

Return to Gone-Away

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Return to Gone-Away

1

A Wish Come True

"You mean really? You mean honestly? Daddy, you mean you really, really, really *did*?" cried Portia Blake, hugging her father around the middle and at the same time jumping.

"You mean cross-your-heart truly?" demanded her brother Foster, grabbing his father's arm with both hands and at the same time jumping. Their dog Gulliver, a boxer, added to the general pandemonium by barking emphatically, and also, of course, jumping.

"Down, everybody, down!" protested Mr. Blake. "Your joy is too athletic; it jars my bones. Yes, I do mean really, I do mean honestly. Your mother and I signed the papers today, and the Villa Caprice is ours!"

"We'll have to think of a new name for that house right away," said Mrs. Blake.

"Ours! Ours! Ours!" yelled Portia, still jumping, but releasing her father. She was eleven and a half years old; her brother Foster was seven. The thing they wished for most in all the world had just happened, and this can be an unsettling experience. Portia now launched into a sort of swooping waltz; then she stopped abruptly and said: "I dibs the round room! May I, Mother? The little round room in the turret? Please?"

"I don't see why not," her mother said satisfactorily. "Daddy and I will have the big one with the fireplace. Think of all those rooms! We could each have two apiece if we wanted." She paused, looking rather dreamy and preoccupied. "Yellow, I think," she remarked. "Yellow, or a pale, pale green."

"Yellow what?" asked Foster.

"She means curtains," said Portia, who understood her mother very well.

The Villa Caprice, which was the cause of all their rejoicing, was a large elderly house a hundred miles away in the country, not far from the heavenly spot that Portia and her cousin, Julian Jarman, had discovered the summer before. This spot was called Gone-Away Lake, and as its name implied, a live lake that had once sparkled there had long ago simply disappeared, vanished mysteriously into the earth, leaving in its place a great stretch of swamp and bog. This was fascinating for exploring purposes: there were turtles to be found there, and curious mosses and wild orchids; there was a quaking bog that you could jump on, and another bog, a dangerous one, safely bridged now, called the Gulper, where Foster had nearly lost his life the summer before. There was the island Cranecrow, towered with evergreens and hiding a little house; but best of all, at the edge of the reedy, whispery expanse of swamp, was the settlement of fancy old ramshackle houses that the summer people had built there long, long ago when Gone-Away was a true lake. Nearly all the houses were broken and abandoned; only two people lived there now: old Mrs. Minnehaha Cheever and her distinguished brother, Mr. Pindar Payton, who had returned, after many years, to live out their lives in the place

they had loved as children. They were an interesting, eccentric pair who liked and enjoyed children, and children in turn liked and enjoyed them.

The Villa Caprice, the Blakes' new possession, was set a short distance beyond Gone-Away, surrounded by woods and a tangle of vine-woven hedges. It had belonged, many years before, to a strong-minded lady of wealth named Mrs. Brace-Gideon, who had perished in the San Francisco earthquake of 1906. She had left no survivors, no one had ever claimed the house, and until the summer before, when the children had crept in to explore it, nobody had entered it in more than fifty years! Everything in the house, except for the velvet shawls of dust that covered every surface, was just exactly as Mrs. Brace-Gideon had left it. Rooms and rooms to be explored! Cupboards and cupboards to look into! Hundreds of books to be examined! And all of this now belonged to the Blakes. No wonder they were overjoyed.

"Of course it's as ugly as a horned toad," said Mrs. Blake. "But so solidly built and so comfortable; and I'll simply force it to be pretty inside!"

"And think of the grounds," her husband said. "The old orchard, the fine trees—"

"Oh, I can't *wait*," cried Portia, beginning to swoop again.

"Yikes, and that suit of armor on the landing," said Foster, remembering. "When I get there, I'm going to try it on." Then he said: "But I think we should get another dog for that house;

it's too big for just one. And maybe a cat? And maybe a horse, or two horses?"

"And maybe a wallaby and maybe an anteater," his father said. "First things first, Foster; wait till we move in."

"Oh, there's such an enormous amount to be *done*," moaned Mrs. Blake. "It's staggering to contemplate." But though she moaned, she looked as happy as a lark; interested and alert, the way women usually look when they are thinking of fixing up a house. "Perhaps red," she said.

"Curtains?" Foster asked.

"Linoleum," replied his mother.

Mr. Blake, however, seemed suddenly rather solemn. "I wonder about the plumbing," he said thoughtfully. "Great Scott, the pipes are probably rusted through; we'll have to have all new ones. And of course there's no electricity. No phone. No refrigeration. Maybe it isn't such a bargain after all."

"Oh, Paul, we got it for a song!" said Mrs. Blake. "*Even* with the pipes, and *even* with all the cleaning and painting, and ripping off that awful porch, it will still be a bargain! And the electricity can wait. We'll do with lamps and candles for the present."

"When can we go and see it, Mother? How soon, now that it's ours?" begged Portia. "Promise not to go without us the first time, will you? Please? Please?"

"Please?" echoed Foster.

"We thought we'd all go up together during your spring vacation," their mother told them. "Aunt Hilda and Uncle Jake said they'd be glad to have us, and I know they meant it."

"And spring vacation's only two weeks off!" Foster exulted. "Oh, man! Oh, brother! Oh, hot dog!"

"Oh, I can't *wait*," groaned Portia.

But of course she had to wait, and though the days ground by deliberately like the cars of a slow freight, they were over at last, and the Blake family set out on their journey to claim their new old house.

They went by train, as they did every year (Gulliver was boarded at the vet's), but never before had they gone so early in the season. It was only the middle of March, and the trees were leafless. The winter had been severe; the country that sped by the windows looked chastened and bare, and the sky was a cold gray; crows speckled it here and there. In some of the dun-colored fields there were still old rags of snow.

"It's not what I'd call a propitious day," said Mr. Blake.

But nothing could dampen the spirits of the family. To them, train travel in itself was a kind of festivity, and to Portia and Foster, at least, food tasted better in a dining car than anywhere else in the world.

"And it certainly ought to," complained their father, frowning at the menu. "Great Scott, at these prices we should be ordering stuffed ortolans, or nightingales' tongues, or braised papyrus

roots from the Nile Delta instead of ham-and-eggs and fried potatoes."

"And a club sandwich for me," Portia reminded him. When it came, she ate every single thing on the plate, including the pickle, the olive, the rather wan lettuce leaf, and left only the two frilled toothpicks that had held the sandwich together. Those Foster put in his pocket. "I can use them for something sometime, but I don't know what yet," he explained.

It was not so very long after lunch—an hour or two—before the train slowed down, coasted on for a bit, and stopped with a clatter at the Creston Station, where the Jarmans always met them.

And there they were, all of them, smiling and calling: big Uncle Jake with his big mustache, pretty Aunt Hilda hurrying forward, and Julian, their son, who was Foster's idol and Portia's best friend, even though he was her cousin and a boy besides.

There was a commotion of greetings and embraces. "Julian, you've grown a year's worth," said Mr. Blake.

Julian would soon be thirteen: a tall, skinny boy with orange-red crew-cut hair, freckles, glasses, and large eager-looking front teeth. One would not have guessed from his appearance that he was his school's best athlete, wonderfully coordinated. In addition to his skill at sports, he was of a scientific turn of mind, and an ardent amateur naturalist. It was his pursuit of an uncommon butterfly the summer before that had led him and Portia into the great swamp of Gone-Away, and indirectly to

the battered resort houses where they had first made the acquaintance of Mrs. Cheever and her brother.

"How are they? Aunt Minnehaha and Uncle Pin?" was the first question Portia asked.

"They're O.K., they're fine," Julian said. "You should see Uncle Pin on ice skates! He's a wizard!"

Uncle Jake, in the lead, drew up beside a blue station wagon and opened the door.

"You have a new car!" exclaimed Portia accusingly. She had been very fond of the old one, which she had known since her babyhood.

"We had to," Uncle Jake said. "The other one got arthritis."

"*Car*-thritis, you mean," corrected Julian, who was partial to puns.

"Anyway, it's only new from our point of view, not from the dealer's," Uncle Jake said. "It was already three years old when we bought it."

The station wagon proved to be very comfortable and more spacious than the old car. A pair of ice skates, a box of dog biscuit, one mitten, and some library books lent a homely air to the interior.

"It *smells* just like the old one," Foster remarked approvingly. "I mean it smells exciting."

They drove through Creston and out into open country; then through the village of Attica, where Uncle Jake's newspaper,

The Attica Eagle, was published; and on again through countryside: bare, leafless, neutral-colored.

"Winter's never going to end." Portia sighed.

"I have news for you: it's ended already," Julian told her. "Tonight you'll hear the peepers, and you'll know. And down near the brook the skunk cabbages are poking out their snouts already. Those things don't just kid around; they mean *spring!*"

The road lay between woods; presently they came to a driveway marked by the Jarmans' mailbox, and they turned in.

"Almost there!" cried Foster. "I'm hungry." Feeling happy often made him hungry; he had noticed it before.

"Well, I had a sort of premonition," Aunt Hilda said. "So I made some peanut-butter cookies and a batch of brownies and an angel cake."

"Man!" said Foster, from his heart.

They rounded a bend in the drive, and there in the midst of its winter lawns was the Jarmans' pleasant house.

It was wonderful to be there again, the Blakes thought. Indoors, a fire was snapping in the living-room fireplace. The dog Katy (who was Gulliver's mother) rushed to greet them, pleasure showing in her charcoal-colored face. Othello, another of her sons, took the cue from his mother and demonstrated his enthusiasm by a volley of friendly barks. Thistle, the family cat, was another story. He came into the room with a who-cares look on his face, strolled off under the piano, skirted the bookcase, disappeared under the couch for a while, and then,

only inadvertently it seemed, fetched up by Portia, rubbing his sides against her legs and beginning to purr.

"Oh, you old fraud," Portia scolded, and she picked up the big warm cat and cuddled him in her arms. "Oh, you old faker. Listen to him purr, Mother," she said. "He sounds just like the Frigidaire at home."

Foster was hopping first on one foot, then on the other, in front of Aunt Hilda. It was his peculiar way of reminding her about the cookies and brownies; more polite, he thought, than asking right out loud. It worked, too.

"Yes, of course," said Aunt Hilda, standing up. "Come along, everyone who's hungry. Refreshments in the kitchen!"

Portia, lagging behind the others, said to Julian: "Do you think it's too late to go and see them?"

"Aunt Minnehaha and Uncle Pin? No, it's still a long way off till supper. Let's just eat a little something to keep our strength up, and then we'll go."

Julian's idea of a little something to keep his strength up was as many brownies and cookies as he could put away before his mother said "No!" Portia was nearly as bad. But the process did not take very long after all, and soon, well-muffled against the raw March wind, they were trudging along the familiar route to Gone-Away.

2

Return to Gone-Away

As they came up over the ridge in the woods, they had their first glimpse of Gone-Away Lake; Portia's first glimpse since September.

"Half a year!" she exclaimed. "Jule, do you realize it's *half a year* since I've been here?"

The place looked different, too. In the great swamp the old reeds had died down; just visible among them were the new ones rising: millions of little light green spears. But Cranecrow Island appeared the same, with its somber evergreens, and across the swamp the battered resort houses with their tipsy porches and tottering turrets seemed no more damaged than they had in the fall. The strange scene, which some people might have found desolate, was to Portia and Julian the most welcome sight in the world.

"And look, there's the dear, beautiful, glorious Machine!" cried Portia.

The Machine, lofty and narrow, was an ancient Franklin automobile, far older than Portia and Julian; quite a lot older even than their parents. It had large staring headlights that gave it an expression of alarm, a roof like the roof of a carriage, and a great deal of ornamental brass, highly polished. This strange vehicle was Mr. Pindar Payton's pride and joy, and to ride in it, as it rattled and snorted and jiggled and chugged, was

a most exhilarating experience, as the children knew. Now, however, it stood haughty and silent in Mr. Payton's front yard.

"And there's Uncle Pin coming out of the house!" shouted Portia, breaking into a gallop. "Uncle *Pin!* Uncle *Pin!* Here I am back again!"

She leaped like an antelope down the slope and then along the curving path that circled the swamp and at last, breathless, flung herself into Mr. Payton's outstretched arms. Behind her came Julian, rattling and clanking. He always clanked when he ran, being prudently equipped on any outing with a camera, field glasses, a collecting case (and sometimes a canteen and a lunch box), all hung around his neck on straps. "Because you never know," he said. "This might be the one time I'd see a prothonotary warbler or find a rare specimen of something or other."

When Portia kissed Mr. Payton, it was like kissing a basket because of his beard.

"Let me look at you, my dear," he said, putting his hands on her shoulders and holding her a little away, to see her better. "By Jupiter, you're a sight for sore eyes!"

"So are you, Uncle Pin," Portia said. She loved the way he looked: his blue eyes under strong black brows, his snow-white beard and mustache; his shabby but distinguished clothes, especially the broad-brimmed hat he always wore. She thought it had a dashing air.

"Well, by Jove!" Mr. Payton exclaimed. "This calls for a celebration indeed. Let us go at once to my sister's house and see what she can provide in the way of celebration material."

He led the way. Portia skipped behind him along the narrow well-known path, and Julian, clanking faintly, brought up the rear. To the right lay the broad swamp, shorn by winter of its reeds; to the left stood the old houses in their neglected yards. They were a tatterdemalion lot, with shutters hanging from hinges, front steps skewed crooked, porches sagging: the Delaney house, the Vogelhart house, the Tuckertown house (where the children had a clubroom in the attic), and all the others, including the one that had ceased even to be a house. The Castle Castle, named for the family who had built it, had collapsed years before in a bad storm and lay now in a great heap of rubble, all scrawled over with a withered vine.

"Oh, it's so beautiful here!" Portia sighed. "It's so heavenly and beautiful to be back."

At the extreme end of the raggedy row was the house Mrs. Cheever had chosen to live in, somewhat more respectable looking than the others. As they approached it, there was a sound of barking from within. Portia knew that must be Tarrigo, still another of Katy's children.

The door flew open and out came Mrs. Cheever, so delighted that she almost danced as she hurried forward on the path to meet them. Tarrigo bounced about her, barking.



"How happy I am to see you!" exclaimed the old lady, embracing Portia. "How wonderful to have you back!"

She looked as though she had stepped straight out of a much earlier era, for she wore only those clothes that had been stored in her family's house—the Big House, as they called it—when they had left it more than fifty years before. "Why buy new ones?" she had said. "The material is superior, and I never got fat, thank fortune, so everything still fits: my clothes, my mother's, my sisters—why, I have enough to last me till I die!" For this reason Mrs. Cheever's dresses were always long and sweeping, all her hats were large and queer, and her blouses had high collars made of lace, with little stiffenings of bone.

Today she wore a skirt of scarlet wool and a blouse with leg-of-mutton sleeves.

"You have no coat, Aunt Minnehaha; you'll catch cold!" Portia said.

"Nonsense. People don't catch cold when they are happy, and I am very, very happy. Yes, indeed I am. Silence, Tarrigo, silence!"

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