

**Augusta Huiell Seaman**



*The Case  
of the Calico  
Crab*

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# CHAPTER I

## THE EMPTY HOUSE

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It did not seem an afternoon for adventure. Not, at any rate, within the peaceful confines of Cedar Point. And yet it was to mark the beginning of the most exciting and mysterious events in the life of Stacy Newhall. It had been, up to this point, a very serene and uneventful life, as far as her own personal affairs were concerned. But a cold and brilliant late afternoon in January of 1942 was to change all that, though she didn't realize it at the moment.

Peeling off one thick, knitted glove, she extracted a key from her handbag and unlocked the padlock which secured the heavy iron gate. Opening the latter and closing it behind her, she relocked the padlock and slipped the key back into her bag. The padlock had felt like a lump of ice and she thankfully slipped her glove on again. Having passed the gate which was the only entrance to the long, five-mile estate on this ocean strip of land, she stood for a moment, trying to decide by which route she would make her way back home. There was the long, straight gravel road running down through the middle of this narrow strip of land between ocean and bay. Or, she might scramble across the dunes and trudge along the sand at the edge of the surf. The third course was a narrow path through the cedars and beach heather to the bay shore, which she could follow

south till she came to her own house a mile or more farther on.

“I’ll take the bay side, I guess,” she decided. “It’ll be warmer and more sheltered in among the pines and cedars, and the sunset will be lovely across the bay. Besides, I might meet Dad. He was going to be out looking for golden-eye ducks this afternoon, somewhere up this way. There’s an important-looking letter for him in the mail I got, and he might like to have it as soon as possible.”

So thinking, she turned toward a narrow, sandy path that wound through the cedars and beach heather to the southwest and the shores of the bay. There had been heavy northeast rain that morning—and for several days past—till a shift in the wind to the northwest had cleared the skies earlier in the afternoon. The usually shifting sand was still damp and firm beneath her feet. The normally gray-colored heather retained the bronze hue that rain always lent it and glowed redly in the afternoon sun. Its contrast to the deep blue sky above was breathtaking, as was the bright green of the pines and the burnished sheen of occasional holly bushes, with their brilliant red clumps of berries. The air smelt of pine and cedar and salt. Stacy drew in great breaths of it and was glad she was alive and in this particular spot.

“Though it’s a queer contrast to last winter at this time!” she thought, as she trudged along. “Then I was still at boarding-school, getting ready to graduate in June. And there were parties and plays, and studying for tests and examinations, and all the social goings-on I’d been used to. Dad and Mother were still quietly at home, busy with college

work. And Jim had just announced that he had enlisted in the aviation service. And now where is he? We don't even know—!" But she must try not to dwell on that, so she brushed the thought from her mind as she emerged from a thick cedar growth into a clearing near the shore of the bay.

In the middle of this clearing stood an old, rambling, gray-shingled house, two stories high and topped in the middle of its roof by a four-sided, glass-windowed cupola. No smoke rose from its big brick chimney, no curtains draped its gaping windows. The house was obviously empty. Stacy knew that it was the old, original house that had stood on the property when Mr. Drew, her father's friend, had bought this long strip of ocean land; and it was, up to that time, the only house on the five-mile stretch to the inlet. Mr. Drew had used it for a while as a hunting-lodge during the duck-shooting seasons, but had found it too uncomfortable and inconvenient. He had later built the pleasant, cosy house a mile or so farther south, and on somewhat higher ground. It was this latter house in which she and her family were now living. The old house, empty and abandoned, stood intact, and rather forlorn, looking out over the bay.

Stacy was about to skirt the side of it and get down to the shore, when she suddenly changed her mind and decided to go into the old house first and run up to the tower, from whence she could obtain a good view up and down the shore. Perhaps she could locate her father easier from that high point. The wind was rather piercing on the exposed bay shore, and if she should not see him, she had determined to keep within the shelter of the woods on the rest of her walk home. The house was supposed to be

locked, but she knew that she could get into it through the cellar door and so make her way upstairs. The padlock on the cellar door had long ago rusted and been broken, and she often got in this way to get the view out over the bay from the cupola. Loosening the rusted padlock, she pulled up the door and hurried down the steps into the semi-darkness of the cellar.

It seemed very dark after the brilliant glare of the sun outside. But Stacy could have found her way in it blindfolded; so she had soon scrambled up the cellar stairs to the main part of the house whose empty interior was lit by the setting sun through its west windows. It smelled musty, and the damp enclosed chill was almost more penetrating than the brisk wind outside. Hurrying up the main staircase to the second floor, she climbed the steep, ladder-like steps to the cupola and stood in the small enclosed space, lighted by its four windows looking toward the four points of the compass.

The brilliant glare of the sun on the water of the bay to the west stabbed her eyes with actual pain. She hastily turned from that direction and looked down the long, curving stretch of shore toward the south. The pointed cedars crowded close to the shore along almost its entire length, interspersed by reedy marsh patches at infrequent intervals. A narrow crust of ice was already beginning to form along the strip of sandy beach. Seagulls darted, swooped, and screamed raucously at each other, and far out toward the middle of the bay, Stacy could see a swimming flock of Canada wild geese—twenty or more. But there was no sign of her father.

“Probably he’s crouching down behind a bunch of reeds somewhere,” she thought, “with his binoculars glued to his eyes, waiting for his particular kind of duck to come swimming along. He certainly has a lot of patience—to sit still out there on a day like this, just to get a glimpse of some particular wild bird and see just what color the feathers are along its back or on the edge of its wings! I’d never try to write a book about shore birds in winter if I had to go to all that trouble! Guess I might as well give it up and go home through the woods. He may be way down the other side of our house, for all I know.”

She took one more glance through the south window before she turned to leave the little tower, resting her hand on the sill, as she leaned far to her right to get as full a view down the shore as possible. But the vista was empty of any human being. It was as she turned away to leave the cupola, that she was conscious of her hand on the window-ledge touching something that seemed unfamiliar. And on looking down at it, she saw a curious object resting on the sill.

“Now, that’s strange!” she muttered aloud, taking it up and examining it more closely. It was the upper shell of a small crab, of a species she had sometimes found along the ocean beach. Not more than three inches long and less than two in width, it was a delicate white shell, thickly dotted with bright pink spots. Her father had told her that it was commonly called the “calico-crab” and the meat of it was much in demand among sports fishermen, as it was a potent lure to the striped bass. The fisherman often paid as much as ten or twelve dollars a dozen for them in the bait-shops,

because the variety was not very plentiful. But there was a curious angle to her finding this empty shell just where it was.

“I was up here three days ago,” she continued to mutter, “and I’m simply certain that thing wasn’t on the window-sill here then—or anywhere else in the house! Some one has been in here since and left that shell here. But who could it be? The house is locked up—and I don’t think any one knows about that broken cellar door lock—except myself. I’ve never told any one that I get in here sometimes. And, anyhow, no one would be likely to carry such a thing as an old crab shell and leave it, except perhaps a child. And there aren’t any children that would be likely or able to get in here. It’s a puzzle!”

Stacy shivered, as a wholly unaccountable chill ran down her spine. The old, empty house had suddenly assumed a slightly sinister aspect for some reason that she could not define. It seemed foolish to base it on just the presence—unaccountable though it was—of this empty shell of a calico-crab. It was more that the crab shell indicated the past presence of some one else in the house—perhaps the person was in here even at this minute!

This was an alarming thought. Stacy stood perfectly still, listening—every sense keenly on the alert. The setting sun had almost reached the horizon, going down in a red blaze of glory through the low mist on the other shore. The little tower had darkened perceptibly. The wind was rising with the coming of darkness. Somewhere outside, a loose shutter banged at intervals. There were other creaks and groans in the woodwork of the house which, under ordinary

circumstances, she would scarcely have noticed. Now they assumed a menacing meaning.

“I mustn’t stay here another minute!” she decided, and scuttled down the ladder. Frantically wishing there were some door through which she could pass, instead of having to go through the dark cellar, she flew down the stairway, through the darkening hall to the kitchen, hesitating only a moment at the top of the cellar steps. Some one—something—might be in that black cellar, waiting to clutch at her as she felt her way toward the outer steps! In sheer panic, she had almost decided to break one of the kitchen windows and climb through, when the foolishness of her fears suddenly brought her to her senses.

“Of *course* there’s no one in here now!” she told herself. “If there had been, I’d have seen footprints around outside. But no, this must have happened before the northeast storm. If there were any footprints, they’ve been washed away by now. Oh, I’m just being a complete idiot!”

And with this pronouncement, she boldly marched down the cellar steps, felt her way along the wall till a turn in it brought her to the daylight still filtering down those outside steps, and leaped up them to the welcome outdoors. Never had it seemed *more* welcome than at that moment! Before leaving, she slammed down the cellar door and inserted the broken padlock through the hasp.

“If some one is getting in here who has no business to,” she decided, “I’m going to put a stop to it myself. Next time I drive to town, I’m going to get a new padlock and then nobody can get in but me. I’m sure Mr. Drew would be glad

to have me do it. Some one might get in there and—and burn the house down—or something!”

Before she left, she looked about carefully for footprints, but could find none but her own. Then she hurried around toward the side of the house facing the bay. A stiff, cold wind tore at her flying dark hair and penetrated even the thick warm ski-suit she was wearing. But the sky was wine-colored above the darkening waters of the bay, and a few small, fleecy pink-and-gold clouds marked the place of the sun’s disappearance. Stacy raced along the shore in the direction of her home, her fears rapidly disappearing with the distance she was putting between herself and the empty house.

“But just the same,” she told herself as she neared her own strip of beach, “there’s something awfully strange about that calico-crab being where it was—and I’m going to find out more about it!”

# CHAPTER II

## ENTER SPIKE TRUMAN AND THE DINGY TRUCK

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It was a curious combination of circumstances that had brought about the wintering of at least part of Stacy Newhall's family in the remote locality of Cedar Point. Up to this time, she had never spent the winter anywhere save in the college town in which they normally lived and later at her boarding-school. Her father was professor of ornithology at the college. Her mother was also an instructor in the institution, in the department of literature. Her older brother, Jim, had recently graduated from another college and immediately thereafter joined up with the aviation service. Beside these, there was one other member of the house, the eight-year-old English boy, Michael Crane, who had been evacuated from London a year before, and had miraculously reached them after some hairbreadth escapes from submarines in crossing the Atlantic. His parents had been lifelong friends of Mrs. Newhall, and she had offered to give Michael a place in her own home, "for the duration."

The Newhall family had spent the preceding summer at Cedar Point, as they had so frequently done in recent years. Mr. Drew, who had been a friend of Professor Newhall since their college years together in young manhood, had allowed them to use it, for a very moderate rent. He would have preferred them to pay no rent at all, since he was such a

close friend, but the Professor would not hear of this. Though Spencer Drew was a multimillionaire, and owner of one of the greatest chemical works in America, it made the Newhall family feel more independent to know they were paying something for the privilege of using this delightful spot as a summer home.

Cedar Point was an odd location, being the last five-mile tip of a narrow strip of land on a remote portion of the coast. It was seven miles south of the nearest coast town, the portion in between boasting only two or three fishponds and some baymen's shacks, and one little general store kept by a woman named Mrs. Dunne. When Mr. Drew had purchased the lower five miles for his own use, he had had a hurricane fence built across the narrow upper end, from ocean to bay, with a locked gate for entrance. No one possessed keys to this gate except himself, the Newhalls and the members of the Coast Guard Station down near its southern end. There was no other access to the property except by boat, on the bay side, or by slipping around the ends of the fence at low tide. As it was so far from town few, if any, ever tried it.

The Newhalls had returned from here to their college town, the previous autumn, when the vacation days were over, expecting to take up their college work as usual. Stacy was prepared to enter the Freshman year in college and her plans were all made, when suddenly there came a strange reversal of these plans. Her father abruptly announced one day, that instead of beginning on his teaching year, he would take his sabbatical year of freedom from college work, go back to Cedar Point and complete a book, which he had long planned to write and illustrate, on shore-bird life in

winter. Only Stacy seemed to be completely dumfounded in this upset to her plans.

“Why does he have to do it just *this* year?” she demanded of her mother. “I thought he was going to wait till next year, when you could take yours, and both have it together.” Mrs. Newhall seemed very calm about the whole thing.

“There are several reasons for it,” she told her daughter. “One is that he hasn’t been too well this past year or so—overworked and overtired. Even the summer did not rest him enough. He’ll give out completely, if he doesn’t have a long rest of several months more. Then, too, he wants to get that book done before more trouble breaks loose in this country. He feels certain we’re very near war. And if that happens, things may take such a turn that he won’t be able to finish it perhaps for many years. Then there’s Michael. He’s so frail and delicate still. I don’t think he was ever a strong child, and he’s been through an awful experience. He doesn’t seem to prosper in this inland air, but he made quite a bit of progress at the shore this summer. We think it might set him on his feet completely, to spend the rest of the year there.”

“Well, what about you—and me?” demanded Stacy. “Are Dad and Michael going down there all by themselves, and you and I going to stay here—or what?” Mrs. Newhall had hesitated just a moment over her answer.

“I’ve got to stay here, of course, and go on with my college work. But those two can’t be left alone at Cedar Point to shift for themselves—and that’s where I’m afraid you’ll have to make your sacrifice, my dear. I’m hoping that

you'll be willing to go with them and see to the running of things. We can get Mrs. Olafsen from the fishpounds to come in every day, as she does in summer. All you'll have to do is supervise things. I'll get down every weekend that I can. I know it means giving up your college year, but this is an emergency and we count on you to do your part. It may be more of an emergency than you think, so don't feel we are asking this of you lightly, will you?"

Stacy's lips had quivered, and her brown eyes had filled with tears of disappointment. It meant the complete abandonment of all her hopes and plans, and the suddenness of it all rather knocked her off her feet. For a moment she could not answer, and, in the interval, her mother added:

"It isn't going to be very easy for me either, dear, to carry on alone here, and I know just how you feel." Those few words had had the effect of bracing the young girl to a braver shouldering of her task. Giving her mother a spasmodic hug, she had exclaimed:

"It's all right, Mums—you can count on me! I *was* a bit knocked cold, just for a minute, but I think I'm going to like it, anyhow. I've always wanted to be at Cedar Point in the off seasons and see what they're like down by the ocean. Now the chance has come. Maybe I can take some of my college books along and do some studying by myself, down there. If I can tag along that way, I might even be able to make up two years' work in one, next year—who knows!"

So it had come to pass. Michael, Stacy, and her father had packed their belongings and returned in the family car to Cedar Point in October. Mrs. Newhall had declared that

she would not need the car and could come down by train and be met at the nearest town, at such times as she could get away. They would absolutely have to have it in that isolated spot.

The beautiful autumn months had drifted by, one gorgeous day after another. Stacy felt she had never realized the real charm of the fall and early winter season at the shore before—that it far exceeded anything the midsummer months had to offer. Her mother came down at frequent intervals, and often brought with her Stacy's closest friend, Roberta Colt, who would have been her roommate if she had entered college that year. She wrote to Roberta (or Bobs, as she was better known) every few days, and this, with the studying she did, the "birding" tramps she took with her father, and her supervision and entertainment of the delicate little English boy, Michael, fully occupied her days.

It had all been very peaceful, idyllic, remote from anything that savored of trouble till America went into the war, early in December. And even after that, the outward surface of their lives remained practically the same, but Stacy was conscious of a strange uneasiness beneath the apparent calm. To begin with, they had word that her beloved brother Jim had, some weeks before, resigned from the army aviation service, joined the American Volunteers, and was even now in the Far East, preparing to patrol the Burma Road. He had proved himself a remarkably skilful pilot, and had been gladly accepted in the Volunteer Corps. He had had to sail at once, without even time to bid his family good-by. They were all proud of Jim, but never did

they dare to confide to one another the secret fears they felt for his safety.

Stacy was conscious, also, that the coming of war had upset her father. He had never acknowledged it, but he seemed to have lost the calm of the earlier days and to be beset with a curious restlessness and uneasiness. Stacy thought it must be because of concern for his book. He complained frequently that the planes and blimps which so often now were passing overhead on their mysterious missions of war, disturbed the bird life of the coast, and were causing many of the wild ducks and geese to seek more inland regions. This was surely enough to cause him worry, but she sometimes wondered whether that were all. She felt there must certainly be something else, though she could not have explained why she thought so.

Thus matters stood on that late January afternoon, when she had decided to walk up to Mrs. Dunne's store and see whether any mail had been left there for them. Mrs. Dunne's own mail was brought down from the nearest town every day by her son, and she had offered to have the Newhall's brought with it, so that they might be saved the trouble of going so far for it. Stacy had been kept indoors so long by the heavy storm that was now past, that she was glad of the outdoor exercise. It was on her way back that she had had the curious experience in the empty old house.

As she ran around her own house toward the east side, to enter it by the door facing in that direction, she was somewhat surprised to see a dingy, tan-colored closed truck standing in the driveway. It was no local vehicle. She knew every one of those. And how it had got in through the locked

gate was a mystery. Probably its owner was inside the house, since there seemed to be no one in the driver's seat. She opened the door and went in directly to the living-room. No one was there except Michael, a pale, frail little light-haired boy, cuddled up in a big chair, reading by the open fire.

"Hello, dear!" said Stacy. "Are you all alone? Whose truck is that out there, do you know?" Michael looked up sleepily from his book.

"I didn't know there was a truck," he replied. "I didn't hear any come in. Yes, I'm all alone. Even Mrs. Olafsen went home a while ago. She'll be back before suppertime, she said. I knew you'd be in pretty soon—or Uncle Ben—so it was all right." He had been told to call Mr. and Mrs. Newhall "Uncle Ben" and "Aunt Eustacia," though they were no actual kin, and it seemed to cheer him in his homesickness to do so. Stacy looked nonplussed at his announcement and declared:

"Well, there's something very queer about how that truck got in through the gate and why it should be parked in front of this house. *Somebody* must be around who belongs to it and I'm going to find out who it is!" She wasted no more words but darted out of the house.

When she reached the truck, in the driveway, she walked all around it, trying to figure out where it had come from. It bore the state license tags, but the series of letters indicated that it belonged in some region far distant from its present locality. Curious to know what it contained, she went round to the rear and tried to open the closed doors. They proved to be securely locked, and she could not budge

them. She had not yet taken her hand from the handles of the door, when a voice behind her almost startled her out of her shoes:

“Better let those alone! You’re not supposed to snoop!” She whirled about indignantly—to behold a thin, tall, red-haired young man with dancing bright blue eyes and sandy eyelashes, and thick-lensed complicated looking glasses, grinning at her. He had evidently just come around a bend in the driveway.

“Why—*Spike Truman!*” gasped Stacy, recognizing her brother’s best friend and college roommate. “How on earth did you ever get in here?” Spike (who went by that name for no known reason except that his real one was Reginald) grinned at her impishly and made a mock-ceremonious bow.

“Good afternoon, Miss Eustacia Newhall!” he chuckled. “I’m certainly happy to see you—looking so fresh and blooming!”

“*Don’t* call me ‘Eustacia’!” she commanded petulantly. “You know how I hate it!” Stacy never had liked her full name—and Spike was a notorious tease.

“Okay—Stacy!” he countered. “How’s tricks? I guess you must be surprised to see me in these parts, but there’s a reason. By the way, I wouldn’t half mind going indoors and warming up a bit, if it’s all the same to you. I got kind of frozen, waiting around for somebody to come home. Where you-all been?” Stacy suddenly remembered her hospitable duties.

“Oh, I’m sorry! Do come along in, Spike. I just got back from a walk, and Dad’s out somewhere. Michael’s home, but he must have been asleep when you knocked. Even Mrs.