giggle!" Peggy shook a warning finger at the little maid. Then she added: "It's such a lot of work to get all decked up like this, I wish we could make that call today."

Merry's face brightened. "We can! I actually forgot to tell you that Alfred Morrison was over last night to see Brother and told him they had arrived a day sooner than they had expected."

"Hurray for us!" Doris sang out. "It does seem like wasted effort to get all toggled up this way just for a rehearsal."

"Let's go downstairs and speak our parts before Grandma Dorcas, then we'll find someone to drive us out. I'll phone the store and see if I can borrow Johnnie Cowles. He's delivering for The Emporium now, and I guess this snowy day he can spare the time."

This being agreed upon, they descended to the living-room. The girls pretended that Grandma Dorcas was the proud Geraldine and that they were calling upon her. The old lady enjoyed her part and did it well; then Johnnie appeared with the sleigh and the girls gleefully departed.

CHAPTER VII. AN UNWILLING HOSTESS

Meanwhile in the handsome home of Colonel Wainright, on the hill-road overlooking the distant lake, a very discontented girl sat staring moodily into the fireplace of a luxuriously furnished living-room. Her brother stood near, leaning against the mantelpiece.

"I won't stay here!" Geraldine declared, her dark eyes flashing rebelliously. "I won't! I won't! Father has no right to send me to this back-woods country village. What if he *was* born here? *That* surely was *his* misfortune, and no sensible reason why *I* should be condemned to be buried here for a whole winter."

"But, Sister mine," the boy said in a conciliatory tone. "I've been trying to tell you that there are some nice girls living in Sunnyside, but you won't let me. If you would join their school life, you would soon be having a jolly time. That's what *I* mean to do."

"Alfred Morrison, I don't see how you came by such plebian ideas. I should think that you would be ashamed to have your sister attending a district school when you know that I have always been a pupil at a most fashionable seminary and have associated only with the *best* people."

"What makes them the best, Sister?"

The girl tapped one daintily slippered foot impatiently as she said scathingly: "Alfred, you are *so* provoking sometimes. You know the Ellingsworths and the Drexels and all those people are considered the best in Dorchester."

Alfred was about to reply that there was a family of Drexels living in Sunnyside, but, luckily, before he *had* said it, his attention was attracted by the ringing of a cow-bell which seemed to be out in the driveway. Geraldine also heard, but did not look up. Some delivery wagon, she thought, but Alfred, who stood so that he could look out of the window, understood what was happening when he saw the village girls descending from a delivery sleigh. They slipped out of their fur coats, leaving them in Johnnie's care, and appeared in shawls and old-fashioned capes. For a puzzled moment Alfred gazed; then, as something of the meaning of the joke flashed over him, he almost laughed aloud. Luckily Geraldine continued to stare moodily into the fire, nor did she look up when Alfred left the room. Before the girls on the porch had time to ring the bell, the boy opened the door and, stepping out, he asked quietly but with twinkling eyes: "Why the masquerade?"

"Don't you dare to spoil the joke?" Merry warned when she had told him that since his sister had expected them to be milkmaids, they had not wanted to disappoint her. Then she informed him: "My name is Miss Turnip. You introduce me and I'll introduce the others." Alfred's eyes were laughing, but in a low voice he said, "I'm game!"

Then aloud he exclaimed: "How do you do, Miss Turnip. I am so glad that you came to call. Bring your friends right in. My sister will be pleased to meet you."

Merry, in telling Jack about it afterwards, said that Alfred played his part as though he had been practicing it for weeks.

"Sister Geraldine," he called pleasantly to the girl who had risen and was standing haughtily by the fireplace, "permit me to present the young ladies who live in Sunnyside. They have very kindly called to welcome you to their village."

The newcomers all made bobbing curtsies, and, to her credit be it said, that even little Betty did not giggle, but oh, how hard it was not to.

Of course there had been classes in good breeding in the Dorchester seminary. One of the rules often emphasized was that it did not matter *how* a hostess might feel toward a guest, she must not be rude in her own home. So Geraldine bowed coldly and asked the young ladies to be seated.

Alfred, daring to remain no longer, bolted to his room and laughed so hard that he said afterwards that he couldn't get his face straight for a week.

Peggy Pierce, being the best actress among "The Sunny Seven," had been asked to take the lead, and so, when they were all seated as awkwardly as possible, she began: "My name is Mirandy Perkins. We all heard as haow yew had come to taown, and so we all thought as haow we'd drop in and ask if yew'd like to jine our Litery Sasiety. We do have the best times. Next week we're a goin' to have a Pumpkin Social. Each gal is to bring a pumpkin pie and each fellow is to bring as many pennies as he is old to help buy a new town pump for the Square. That's why it's called Pump-kin Social."

This remark was unexpected, not having been planned at the dress rehearsal, and it struck Rosamond as being so funny that she sputtered suspiciously, then taking out a big red cotton handkerchief, she changed the laugh into a sneeze.

Geraldine sat stiffly gazing at her callers with an expression that would have frozen them to silence had they been as truly rural as they were pretending, but, if she had only known it, these country girls had been attending a school every bit as fashionable as the seminary of which she so often boasted.

"I thank you," that young lady replied, "but it is not my intention to remain in this backwoods place. I plan leaving here next week at the latest."

"Wall, naow, ain't that too bad? We thought as how yew'd be seech an addition to our sasiety," Peggy continued her part. "Of course we all feel real citified ourselves. We get the latest styles right from Dorchester for our toggins."

"Toggins?" Geraldine repeated icily. "Just what are they?"

There surely was a titter somewhere; but Peggy, pretending to be surprised, remarked: "Why, toggins are hats and things like Jerushy's here." She nodded at the caricature of a red hat with green and pink trimmings which was perched on Rosamond's head.

Merry returned to the rehearsal lines from which they had sidetracked.

"Yew'd enjoy our Litery Sasiety, I'm sure," she said, "bein' as yew have a litery sort of a look. We meet onct a week around at differunt houses. We sew on things for the missionary barrel, and then one of us reads aloud out of The Farmers' Weekly."

Just then the clock on the mantelpiece chimed the hour of four, and Peggy sprang up. "Crickets!" she exclaimed, "Here 'tis comin' on dark most, and me not home to milk the caows."

"An' I've got to churn yet before supper," Doris Drexel ventured her first remark. Luckily Geraldine did not glance at the soft, white hands of the speaker. They were all smiling in the friendliest fashion, but as soon as they were outside and riding away in their queer equipage, they shouted and laughed as they had never laughed before.

"Her highness will probably leave town tomorrow," Doris remarked, "but if she does, the town will be well rid of her."

"I wonder if we put it on too thick," Bertha questioned as they were slipping on their fur coats, which they had left in the sleigh. "I was afraid she would see through our joke."

"I don't believe she did," Merry said. "Alfred told Jack that his sister got her ideas of girls who live in country villages from the moving pictures, and they are always as outlandishly dressed as we are."

"Well it will be interesting to see what comes of our nonsense," Gertrude remarked. "On the whole I feel rather sorry for that poor, unhappy girl."

When Alfred saw the queer equipage disappearing, he descended to the library. "Oh, hello, Sis," he said, "Have your callers gone?"

Geraldine's eyes flashed and she stamped her small foot as she said:

“Alfred Morrison, I just know that you asked those dreadful creatures to call on me. I suppose you would like to have *me* attend their Pumpkin Social, which is to be given to raise money to buy a town pump.”

This was too much for Alfred and he laughed heartily.

“Well,” he said at last, when he could speak, “I take off my hat to the young ladies of Sunnyside. They are the cleverest damsels that I ever met.” So saying, he disappeared, fearing that he would break his promise to Merry and reveal that it was all a joke if he remained any longer with his indignant sister.

Geraldine would probably have packed her trunk that very night and departed the next day if she had had sufficient money with which to buy a ticket, but for some reason her monthly allowance from her father had been delayed.

CHAPTER VIII. THREE LETTERS

The following morning Colonel Wainright called the girl into his study, and, laying his hand on her shoulder, he said: "Little lassie, why don't you try to please your daddy and go to school in the village here at least until the spring vacation. Then, as you know, you will be able to return to Mrs. Potter's seminary, if you wish."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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