

Edward Stratemeyer



Outdoor Girls at New Moon Ranch

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CHAPTER I

ROY OR CLEM?

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“Why so thoughtful, Betty?” teased the girl who had been Grace Ford and was now Mrs. Frank Haley. “You haven’t spoken a word for the past ten minutes——”

“Which,” put in Amy Stonington Ford, with a fond smile in Betty Washburn’s direction, “is a very unusual thing for Mrs. Allen Washburn. But, honestly, what were you thinking of, Betty?”

“Mollie,” returned Betty unhesitatingly. “I’ve been thinking about her steadily ever since I——”

“Saw her with Clem Field and dear old faithful Roy,” Grace finished, with an understanding nod. “I know. I’ve been wondering, too.”

“Wondering what?” asked Amy.

Grace waved a bonbon in the direction of their mutual friend, Mollie Billette. The latter was halfway up a rather rickety stepladder. She carried an ornamental basket of ferns which it was her evident intention to hang in the entrance from the spacious square hall to the still more spacious living room. Two young men supported the ladder and looked anxiously up at the girl.

“Wish you’d let me do that, Mollie,” said Clem Field. “This is no sort of work for a girl when there are fellows around.”

From her impressive height, Mollie looked down upon the speaker disdainfully and said in a solemn voice:

“Any kind of work is the work for an Outdoor Girl and she never asks help from a boy—never!”

"Hear! Hear!" cried Roy, on the other side of the stepladder. He let go of it for a moment to clap his hands. The ladder teetered drunkenly and Mollie squeaked. Also, she almost dropped the fern basket on Clem's head!

"Listen!" she said severely, as Roy recovered his hold of the ladder. "Next time you are going to do that, give me warning, will you, Roy Anderson?"

Everybody giggled and Roy looked aggrieved.

"That was one time you needed me, anyway," he suggested dryly.

"Oh, well—when it comes to hanging baskets—" chuckled Mollie, and took another step up the ladder.

The married members of the Outdoor Girls Club exchanged significant glances.

"Looks to me like an even race between Clem and Roy," said Grace, enjoyably nibbling her candy.

"I think she likes Clem," said Betty, adding, with a smile that showed her pretty dimples: "I don't blame her so much, at that. Clem *is* rather a dear!"

"Yes, but good old Roy is the steady, dependable sort that Mollie really should have," objected Amy. "They are so absolutely unlike——"

"That they ought to get along beautifully together," finished Grace.

"All of which," added Betty brightly, "won't make a shade of difference to Mollie when she comes to actually make her choice. She will do exactly what she pleases, so there's no use our trying to settle things for her."

"Nevertheless, one can't help wondering," murmured Grace, and the pleasantly scheming look of the born

matchmaker came into her eyes as she watched the girl on the ladder and the two young men.

The beautiful new home of Stella Sibley in Deepdale was the scene of this reunion of the Outdoor Girls, married and not married.

All the “old crowd” were there; Betty Nelson Washburn who had married the successful and popular young lawyer, Allen Washburn; Amy Ford, Will Ford’s wife; and Grace Haley, who had been the last of these three Outdoor Girls to enter the holy state of matrimony.

After considerable persuasion on the part of Frank Haley, Grace had yielded to the latter’s persistence to the extent of becoming his wife—and was now one of the happiest brides imaginable.

Mollie Billette, then, was the last of the original quartette of Outdoor Girls to remain unmarried and it was around and about her that this match-making discussion centered.

Roy Anderson—or “good old faithful Roy,” as he was sometimes affectionately called by those who knew and liked him best—had accompanied the Outdoor Girls on some of their very first adventures. He had an amiable disposition and a fund of good humor, which goes a long way toward explaining his general popularity.

To be sure, Mollie had never shown Roy any especial favor. But then, as a matter of fact, she was apt to treat all her would-be admirers with a good-natured indifference that effectually kept them at their distance. But she liked Roy and her friends had more or less taken it for granted that eventually these two would pair off.

Now, however, it was disconcerting to find all their pleasant deductions threatened by the appearance on the scene of Clem Field.

Clem was a dashing, attractive youth still in college and with money enough to make life pleasant for himself and his friends. Mollie's old girl friends admitted his good looks and charm, but they were jealous on Roy's account. It was hard to see "good old faithful Roy" left "standing at the post."

But now the trend of their thoughts was changed by Stella Sibley. The latter, a tall, good-looking young person, flung herself into a chair near the "married girls" and peered anxiously from the window.

"Sister Annie, Sister Annie, do you see a man?" murmured Grace, the while she munched happily on her sweets.

"I'm not looking for a man," retorted Stella, without turning her head. "Or, at least, not altogether."

"You're wondering why the rest of the crowd don't show up," said Betty. "They *are* terribly late, aren't they?"

Stella nodded.

"Probably Carolyn is holding them up. She's dreadfully pretty——"

"And she knows it," said Amy, with a wise nod of her head.

"I'll say she does," grinned Stella. "She takes about a year to dress and doesn't care who is kept waiting. Slightly wearing—if you have to catch a train or any little thing like that!"

"Carolyn's a dear, nevertheless." With a swish of short skirts Irene Moore joined them. Irene was short and inclined

to plumpness. Besides which she was very pretty herself in an impish, impudent way. "I won't have you saying mean things about our new soon-to-be Outdoor Girl, Stella Sibley, even if you *are* my best friend!"

"Oh, she makes a fine Outdoor Girl, once she gets through primping before the mirror," Stella admitted. "I'm fond of her myself. Still——"

"It may not be Carolyn's fault at all that they're late," suggested Betty peaceably. "How about the two others who are going to be initiated to-day——"

"The twins!" cried Irene, sparkling. "They *are* a sketch ——"

"And so exactly alike that you couldn't tell them apart if it were not that Lota has a freckle on the tip of her nose!" finished Stella, with a chuckle.

"From a distance, your hail is apt to sound something like this," said Irene, "'Hello, Meg or Lota. Which are you?'"

The "married" girls laughed.

"Must add considerable interest to your adventurings," said Betty.

"It does and they do," returned Irene, wrinkling her funny little nose in cheerful recollection. "One of them plays a trick on you, you know——"

"And they are always doing it," murmured Stella.

"And you don't know which to blame," finished Irene. "The result is, you blame both, or neither—and they get away with it."

From the porch, where she had gone to rest from her labors, accompanied by Roy and Clem, Mollie looked in at them.

“Here they come now,” she announced. “At least,” she modified, as every one ran out on the porch, “it looks like them. Three girls and two boys. But where did they get the good-looking car?”

“I think it belongs to one of the boys the twins are bringing with them,” Stella said, shading her eyes to watch the swift approach of the car.

“Evidently they know they’re late,” said Betty. “For they are surely breaking all speed laws——”

She broke off as Molly uttered a frightened exclamation.

“That moving van!” she cried. “The horses—why, I believe the horses are running away!”

“There’ll be a smash-up!” cried Roy hoarsely. With Clem at his heels, he dashed down into the street.

“Look out!” yelled the latter, waving wildly at the driver of the approaching car. “That van! Swerve to one side, can’t you, you idiot!”

The young fellow at the wheel evidently saw the danger—but too late. The girls felt sick as they stood, gasping, waiting for the crash.

CHAPTER II

THE CRASH

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From where the Outdoor Girls stood together on the porch it seemed inevitable that some one must be dreadfully hurt, perhaps killed, in the crash.

The moving van, with its runaway horses, dashed directly across the road just as the swiftly driven car reached the intersection.

With a grinding of brakes the roadster swerved swiftly to one side. There was a thud as the front fender of the car came into forceful contact with the rear of the moving van. The girls screamed as the machine, like a toy automobile, hesitated for a moment with two wheels raised high off the ground; then calmly, almost deliberately, ran off the road and turned over on its side!

Meanwhile, the moving van that had caused all the damage rushed blindly down the side road, the driver sawing at the reins and shouting wildly to the maddened horses.

"They're killed! They're killed!" cried the girls, and rushed down the road toward the overturned roadster.

Clem and Roy were there before them. The latter whirled about, looking rather white and shaken as the girls came up to him.

"It's all right. Don't get excited," he cried. "Nobody's hurt. They—they fell in a flower bed!"

This seemed like a fairy tale to the terrified girls, but the next moment they saw that it was true.

A large estate bordered that side of the road and this, in turn, was shut off from the highway by a hedge. Behind the hedge rhododendrons and peony bushes were massed in profusion. The roadster, checked in the turning over process by the hedge, had spilled its cargo into as soft and colorful a bed as one could wish!

There sat the victims of the accident, looking rather dazed and shaken-up, to be sure, but otherwise none the worse for their hair-raising adventure.

The two boys had already picked themselves up, rather ruefully stretching out arms and legs to make sure that no bones were broken. Now they turned to the girls. But the latter had recovered themselves, too, and refused to be helped.

"If we are going to be Outdoor Girls we've got to learn to look out for ourselves," the twins said, extricating themselves with some difficulty from the mass of bushes.

Carolyn Cooper put both hands to her golden, curly head and screamed.

"My hat! I've lost my hat!" she wailed. "Oh, somebody find my hat!"

"It was the latest Paris sports model, too!" cried Lota, clapping both hands to her heart in a comic gesture of despair. "Find it, some one! Hurry—before she dies of fright!"

"Humph!" snorted one of the new boys. "Lucky you didn't lose your head, Carolyn."

"I should say so, with you driving, Hal Duckworth!" retorted the fair-haired girl, with spirit. "Why don't you keep your eyes on the road?"

“With you beside me, how could I?” the lad retorted, with a grin.

“Gracious!” exclaimed Meg Bronson, a sturdy, forthright girl, with intelligent eyes and humorous mouth. “If Carolyn has that effect on you, Hal, I’ll see to it that next time I occupy the front seat!”

“It would be just the same,” said Hal gallantly, and everybody laughed at the look Meg threw him.

“You expect me to believe that?” she cried.

It was about this time that some one realized that, since there was no tragedy, introductions were in order. Carolyn made them with the tact and sunny smile that had already endeared her to the Outdoor Girls.

While the young people are busily engaged in meeting each other a moment will be taken to describe briefly some of the adventures of the Outdoor Girls up to the present time.

Their adventures began with the well-remembered hiking and camping trip told of in “The Outdoor Girls of Deepdale.”

From then on interesting experiences followed thick and fast, among other places, at Rainbow Lake, in Florida, and at Wild Rose Lodge. Then came that summer of glorious adventure in the saddle and, later, the thrilling vacation at Cape Cod where they had met and helped Sally Ann Bevins, the New England girl.

They remembered with pleasure the more recent trip along the coast of Cape Cod in Clem Field’s motor boat, the *Liberty*. It was during this adventurous cruise that they had met and befriended Carolyn Cooper and were successful in

restoring her to an uncle who, curiously enough, had his residence in Deepdale.

In the book directly preceding this, entitled "The Outdoor Girls at Spring Hill Farm," the young people had participated in a treasure hunt, though the thrilling adventure had started as a quiet and quite ordinary vacation on Spring Hill Farm.

During the course of these adventures, the original Outdoor Girls had dropped out, one by one. First there was Betty Nelson, their loved "Little Captain." Betty, as already mentioned, had married Allen Washburn, the young lawyer, and, as Mrs. Washburn, was gloriously happy.

Amy Blackford, another of the original quartette, had married Will Ford, brother of Grace Ford. And Grace was now Mrs. Frank Haley.

So, of the original number of Outdoor Girls only one remained unmarried—Mollie Billette, she of the dark eyes and quick tongue. And, from present appearances, the girls had every reason to believe that Mollie would soon follow in the trail her friends had blazed!

At the time of their first visit to Cape Cod, the girls had made the acquaintance of Stella Sibley and Irene Moore. These two jolly, decidedly worthwhile girls had later joined their club.

Now, at the time of the present story, three new members were about to be initiated, Carolyn Cooper and the Bronson twins, Meg and Lota. Meg's real name was Margaret, of course; but she had so long been known by the affectionate nickname that her friends were apt to forget that she had any other.

The Bronson girls were orphans. But they were fortunate in the possession of a guardian, Daniel Tower, who made up to them as far as he was able for the immeasurable loss of their parents. Tower was a lumberman, a fine, bluff old fellow with waving white hair, twinkling eyes, and a ruddy complexion. Perhaps it is sufficient to add that he was every bit as kind-hearted as he looked.

When the lumberman settled in Deepdale, Meg and Lota came on to join him. There they all met—and fell in love with—the Outdoor Girls and their club, with the result that they had finally been asked to join.

This brief explanation leads back to the point where the rapidly driven motor car had collided with the moving van, depositing its occupants in the midst of a flower bed.

“This is Hal Duckworth,” said Carolyn, introducing one of the new boys to the Outdoor Girls. “As you may already have gathered, he was at the wheel when this terrible thing happened. It’s a wonder we weren’t all killed.”

“It is!” Mollie agreed, as she and the other Outdoor Girls, married and single, acknowledged the introduction to Hal Duckworth.

“Still I think Mr. Duckworth was very clever to land you in a flower bed instead of a sand-bank,” chuckled Irene.

Hal Duckworth threw her a grateful glance.

“That’s the first kind word I’ve heard since I landed,” he said.

“‘Landed’ is right!” giggled Lota.

The second youth, Dick Blossom, was a bit harder to know than his friend and bosom chum, Hal Duckworth. He seemed rather shy with the girls. His smile was ready, but

his hands, big and bony, often got in his way to such an extent that, in sheer desperation, he would thrust them into his pockets and keep them there until necessity forced him to remove them from that safe sanctuary. In spite of his bashfulness, or perhaps because of it, the unmarried girls liked him immediately and the married girls felt a yearning to take him under their wing.

The introductions once accomplished, the boys turned their attention to the motor car. It, like the girls and boys, was uninjured, but the hedge and flower bed into which it had plunged were considerably damaged.

"We'd better go back to the house," Stella suggested. "Peters can bring our car down and haul this one out."

"Bright idea," said Hal Duckworth immediately. "I suppose Peters is the hired man?"

"Chauffeur," Stella corrected. "Come along, everybody. It's time we started our meeting."

As the young people, in hilarious spirits now, trailed along toward the house Betty and Amy, arm in arm, glanced back toward the scene of the wreck.

Mollie still lingered there; beside her were both Clem and Roy.

"I wonder if either has proposed?" murmured Amy, with apparent irrelevance. But her chum understood.

Betty chuckled.

"Probably both!" she said.

CHAPTER III

NEW MEMBERS

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As Amy and Betty sauntered happily up the road, leaving Mollie to follow with the two boys when she would, they were impressed anew with the beauty of Stella Sibley's new home.

The house stood on a small eminence with a velvet stretch of lawn sloping down to the road on one side and bounded on the other by a fringe of dense woodland. Spruce and fir trees stood out in handsome relief against the white of stucco and marble and here and there the smooth green of the lawn was broken by vivid splashes of color, flowers in well-tended flower beds.

"A month from now the whole place will be a riot of color," said Betty dreamily. "Isn't it nice that Stella can have such a lovely home?"

Amy nodded, and pointed toward the house.

"And if I'm not very much mistaken, there is Stella herself on the porch beckoning us to hurry," she said, with a smile. "Evidently she wants to get the party started."

In the house they found every one assembled. As they entered they were greeted by a burst of merry music. Meg and Lota were perched high upon one of the window seats made by a boxed-in radiator. Meg strummed on a banjo while Lota plucked merrily at the strings of a ukulele.

Stella slid across the polished floor to the grand piano, sought and found the right key and plunged into the melody of the popular ballad they were playing. Not to be outdone,

Carolyn and Irene immediately raised their voices in more or less melodious song.

They ended on a prolonged high note that sent Betty's hands to her ears in laughing protest and broke finally into a peal of laughter.

Stella whirled about on the piano bench. She saw Mollie standing in the doorway with Clem and Roy and, on a mischievous impulse, whirled around again and began to play the wedding march!

Irene put an end to that by sitting rather heavily on the keyboard. She swept Stella's hands from the piano with a reproachful look.

"I won't have Mollie teased!" she cried. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Stella Sibley! And in your own house too!"

However, Mollie betrayed no embarrassment at Stella's mischievous trick. To be sure, she frowned a little and those who had been watching closely—Betty and Grace and Amy, for instance—noticed that she flushed a little under the tan of her skin. But to the others she appeared merely brisk and businesslike, ready and eager to plunge at once into the serious part of the meeting.

"Here, Lota and Meg, put up those ukes——"

"Mine isn't a uke—it's a banjo," corrected Meg indignantly.

"Well, it makes just as much noise," returned Mollie, to a chorus of giggles. "Put it up, anyway, until after we have our business meeting."

"No one can become an Outdoor Girl who doesn't mind Mollie," added Stella sternly.