THE SECRET OF MOHAWK POND

NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN

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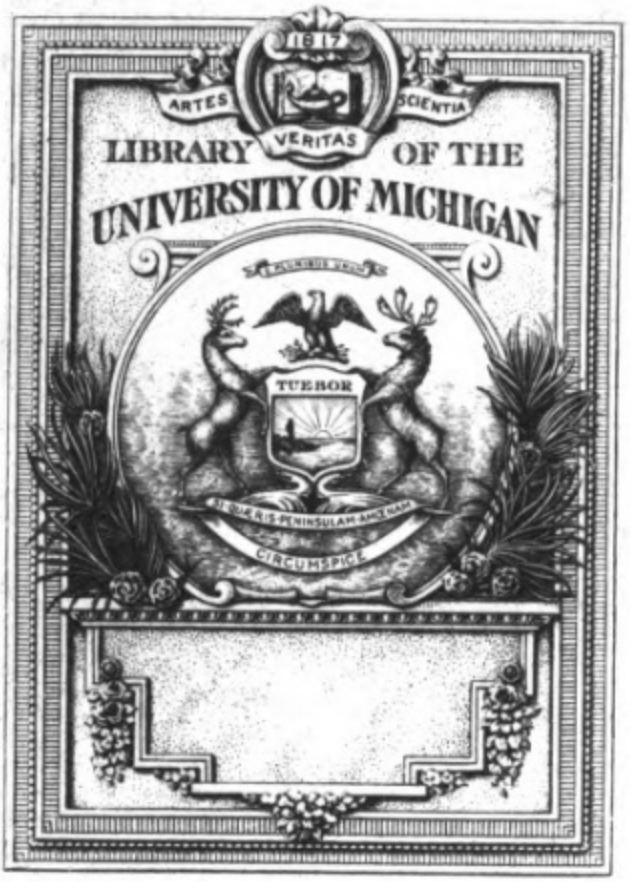

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By NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN

THE SECRET OF MOHAWK POND

THE DANCING SILHOUETTE

P. P. C.

THE BLUE CAR MYSTERY

THE MISSING INITIAL

THE THIRTEENTH LETTER

THE MEREDITH MYSTERY

THE CAT'S PAW

THE UNSEEN EAR

THE THREE STRINGS

THE MOVING FINGER

THE RED SEAL

THE MAN INSIDE

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The Secret of Mohawk Pond

By

NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN

New York :: London
D. APPLETON & COMPANY
1928

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In Memory of
Elizabeth Deming

and our friendship of many years
this tale of Litchfield County
which she loved so well
is tenderly inscribed

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The Secret of Mohawk Pond

CHAPTER I

YEW LODGE

HEAVY clouds, massed toward the northwest, deepened the blackness of the May night and brought added concern to Peggy Prescott as she drove her car along the rough country road leading from Milton to East Cornwall. It was her first motor trip through that part of Connecticut and the mountain scenery from Danbury northward had made her forgetful of the hours she had spent behind the steering wheel in her frantic haste to reach her destination. She did not need to refer to a clause in her uncle's will, a memorandum of which reposed in her suitcase, to remember the conditions attached to her inheritance of his not inconsiderable fortune.

". . . provided the said Margaret Prescott take up her residence in Yew Lodge on the banks of Mohawk Pond, Litchfield County, Connecticut, between the hours of 1 A.M. and midnight of the 16th day of May, following my death, with but her ser-

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vants and her personal effects; to come only by motor, and to remain at Yew Lodge for a day and a month, never absenting herself therefrom for more than one hour during either the day or the night within that specified period of time.

"If the conditions herein set forth are not carried out to the letter, all bequests to the said Margaret Prescott are to go instead to my deceased wife's nephew, Jamieson Sinclair, Lieutenant-Commander, United States Navy."

Notice of the probate of her uncle's will and its contents so far as it concerned her, reached Peggy in San Francisco on the eve of her sailing for Manila to join her father and mother, Colonel and Mrs. John Prescott. She promptly canceled her passage on the army transport and, with her mother's colored maid, Julia, caught the first train east. Met on her arrival in New York that morning of May 16th by the executor of Herbert Prescott's will, she had been provided with a five-passenger coupé that she might comply with her uncle's stipulation that she "come only by motor" to Yew Lodge and, with an automobile map of the country, her route carefully traced thereon, light-heartedly she had started around three o'clock that afternoon on the last lap of her trip.

A long and poorly marked detour north of Danbury had caused her to lose her way, with resultant loss of both time and temper, before she got back on the main highway. Handicapped by being

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forced to drive twenty-five miles an hour because the car was new, Peggy could not make up time and it was after seven when she swung off the Litchfield pike and headed for Milton. At that place she found the general store closed, the owner evidently having gone home for the night, and unable to secure more gasoline, she had driven steadily ahead, hoping to pass a filling station. The country road was little frequented, however, and the only person she encountered, a freckle-faced boy, who regarded his pretty questioner and her maid with open-eyed curiosity, gave her but vague answers as to how far she was from the "lane" which led from that road to Mohawk Pond.

Julia, sitting dozing by Peggy's side, was roused by the lurch the car gave as Peggy turned into a narrow lane and sped along it. The branches of the trees growing close to the lane rattled against the side of the car, giving out an eerie sound as they progressed.

"Is yo' right, Miss Peggy, ma'am?" questioned Julia, peering anxiously into the darkness. "Seems like it's turrible lonesome."

The lane curved dangerously and Peggy, intent on easing the car along the deep ruts, did not reply at once. Ten, fifteen minutes passed, then the lane, with a final right-hand turn, ended abruptly in front of a large two-story log house, partly surrounded by a grove of trees. The powerful headlights showed up the building as the girl brought the car to a stop

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within a few feet of the steps leading to the front door.

"Is this hyar yo' new home, Miss Peggy?" demanded Julia, the drawl leaving her voice as her excitement mounted.

"I trust it is, Julia." Peggy locked the transmission and opened the car door. "We can't go much further as we are about out of gas." She fumbled in her handbag and produced a key ring. "Sit still, Julia; I'll do a little exploring," and before the startled maid could remonstrate, she was out of the car and up the steps.

One of the keys supplied by the executor fitted the lock and, opening the front door, Peggy stepped across the threshold into what appeared to be a huge living room and hall combined. The lights from her car illuminated part of the interior. Handsome rugs were scattered over the hardwood floor, while the furnishings of the room denoted taste and comfort. Evidently an unlimited purse had gratified the whims of an extravagant owner. So far as she could tell Peggy judged the lodge to be similar to those she had seen in the Adirondacks, where only the exterior reminds the beholder of the log cabins of our pioneer ancestors, and where all the luxuries of a town house are transported into the wilderness.

Peggy took several hesitating steps forward and spied the shadowy figure of a man hovering in the background.

"Is this Yew Lodge?" she asked eagerly. A re-

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spectful bow answered her. "Then you are expecting me—Miss Prescott?" Another bow. Turning back toward the front door, she called to her maid: "Come in, Julia; you can leave the bags until later."

Not waiting to see her orders carried out, Peggy again addressed the silent figure as she removed her hat and coat and tossed them on a convenient chair. "Did Mr. Chase notify you of my coming?"

Once more the figure bowed, then glided to the left and held back the drawn portières across a doorway, evidently expecting her to pass through it.

Without hesitation she started in that direction. She had almost reached the door when her high heels slipped on the polished floor. Her out-flung hand reached the wall, thereby saving a nasty fall. Accidentally her fingers pressed an electric wall button and several lights went on in front of her and she saw that she faced a dining room. The table was set for four persons. The chair at the head of the table was drawn back and the figure waited respectfully for her to occupy it. Another instant and she had sunk back in the chair's comfortable depth. Pointing to a tall goblet by her plate, she glanced up.

"Water, please," she said, and caught a glimpse of swarthy skin and glowing eyes before the figure withdrew. A second later a large silver soup tureen was placed in front of her.

Surprised by the continued silence and thinking

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she had not made herself heard, she again touched her goblet. "Water," she repeated with more emphasis and, as the figure once more glided into the room, she drew out her cigarette case and match box.

Through a cloud of cigarette smoke Peggy contemplated the handsome cut glass and plate on the mahogany table and admired the Cluny lunch set. Her uncle had denied himself nothing in his voluntary seclusion from the world.

"Miss Peggy, whar is yo'?" Julia's hail came from the living room. "It's rainin'. Is yo' plannin' to leave the cyar out in front?" The maid had glimpsed the light coming from the dining room even as she spoke, and she joined Peggy. "My lan', why yo' settin' thar, Miss Peggy?"

"I am waiting for dinner." And at the words Julia's comely yellow face brightened. The sandwiches and coffee which Peggy had insisted her maid share with her had not satisfied Julia's hunger. "Go out in the kitchen, Julia, and ask Uncle Herbert's servant where the garage is located and I will drive the car around there."

Julia started with alacrity for the door to which her mistress pointed, but on discovering pitch darkness beyond it, she stopped.

"Miss Peggy, dear, thar ain't no light;" then, as a surprised ejaculation escaped Peggy: "Come an' see fo' yo'se'f, honey."

Peggy was at her side in a second. "Feel on the

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wall and locate a light switch," she suggested, running her own fingers up and down just beyond the door jamb. Julia, however, touched the switch first and they found themselves in a large pantry; from it they went into the larger kitchen, the light from the open doors behind them guiding their search for other light switches. Except for themselves the rooms were deserted. Swiftly they made a canvass of the entire first floor, and when they stood once again in the dining room there was no color in Peggy's lovely cheeks.

"There ain't no one been in this hyar house fo' days," declared Julia energetically. "I seen dust everywhar, Miss Peggy; why, jes' look at dem things on the dinner table; dey's heavy with dust," and turning on more electric lights that they might see better, "The silver on the sidebo'd ain't been cleaned fo' a month o' Sundays. An', Miss Peggy," she almost whispered the words—"every do' and window on dis hyar flo' was locked in de inside, too."

Peggy cleared her throat before she spoke. "Did any one leave by the front door, Julia, while I was in here?"

"No, Miss; I'd a seen 'em if dey had." Julia spoke with disconcerting positiveness. "I was waitin' by de cyar lights and dey shone right on de front do'. Ef it hadn't been rainin', I'd be standin' thar yet."

"Let's go upstairs," and not waiting for the objections which trembled on Julia's lips, she led the

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way into the living room and up the winding staircase to the next floor. The bedrooms opened upon the circular gallery which looked down into the living room, and one by one the two women entered them. The same luxurious furnishings and arrangements were carried out in the sleeping quarters as Peggy had found on the first floor—but that was all she did find. Apparently there was no one in the house but their two selves and, as Julia pointed out with much insistence, the place bore undisputed evidence of not having been occupied for months.

"Hadn't we better sleep in the cyar, Miss Peggy?" coaxed Julia, as they returned to the living room.

"No." Peggy spoke with determination. "I must abide by Uncle Herbert's will, Julia, and live *in* this house, not outside it; otherwise I forfeit my inheritance. Stay here until I put out the lights of my car."

But instead of remaining in the house, Julia trotted close by her side and the two women made quick work of closing the car windows and locking the doors. Neither lingered in the living room on regaining it, and without mentioning their mutual desire to eat something, they trudged upstairs, Julia carrying the bags in one hand and clinging to Peggy's skirts with the other.

"Here's the linen closet, Julia." Peggy held open the door as her maid came into the hall after depositing the bags in the bedroom Peggy had selected

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for her own use. "Make up the beds while I telephone to Mr. Chase."

A branch telephone was in a corner of the gallery close at hand and Peggy lost no time in getting the Cornwall Telephone Exchange.

"Hello, Operator," she called as the exchange answered. "This is thirty-eight ring five, Miss Prescott speaking, from Yew Lodge, Mohawk Pond. Please record this call as coming from here at ten-ten, Eastern standard time. Have you done that? Thanks. Now put me through for New York City —Mr. Philander Chase, Spring three hundred and twenty-six."

It was ten minutes later that a masculine voice called "Hello," at the other end of the wire.

"Hello, Mr. Chase; I am here at Yew Lodge." Peggy's tone was low but every word was distinct. "The time is recorded at the Cornwall Telephone Exchange, so that you can substantiate my statement officially for your Court Records. Any excitement, did you ask?"—she hesitated—"I took the wrong road and got lost; that's all. Good night," and she rang off.

Not until Julia was asleep in the small maid's room next to hers did Peggy permit her thoughts to turn back to her entrance into her uncle's home—hers now, by right of inheritance, provided she carried out Uncle Herbert's stipulations. And why shouldn't she?

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She sat on the edge of her bed and ran her hand through her curly hair. Was the man she had taken for her uncle's butler but a figment of her imagination? Mr. Chase had said nothing of a caretaker, but surely one must have been left on the place. Not to reside there perhaps, but possibly have quarters outside the Lodge—in the garage, or a nearby farmhouse. To leave such a home unguarded seemed incredible, even if it was located in an inaccessible and little known part of the sovereign state of Connecticut.

No, it was entirely feasible that she had encountered a caretaker, who, for unknown reasons, had departed as quickly and mysteriously as possible. But why disappear? And how? Every door and window they had found locked, even that leading to the cellar. And why lead her to the dinner table and let her suppose he was going to serve a meal? Had she dreamed *that*, too?

She rose and slipped on a kimono over her silk pajamas. Walking softly so as not to awaken Julia, she turned on the lights of the living room from the switch on the second floor and sought the dining room, lighting it thoroughly first. Everything there was just as she had left it; even the chair she had sat in was pushed back from the table as it was when she rose in haste to hunt for the servant.

Going over to the chair, she stared at the covered soup tureen in front of her plate. Like the china

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on the table a film of dust was discernible on it. Very gingerly Peggy lifted the cover and glanced in the tureen.

Inside lay a cocked automatic pistol.

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CHAPTER II

BARRED GATES

PEGGY PRESCOTT and her maid eyed each other across the breakfast tray which Julia had brought to her bedroom a moment before.

"Yo' was sleepin' so nice, I didn't call yo'." Julia spoke in haste, reading correctly Peggy's reproachful glance at her watch. "An', Miss Peggy, dis heah am de bery bes' I kin do with the t'ings in de kitchen; thar ain't no eggs, nor butter nor milk —jes' nuffin' but what yo' see," and she pointed to the steaming pot of black coffee, the deliciously crisp bacon and the toasted bread—the latter salvaged from the lunch kit which they had brought from New York.

"And you, Julia—what have you had to eat?" questioned Peggy, pouring out the coffee with a generous hand.

"Po'k an' beans an' coffee," promptly. "Don' yo' worry 'bout me, I've et a-plenty. Dere's lots ob canned stuff in de pantry. It wasn't hard to start de fire in de range." And the maid bustled about the bedroom, taking from the suitcases Peggy's slender wardrobe.

Julia's devotion to Mrs. Prescott was second only

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to the adoration she had for Peggy. It was that adoration which had induced her, when all else failed, to promise to make the trip to the Philippine Islands with her young mistress. Peggy's last-minute decision to go to Connecticut instead had brought vast relief to the colored girl, her dread of an ocean voyage having increased as the hour for sailing drew near. Therefore she was in a frame of mind to find everything at Yew Lodge satisfactory and its inconveniences something to make light of.

Peggy wasted but little time in eating her breakfast, and scrambling out of bed, completed her dressing in less than twenty minutes. Pausing in front of her mirror, she took a final survey of herself and patted her curly hair which, cut in a shingle bob, proved a most becoming frame for her piquant features and wild-rose beauty. Convinced that her fatiguing trip across the continent had left no trace in her appearance, she hurried over to her bed with its tossed-back sheet and blankets. Slipping her hand under the pillow, she withdrew from beneath it the automatic pistol which she had found in the silver soup tureen on the dining-room table.

From the bathroom adjoining came the sound of running water and Julia's melodious voice uplifted in song. Peggy looked about her; she knew that Julia was of an inquisitive frame of mind and that nothing among her belongings escaped her friendly inspection. She also knew Julia's terror of a weapon of any sort. Where to put the pistol in case she had

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sudden need of it and yet have it secreted from Julia? Slowly her eyes traveled over the furniture; the dresser by the window, the old maple chest of drawers—neither presented a safe hiding place as no key was in evidence in any of the drawers, and except for the bed, two chairs and a table, there was no other furniture in the room.

Tossing a sweater over her shoulder and letting it dangle so as to conceal the pistol in her hand in case Julia suddenly emerged from the bathroom, Peggy went out into the hall which, with its railing, formed the circular gallery overlooking the living room beneath. The hall, about four feet wide from wall to railing, was furnished with a number of comfortable lounging chairs, the telephone stand, and a combination sectional bookcase and writing desk. Stuffed animal heads hung on the walls between the doors opening into other bedrooms. From one of the antlers of the deer head next to her door was suspended a beaded Indian pouch, large enough to hold the pistol, and Peggy slipped it inside. The automatic was one of a type with which she was entirely familiar, her father's top sergeant having taught her to shoot both revolver and pistol. The night before she had removed the cartridges, lowered the hammer, and, replacing the cartridges in the clip, pushed it back inside the pistol butt, ready for future use. Also with a caution, which her soldier-father would have applauded, she had refrained from telling Julia of the mysterious figure she had seen

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on entering Yew Lodge. Like others of her race, Julia's terror of the supernatural was unbounded.

Peggy's own qualms had vanished with the approach of dawn. She had lain awake for long hours, listening for the slightest sound, her hand on the weapon under her pillow giving her the required courage to remain in bed. If the same figure again appeared before her she was determined to shoot and shoot to kill. A mental picture of Julia awakening to the tune of bullets zipping about had caused her to chuckle aloud.

When daylight had made clear all the objects in the room her curiosity had carried her over to one of the windows and she gazed outside. Her bedroom faced Mohawk Pond and from where she knelt at the low window ledge she obtained a fine view of the egg-shaped body of water. The roof of the verandah, which extended across the water front of Yew Lodge, prevented her from seeing directly beneath the window, but she had a glimpse of the flagged walk leading to the small dock, beside which was a boathouse. Even as she looked, delighted with the wild scenery spread before her, twenty or more black ducks rose from the pond and flew off. The girl's eyes sparkled as she crept back to bed; her love for the great out-of-doors was indeed to be gratified, and her last waking thought, before she dropped into dreamless slumber, was a final determination to fulfill every proviso in her uncle's will

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that she might keep Yew Lodge for her very own for the remainder of her life.

Tucking the Indian pouch carefully out of sight between the wall and the wooden plaque on which the deer head was mounted, Peggy called to Julia, and mistress and maid went downstairs. Julia, an indefatigable worker, had spent the time while waiting for the hour she deemed proper to waken Peggy, dusting and airing the dining room, and the latter found that the china and glass and the silver soup tureen had been removed from the dinner table, carefully washed and put in the pantry.

Peggy concealed her annoyance from Julia, who pointed with pride to all that she had accomplished in, as she expressed it, "tidying up." The young girl had hoped by a close inspection in broad daylight to see some marks on the tureen and the mahogany surface of the table which might give her a clew as to whether it had been standing there with the rest of the table appointments or if she had actually seen the tureen brought in and placed in front of her. Could she place faith in her eyesight or had her too-vivid imagination played her false? After all, the automatic pistol might have been put in the tureen by her uncle and forgotten. She had selected an Indian pouch for its concealment, but then she had not left it cocked and ready to go off. However peculiar her uncle, and his will gave ample proof of eccentricity, would he be guilty of leaving carelessly around a cocked automatic, thereby jeop-

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ardizing the life of the incautious finder of the pistol? He must have been familiar with its hair-trigger action.

"Dere ain' no ice box, Miss Peggy." Julia broke unceremoniously into her thoughts. "Whar yo' 'speck yo' Uncle Herbert kep' his butter an' eggs?"

"Have you been in the cellar?"

"No, ma'am; I ain't." Julia's eyes rolled at the question. "Is yo' gwine thar?"

"Certainly." And taking out her key ring, supplied by Mr. Chase, Peggy made for the servants' quarters. A short passageway from the pantry gave access to the right wing of the Lodge. The thoroughly equipped kitchen, its cupboards filled with pots, pans and crockery, looked homelike and comfortable. It was lighted by three windows and there was a screened-in porch on which the side door opened. Another door, also secured by a Yale lock in which one of her keys fitted, proved to be the entrance to the cellar stairs, and Peggy went down them, followed by Julia carrying a lighted candle.

Apparently the cellar extended under the entire building. At the farther end they found the Genco Power System which furnished electricity for lighting the Lodge. Peggy had seen one similar to it at her boarding school near Middleburg, Virginia. Leaving Julia staring at the machinery, she walked about the concrete floor and studied the brick foundations of the lodge with keen interest. Towards the water front, small, dust-covered windows looked

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under the flooring of the verandah, and piled against the wall were what she took to be empty crates and old chests. On her left were bins filled with split wood, apparently for the range, while two of the larger bins held stove coal. She could see no furnace, and concluded that heat for the upper stories was depended upon from open fires and the kitchen range, which supplied the hot water. Some of the letters she had received from her uncle were written from sunny Italy; evidently it had not been his custom to winter in bleak New England.

Steps led upward to a slanting cellar entrance and Peggy mounted them, only to find that the two doors were evidently locked on the outside, for they resisted her efforts to open them. To the left of the steps were large cupboards, partitioned off; one, having slats instead of a solid wood partition, contained old furniture, a few trunks and some crocks, and Peggy, viewing their dusty appearance as well as she could with the aid of Julia's candle, decided not to enter it. The further cupboard was padlocked and none of the keys on her ring fitted it.

"'Tain't no use o' worryin' 'bout that, Miss Peggy," consoled Julia practically. "Ef der's ennything inside dat closet, it cayn't git out dis a-way. Der ain't no ice box down hyar, an' it's awful dirty. Come away, honey; I'll clean it up—mebbe." The reservation was made under her breath as Julia glimpsed something crawling a short distance from them. "Lawd ha' mercy, what's dat?" The candle

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dropped from her trembling fingers and its flame sputtered on the hard concrete, dying out entirely. Julia led the scramble for the kitchen stairs.

"How you scared me! Aren't you ashamed?" And Peggy, half laughing, half out of breath, leaned against the kitchen table. "It was probably a rat—a mouse," correcting herself at sight of Julia's frightened countenance.

"A mouse ain't so bad," admitted the colored girl. "Does yo' reckon dere's snakes 'bout hyar, Miss Peggy?"

"Probably," answered the other. "Come, be sensible, Julia; you had snakes on your Virginia farm, you've told me so."

"Sure, ma'am; but we had men-folks to kill dem." Julia threw some coal in the range by way of assuaging her feelings. "What we gwine do fo' ice?"

For answer Peggy opened the side door and crossing the inclosed porch went down the three or four steps to the ground. Mohawk Pond narrowed at that end and around the bend Peggy spotted a low roof just showing over the sloping bank.

"Look, isn't that a spring house?" And the two hastened toward it. Julia gazed at the spring with delight and picking up a dipper from inside the small stone shelter, first rinsed it out and then filled it with cold water.

"Try it, Miss Peggy," she coaxed. "Yo'll like it better'n that in the spigots"—nodding her head toward the G. E. gasoline motor housed near by,

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which pumped water into Yew Lodge. "Dis hyar spring house am jes' fine fo' meat an' butter an' eggs. It's icy col' in dere and dese bushes don' let it git het up none." Julia straightened up and looked about. "My, what gran' lookin' trees 'way off yonder on dat bluff 'cross de pond, Miss Peggy. Them woods is jes' lovely."

Peggy nodded absently. She had just obtained her first sight of the mountain rising half a mile or more behind Yew Lodge, and its grandeur took her breath. Had she arrived in the daytime instead of at night she would have seen it as she drove down the winding lane to the main entrance of her new home.

"That must be the east summit of Mohawk Mountain," she explained to Julia, pointing toward the peak. "Uncle Herbert described it to me once. He said Mt. Mohawk consists of two peaks, with a road in the pass between them. This pond is sunk deep in the hills and it can't be seen from any main road."

Julia looked uneasily about. "Does yo' reckon it's dangerous hyar?" she asked. "I ain't lookin' to be buried alive."

"Nonsense; there are plenty of homes near by, hidden in the woods." Peggy spoke with a confidence she did not altogether feel. In spite of the brilliant sunshine of a perfect May day, she was commencing to have a sense of loneliness. "Will you drive into Milton with me, Julia? I'm going for some provisions and gas."

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To her surprise Julia shook her head. "I don' mind stayin' hyar, Miss Peggy, long's dere ain' ben no dead people in yo' house." She paused and cast a sharp glance at the young girl. "Yo' Uncle Herbert didn't die hyar?"

"No; I believe at the Torrington Hospital." Peggy sighed involuntarily. "He built this Lodge just after the War and, so far as I know, no death has ever occurred here."

Julia's expression brightened. "I'll help yo' all get ready," she volunteered, leading the way back. "Ain' no human goin' to git me in broad daylight, an' I got lots to do. Here's a market list fo' yuh," and Julia, keeping up a running fire of conversation assisted Peggy into her coat and hat.

Before leaving the living room Peggy rummaged in the drawers of her uncle's flat-top desk and finally brought to light what she sought, a small, leather-bound memorandum book. Five or six pages contained writing, but she fastened them to the top cover with an elastic band. Then on the first blank sheet she drew some ruled lines, printing at the head of each column the words, "Date, Departure, Return," and at the top "Log of Yew Lodge, M. Prescott, Owner." She entered the date, May seventeenth, nineteen hundred and twenty seven, then glanced at her wrist watch. "I'll allow ten minutes for putting water in the radiator, turning the car and getting off the grounds," she muttered, under her

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breath, and entered the time: "11:12 A.M.," under the column marked, "Departure."

Julia was brushing out the car when Peggy appeared, water pitcher in hand. In her unfamiliarity with Yew Lodge, she had, the night before, driven off the road which, approaching the house, turned sharply to the left and ended before a portable garage in the grove of trees toward the east summit of Mohawk. While Julia filled the radiator, Peggy looked at her crank-case gauge and her tires, then climbed in behind the wheel, and backing the car around, headed down the lane, with a farewell wave of her hand to Julia.

She had gone five hundred yards or more along the winding lane, when she put on her brakes sharply as a closed gate loomed up before her. Considerably surprised, she stopped the car, climbed out and opened it. The gate had not been closed the night before, nor, in the blackness of the night, with the frequent turning of the road, had her headlights outlined the gateposts on either side of the lane. Once again she started and had covered a like distance when a second gate stopped her. It took a moment to unfasten the rusty latch and, neglecting to shut the gate, she climbed back into her car and sped on toward Milton. Once on the country road she turned to the left and, thankful to meet no cars, made what speed she could over its rocks and ruts, and saw no one in the lonely woods that skirted the roadside.

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At the general store in Milton, Peggy secured such supplies as they had, but it left Julia's list woefully incomplete. She found the clerk most obliging, however, and while filling her gasoline tank he gave her the names of shops in Litchfield where she might telephone her orders and have supplies sent by parcel post via the post office at Cornwall Bridge.

"It looks as though I'd have to become a vegetarian," she commented dolefully, paying her bill.

"Obadiah Evans might let you have chickens and ducks, provided he don't turn cranky." The clerk stopped by the open window of her car and carefully counted out her change as she sat behind the wheel. "He lives in the farmhouse next to the lane where you turn off the Milton road. Thank you, ma'am," and he smiled back at his pretty customer. "I put air in the tires. Call again."

A chicken dinner loomed large in Peggy's mind, but there was no sign of Obadiah Evans at the well-kept and recently painted farmhouse somewhat back from the Milton road, just beyond Mohawk Lane. Peggy dared not linger, as her watch showed her that it was close to noon—her hour's grace was nearly over.

To her great annoyance the first gate in the lane, the one with the rusty catch, was once more closed, and this time so securely fastened with heavy wire that she failed to unlatch it. She went back to her car to search for her tool kit and a pair of pliers. She was about to lift the front seat when, through a

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gap in the trees to her left, she caught sight of a man in the pasture beyond. Peggy pressed the button of her motor horn and its imperative "honk—honk" cut the stillness. Again she pressed the button, keeping her fingers on it. She saw the man's head go up. First listening for a minute or two, he walked with maddening slowness in her direction.

"Please hurry," she called, and he quickened his footsteps. "I can't get the gate open."

Instead of going toward it, the man came up to her car.

"This lane is privately owned," he stated, and while both manner and tone were entirely courteous, Peggy's back stiffened; she was accustomed to having her slightest wish gratified without question.

"It is owned by me," she responded, and met his steadfast regard with an equally steady look. "I am Miss Prescott."

"Oh!" The ejaculation escaped unwittingly and again the man and the girl eyed each other. The angry sparkle in her eyes and her heightened color added to the charming picture that she made, silhouetted against the dark interior of her car, the sunlight obscured under a passing cloud. Standing fully six feet, two inches, his farm clothes hanging loosely on his thin frame, the man's tanned cheeks reddened also. In sheer embarrassment his hand went involuntarily to his bare head and, finding no hat to lift, brushed his dark hair off his forehead

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with a circular motion. Peggy was the first to break the silence.

"Mr. Obadiah Evans?" she inquired, and her soft voice grew more cordial.

He shook his head. "Pop," he called over his shoulder, and for the first time Peggy became aware that another man was approaching her car. "This is Miss Prescott, Pop."

Obadiah Evans advanced with rapid strides. "I am pleased to see you," he said, extending a huge hand and grasping hers until her fingers tingled. "Your uncle and I were real friendly. When did you get here?"

"Last night." Smiling, she pointed through the windshield. "These gates were hospitably open then."

Obadiah considered her for a moment before addressing his silent companion. "The gates were open, heh? How about it, Jim?"

But Jim apparently did not hear for, halfway to the closed gate, he kept steadily on without turning about.

"Mr. Evans." Peggy spoke hesitatingly; the man before her might be a tiller of the soil, as his stained overalls and muddy boots indicated, but there was that about him which commanded respect. To treat him simply as a convenience went against the grain and she changed the words upon her lips; what he might not do for barter he might consider doing because she was Herbert Prescott's niece. "I find it

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difficult to get provisions; can you help me out?"

The farmer stroked his chin. "Chickens?" he suggested and she nodded a quick assent. "Eggs, too?"

"And milk—" Her eyes lit with a friendly smile. "Is that asking too much?"

Obadiah's shrewd glance left her and centered on Jim, returning from opening the gate.

"I guess we can accommodate." His Yankee twang grew more pronounced. "You can look for the eggs and milk to-morrow." He nodded a friendly good-by. "Where are you going, Jim?" as the latter sprang on the running board of the moving car.

"To the next gate; that's wired, also," and Jim tightened his hold as the car sped through the gate and around the curve.

Obadiah watched it out of sight, a curious expression on his weather-beaten face. "I'm thinking," he muttered, below his breath, "the gal's uncommon good looking."

Peggy's utter disregard of the roughness of the lane and its numerous curves drew a remonstrance from the man clinging on the running board.

"Go easy," he exclaimed, "or you'll break a spring." Then, as the front wheels caught in a deep rut and slued the car around: "Shall I drive?"

The girl's cheeks flamed red; that his criticism was just made it rankle the more. The four-wheel brakes brought the car to a stop almost on top of the second

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gate. Peggy, her eyes on Jim as he wrestled with the wired latch, opened and closed her handbag with a vicious snap. What was there about the man to irritate her? The older Evans had met her friendly advances in like spirit, but Jim—why the very set of his shoulders radiated disapproval—was he, in vulgar parlance, trying to take her down a peg? A glance at her wrist watch showed that she had but three minutes to make Yew Lodge.

Peggy's foot came down on the accelerator and the car, in second gear, shot through the opening. At the same moment her extended hand released a half dollar. As Jim caught the tip, the silver coin struck against the amethyst of his class ring, worn with its tell-tale setting turned palm inward.

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CHAPTER III

AN ADVENTUROUS NIGHT

THE shadows lengthened and Peggy Prescott, sitting in a window alcove of the living room, overlooking the driveway to Yew Lodge, closed her book and laid it down on the cushioned seat. The printed page had lost interest with the fading light and she did not bother to turn on the reading lamp close at hand. She had reached Yew Lodge on Monday night, the sixteenth, and this was Saturday. The intervening five days had passed swiftly, with practically every hour occupied with work, for she had insisted upon helping Julia put the Lodge in order, and while doing so had inventoried each room.

The latter occupation had proven most interesting, for Herbert Prescott had brought to his mountain home a collection of objects from every part of the globe. Able to gratify his whims by a fortune he had amassed while yet in middle life, he spent his later years in European travel, and his only brother, Colonel Prescott, had seen but little of him. There was twelve years' difference in their ages and their tastes were utterly dissimilar. The elder Prescott's influence, then a growing power in banking circles,

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had secured for John his appointment to West Point. He had attended the latter's marriage at Fort Meade, in the Black Hills of South Dakota, and had bestowed on the pretty Virginia bride a handsome present.

Herbert Prescott made his exit from the family circle with a promise to visit his brother regularly once a year. The promise had never been kept. Only once had Peggy seen her uncle. He had dropped in upon them during her father's detail at the War College in Washington and had stayed over night. Peggy, ill with chicken-pox, had regarded him with round, wondering eyes as he stood at the foot of her bed. His gaunt figure had seemed gigantic in height to her childish mind, and the black patch which he wore over one eye increased her awe. To her repeated questions the next morning, her father had told her that Herbert Prescott had, while cleaning a revolver, accidentally discharged it and had lost the sight of his eye. Where this had happened was never divulged, at least to her. She heard vaguely later of her uncle's marriage in Paris and of his wife's death within a year. Occasionally at Christmas came checks, a delightful reminder of Herbert Prescott's existence, and, during the past four years, his random letters to her.

A story in a New York paper, chronicling Herbert Prescott's death had been Peggy's first intimation of that fact, and she had cabled the news to her family in the Philippines. She had taken it for granted that her father would be his brother's heir

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and so the news that she, and not Colonel Prescott, would inherit his property, had come like a bolt from the blue. No other member of her family was mentioned in the will, and her inheritance hinged upon what she had grown to look upon as a freak clause —she dared not say even to Julia that she had come to believe her uncle mildly insane when he made such a will.

Julia's heavy tread coming around the house caused Peggy to look outside the open window in time to see the maid place an empty milk pail by the path leading from the kitchen door to the lane. Regularly, ever since her interview with Obadiah Evans, had milk arrived early in the morning; whether he or Jim delivered it, Peggy did not know. She had seen neither of the men, contenting herself with sending Julia, who thought nothing of the walk in the daytime to the mail box at the end of the lane to collect the packages dispatched via parcel post from the shops at Litchfield, after a telephone conversation with their owners.

Not even to herself would Peggy admit that she had stayed at Yew Lodge, under pretense of one kind or another, to avoid a second encounter with Jim. Bitterly she regretted the perverse impulse which had inspired her to throw him a half dollar. The mere thought of her action brought a wave of color to her cheeks. She shook herself angrily. She was attaching too much importance to the matter; a tip was a gratuity—nothing more. The latter

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term, however, caused her but further mental discomfort—a gratuity implied a menial—

"Julia!" The maid started as Peggy's clear tones reached her. "Are you ready to go with me?"

"Yessum." But there was reluctance in the affirmative reply and the maid lagged back in her approach. "Is yo' sho' nuff wantin' to go on de pon', Miss Peggy, ma'am?"

"Yes," firmly. Earlier that week Julia had agreed to do whatever Peggy wished in the evenings, provided she was never left alone in Yew Lodge after dark. She had not calculated on Peggy's evincing a desire to go canoeing by moonlight, but a promise was a promise, and Julia was always willing to try anything once.

Peggy's eyes danced as she watched Julia's slowness in shutting the doors and bolting the windows—nothing would have induced the colored girl to reenter the Lodge unless it had been entirely locked up in their absence.

"Don't let your enthusiasm run away with you, Julia." They had reached the dock and Julia was regarding the birch bark canoe with distended eyes. "Step in it carefully."

The advice was unnecessary. Clinging tightly to the dock, the maid lowered herself into the canoe by degrees, never releasing her hold of the wooden pile until she was seated in the bow, then she transferred her grasp to the canoe's sides. Her fingers ached from the pressure, but she clung the tighter

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as Peggy paddled away from the dock. It was not until they were halfway across Mohawk Pond that she found her voice.

"Ain't dese hyar boats dangerous, Miss Peggy?"

"Not unless you get hilarious," was the consoling reply. "Isn't the scenery gorgeous?" and Peggy pointed with her paddle to the eastern peak of Mohawk Mountain, showing boldly against the skyline, its wooded heights towering far above them. "Some day, Julia, we'll walk to the summit."

"I wish I was dar right now," Julia's roving eyes swept the bank hopefully, but with a quick turn of her paddle, Peggy headed the canoe in another direction and they continued down the length of the pond until they reached the high rocky bluff at the extreme end. The shore near the bluff was steep and she found no safe landing place. Backing the canoe off some little distance she regarded the fine white pines standing on the bluff with admiration and even Julia gave them more than a passing glance.

In pure enjoyment Peggy circled the pond. To the south she found the shore flat and swampy and they talked in subdued tones while the canoe drifted along, occasionally guided by Peggy's paddle. An hour or more had passed when Julia, lulled into forgetfulness of time, awoke to the fact that the moon was obscured by clouds.

"Ain't we goin' home?" she questioned anxiously, with an apprehensive eye on the dark waters. "The

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