

THE MYSTERY
AT DARK CEDARS

EDITH LAVELL

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Title: The Mystery at Dark Cedars

Author: Edith Lavell

Release Date: August 28, 2013 [eBook #43582]

Language: English

Character set encoding: UTF-8

***START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MYSTERY AT
DARK CEDARS***

E-text prepared by Stephen Hutcheson, Dave Morgan,
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(<http://www.pgdp.net>)

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The MARY LOU Series

The Mystery at Dark Cedars

By
EDITH LAVELL

Author's Logo

A. L. BURT COMPANY
Publishers
NEW YORK CHICAGO

The MARY LOU Series
by
EDITH LAVELL

The Mystery at Dark Cedars
[The Mystery of the Fires](#)
[The Mystery of the Secret Band](#)

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To My Daughter
JEANNE MARIE LAVELL

Who loves mystery stories

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Characters

MARY LOUISE GAY a girl detective.
JANE PATTERSON her chum.
MISS MATTIE GRANT spinster at Dark Cedars.
ELSIE GRANT orphan, niece of Miss Grant, living at Dark Cedars.
MRS. GRACE GRANT sister-in-law to Miss Grant.
family of Mrs. Grace Grant.
 JOHN GRANT middle-aged bachelor
 HARRY GRANT younger bachelor
 ELLEN GRANT PEARSON married daughter
 CORINNE PEARSON granddaughter, girl of nineteen
HANNAH AND WILLIAM GROBEN servants at Dark Cedars.
MR. GAY, MRS. GAY, JOSEPH (Freckles) GAY family of Mary Louise.
MAX MILLER, NORMAN WILDER, HOPE DORSEY, BERNICE TRACEY friends of
 Mary Louise.
MRS. ABRAHAM LINCOLN JONES a colored woman.
MIRA a gypsy fortune teller.
SILKY Mary Louise's dog.

CHAPTER I

The House of Mystery

“Be quiet, Silky! What’s the matter with you? You don’t usually bark like common dogs over nothing!”

The brown spaniel stopped under a maple tree and wagged his tail forlornly, looking pleadingly into his mistress’s eyes, as if he were trying to tell her that he wasn’t just making a fuss over nothing.

Mary Louise Gay stooped over and patted his head. She was a pretty girl of sixteen, with dark hair and lovely brown eyes and long lashes that would make an actress envious.

“I see what Silky means!” cried her companion, Jane Patterson who lived next door to Mary Louise and was her inseparable chum. “Look, Mary Lou! Up in the tree. A kitten!”

Both girls gazed up at the leafy branches overhead and spied a tiny black kitten crying piteously. It had climbed up and couldn’t get down.

“I’ll get it,” said Mary Louise.

She swung herself lightly to the lowest branch, chinned herself, and climbed the tree. In another minute she had rescued the kitten with her hands.

“Stretch on your tiptoes, Jane,” she called to her chum, “and see if I can hand it down to you.”

The other girl, who was much shorter and stockier than Mary Louise, did as she was told, but the distance was too great.

“I suppose I’ll have to climb down with her in one hand,” concluded Mary

Louise. "That's not so easy."

"Drop her over to that branch you swung up by, and I'll get her from there," suggested Jane.

A moment later Mary Louise was at her chum's side, stroking the little black kitten, now purring contentedly in Jane's arms.

"I wonder whose it is," she remarked. "There isn't any house near——"

"Except old Miss Grant's."

Both girls turned and looked at the hill which rose at the right of the lonely road on which they had been walking. The house, a large drab plaster building, was barely visible through the dark cedars that surrounded it on all sides. A high, thick hedge, taller than an average-sized man, gave the place an even greater aspect of gloominess and seclusion.

"Maybe it is Miss Grant's kitten," suggested Jane. "Old maids are supposed to like cats, you know."

Mary Louise's brown eyes sparkled with anticipation.

"I hope it is!" she exclaimed. "And then we'll get a look at the inside of that house. Because everybody says it's supposed to be haunted. Our colored laundress's little girl was walking past it one evening about dusk, and she heard the most terrible moan. She claims that two eyes, without any head or body, looked out through the hedge at her. She dropped her bundle and ran as fast as she could for home."

"You don't really believe there is anything, do you, Mary Lou?"

"I don't know. There must be something queer about it."

"Maybe there's a crazy woman shut up in the tower."

"You've been reading *Jane Eyre*, haven't you, Jane? But there isn't any tower on the Grant house."

"Well, I guess Miss Grant is crazy enough herself. She dresses in styles of forty

years ago. Did you ever see her?”

“Yes, I’ve had a glimpse of her once or twice when I walked past here. She looks like the picture of the old maid on the old-maid cards. It must be awful for that girl who lives with her.”

“What girl?” inquired Jane.

“A niece, I believe. She must be about our age. Her father and mother both died, so she has to live with Miss Grant. They say the old lady treats her terribly—much worse than the two old servants she keeps.”

While this conversation was going on, the two girls, followed by Silky, were walking slowly up the hill towards the big hedge which surrounded the Grant place. Once inside the yard, it was almost like being in a deep, thick woods. Cedar trees completely enclosed the house and grew thick on both sides of the narrow path leading from the gate to the porch. In spite of the fact that it was broad daylight, Jane found herself shuddering. But Mary Louise seemed delighted with the strange, gloomy atmosphere.

“Doesn’t this girl go to high school?” asked Jane. “If she’s about our age——”

“I don’t believe so. I never saw her there.”

They stopped when they reached the steps of the porch and looked about with curiosity. It certainly was a run-down place. Boards were broken in the steps, and pieces of plaster had crumbled from the outer wall. The grayish-colored ivy which grew over the house seemed to emphasize its aspect of the past.

“Isn’t Miss Grant supposed to be rich?” whispered Jane incredulously. “It doesn’t look like it!”

“They say she’s a miser. Hoards every cent she can get.” Mary Louise smiled. “I believe I’ll tell Daddy to report her for hoarding. She deserves it!”

“Better wait and find out whether she really is rich, hadn’t you?” returned Jane. “Your father’s a busy man.”

Mary Louise nodded and looked at her dog.

“You lie down, Silky,” she commanded, “and wait here for us. Miss Grant probably wouldn’t like you. She might think you’d hurt Pussy.” She smiled indulgently. “She doesn’t know you belong to the Dog Scouts and do a kind act every day—like rescuing cats in distress!”

The spaniel obeyed, and the two girls mounted the rickety steps of the porch. Although it was late in June, the door was closed tightly, and they had to pull a rusty knocker to let the people inside know that they were there.

It was some minutes before there was any reply.

A sad-faced girl in an old-fashioned purple calico dress finally opened the door and stared at them with big gray eyes. The length of her dress, the way her blond hair was pulled back and pinned into a tight knot, made her seem much older than her visitors.

A suggestion of a smile crossed her face at the sight of the girls’ pleasant faces, and for a second she looked almost pretty.

“Is this your kitten?” asked Mary Louise. “We rescued it from a tree down the road.”

The girl nodded.

“Yes. It belongs to my aunt Mattie. Come in, and I’ll call her.”

The girls stepped into the dark square hall and looked about them. The inside of the house was even more forbidding than the outside. The ceilings were high and the wall paper dark. All the shutters were drawn, as if there were poison in the June sunlight. For no reason at all that they could see, the old stairs suddenly creaked.

Jane shuddered visibly, and the girl in the purple dress smiled.

“Don’t mind the queer noises,” she said. “Nothing ever happens in daytime.”

“Then something does happen after dark?” questioned Mary Louise eagerly.

“Oh, yes. Why, only two nights ago——”

“What’s this? What’s this?” demanded the sharp, high voice of an old woman. “What are you standing there talking about, Elsie? With all those peaches waiting to be pared!”

All eyes turned naturally towards the old staircase, from which the sound of the voice was coming. Miss Grant slowly descended, holding her hand on her right side and grunting to herself as if the act of walking were painful to her. She was a woman of at least sixty-five, thin and wrinkled, but with little sharp black beady eyes that seemed to peer into everything suspiciously, as if she believed the whole world evil. She was wearing an old-fashioned black dress, and a dark shawl about her shoulders.

“These girls have found your kitten, Aunt Mattie,” Elsie informed her. “They rescued her from a tree.”

The black eyes softened, and the old woman came towards the girls.

“My precious little Puffy!” she exclaimed, as one might talk to a baby. Then her tone abruptly became harsh again as she turned to her niece.

“Go back to your work, Elsie!” she ordered gruffly. “I’ll attend to this!”

Without any reply the girl slunk away to the kitchen, and Miss Grant took the kitten from Jane.

“Tell me what happened to my poor little pet,” she said.

Briefly Jane repeated the story, with an emphasis upon Mary Louise’s prowess in climbing trees.

Apparently the old lady was touched.

“I must say that was good of you,” she remarked. “Not a bit like what most young people nowadays would do! All they seem to enjoy is torturing poor helpless creatures!”

She put the kitten down on the floor and turned towards the stairs.

“You wait!” she commanded the girls, “I’m going to get you a reward for this!”

“Oh, no, Miss Grant!” they both protested instantly, and Mary Louise went on to explain that they were Girl Scouts and never accepted money for good turns. (Even Silky knows better than that, she added to herself. He won’t expect a bone for rescuing Pussy—only a pat on the head!)

“You really mean that?” demanded Miss Grant, in obvious relief. She would save two cents! She had meant to give each girl a whole penny!

“Tell me your names, then,” she continued, “and where you live. I might want to call on you for help sometime. I can’t trust my niece as far as my nose, and my servants are both old.” Mary Louise chuckled. So there was a mystery in this house! A lurking danger that Miss Grant and her niece both feared! And she and Jane were being drawn into it.

“Jane Patterson and Mary Louise Gay,” she replied. “We live over in Riverside, next to the high school. You can get us on the phone.”

“I haven’t a telephone. Too expensive. Besides, if I had one, I couldn’t tell what devilry Elsie might be up to.... No, I don’t hold with these modern inventions.”

“Well, you could send Elsie for us if you need any help,” suggested Jane. “It’s only a little over a mile. You see, Mary Louise’s father is a detective on the police force, and we’re both interested in mysteries.”

“I’m not thinking of any mystery,” snapped Miss Grant. “What I’m thinking of is *facts*. One fact is that I’ve got a pack of scheming relations who are trying to send me off to the hospital for an operation while they loot my house.”

Mary Louise’s forehead wrinkled in surprise.

“I didn’t know you had any relations besides your niece,” she said.

“Certainly I have. Haven’t you ever heard of the Grants in Riverside? Mrs. Grace Grant—a woman about my age? She has two grown sons and a married daughter. Well, they spent all their money, and now they want mine. But they’re not going to get it!”

Her hand went to her side again, as if she were in pain, and Mary Louise decided it was time for them to go.

“Well, good-bye, Miss Grant,” she said. “And don’t forget to call on us if you want help.”

It was a relief to be out in the bright sunlight again, away from the gloom and the decay of that ugly house. Mary Louise took a deep breath and whistled for Silky. He was waiting at the foot of the porch steps.

As they walked down the path they were startled by a rustle in one of the cedar trees. Silky perked up his ears and went to investigate the disturbance. In another moment a head peered cautiously through the branches. It was Elsie Grant.

“Will you come over here and talk to me a little while?” she whispered, as if she were afraid of being caught. “I never see any girls my own age—and—you look so nice!”

Both Mary Louise and Jane were touched by the loneliness of this poor unhappy orphan. They went gladly to her side.

“Don’t you go to school?” asked Mary Louise. “I mean—when it isn’t vacation time?”

The girl shook her head.

“That must be awful!” exclaimed Jane. “Sometimes I hate school, but I’d certainly hate worse never to go. How old are you?”

“I’m only fifteen,” replied Elsie. “But it seems as if I were fifty. I mean—the time is so long. Yet I’ve really only lived here with Aunt Mattie two years.”

“And didn’t you ever go to school?” questioned Mary Louise. She couldn’t believe that, for the girl spoke beautiful English.

“Oh, yes—before I came here. I was just ready to enter high school when mother died—only a couple of months after my father was killed in an accident. He was Aunt Mattie’s youngest brother. And he didn’t leave any money, so I had to come and live with her.”

“But I can’t see why she doesn’t send you to school,” protested Jane. “It’s a public high school. It wouldn’t cost her anything.”

“Yes, it would, because I haven’t any clothes except these old things of hers. I can’t go anywhere—I’m too ashamed.”

Mary Louise’s eyes gleamed with indignation.

“That’s terrible!” she cried. “We can report her—”

Elsie shook her head.

“No, you couldn’t. Because she feeds me well enough and gives me clothing that is clean, and warm enough in winter. No, there isn’t a thing anybody can do. Except wait until I’m old enough to work in somebody’s kitchen.”

“No!” protested Jane.

“But I thought if I could just see you two girls once in a while and talk to you, life wouldn’t seem so bad. If I could call you by your first names——”

“Of course you can,” Mary Louise assured her, and she told Elsie their names. “We’ll come over often. And I don’t believe your aunt will object, because she seems to like us.”

“She loves that kitten,” explained Elsie. “It’s the only thing in the world she does love, besides money.”

“She mentioned her money,” remarked Jane, “and told us that she believed her relatives were trying to get it away from her.”

“By the way,” said Mary Louise, “you started to tell us about something that happened here two nights ago. Remember? What was it?”

Elsie shivered, as though the memory of it were still painful to her.

“I sleep up in the attic, all by myself. And I hear the most awful noises all night. I’m always scared to death to go to bed.”

“Don’t the servants sleep there too?” asked Mary Louise. She was anxious to get her facts straight from the beginning.

“No. They sleep on the second floor, in a room over the kitchen. There are just

two of them—an old married couple named Hannah and William Groben.

“Well, night before last I heard more distinct noises than ever. First I thought it was one of the trees near my window, and I nerved myself to get out of bed and look out. And what do you think I saw?”

“A ghost?” whispered Jane, in awe.

“No, I don’t think so. I believe it was a human being. Anyway, all I saw was two bright eyes peering in at the window!”

“What did you do?” demanded Mary Louise breathlessly. “Scream?”

“No, I didn’t. Once before I screamed, and Aunt Mattie had William investigate everything, and when he found nobody I was punished for my foolishness. I had to eat bread and water for two days. And it taught me a lesson. I never screamed again.”

“Then what happened?”

“I think whoever it was climbed from the tree into the attic storeroom window and went through an old trunk in there. I heard a little noise, but I couldn’t tell whether it was only the wind or not. Anyway, nothing was known about it till yesterday, when Aunt Mattie went up to look for something in her trunk.”

“Did you tell her then?”

“I tried to. But she wouldn’t listen. She accused me of going through her trunk. But I wasn’t punished, because nothing was stolen.”

“Then it couldn’t have been a robber,” said Mary Louise. “Or something would have been taken. Wasn’t there anything else in the house missing?”

“Not a thing! Hannah even counted the silver and found it was all there.”

“How does Hannah account for it? Or does she think, like your aunt, that you did it?” questioned Mary Louise.

“Hannah says it was ‘spirits.’ She says the spirits can’t rest as long as their old things are around. She wants Aunt Mattie to burn or give away all the old

clothing in the house. She says dead people's clothes are possessed."

Jane let out a peal of laughter, but Mary Louise warned her to be quiet. "We mustn't get Elsie into trouble," she explained.

"Was that the only time anything like that ever happened?" asked Jane.

"No. Once, earlier in the spring, when Hannah and William were away at some lodge supper, their room was entered and searched. I was blamed and punished then, though nothing was missing that time, either. But the awful part of it is: I expect it to happen again every night. Every time the wind howls or a branch beats against a windowpane, I'm sure they're coming again—whoever they are. And—I'm afraid!"

"Something's got to be done!" announced Mary Louise, with determination. "I'm not my father's daughter if I allow a mysterious outrage like this to go on." She pressed Elsie's hand. "You can count on us," she concluded. "We'll be back to see you tomorrow!"

CHAPTER II

The Robbery

The house in which Mary Louise's family lived was as different from the Grants' as day is from night. It was painted white, and its smooth green lawn was dotted here and there with bright flower beds. Modern, airy, and filled with sunshine, the house itself looked like the home of a happy family, which the Gays were—as their name implied.

Mary Louise's young brother—always called “Freckles”—was setting the breakfast table when she came downstairs the morning after her visit to Dark Cedars. It was Mary Louise's task to put the bedding to air while her mother cooked breakfast. Mrs. Gay did not keep a maid, and both children did their share of the work.

As they sat down to breakfast Mary Louise could not help contrasting her life with poor Elsie Grant's. Thinking how different, how cheerful everything was here—though of course it was never quite the same when her father was away on a case, as so happened at the present time. Mary Louise wanted to do something to help Elsie, besides just visiting her. She had a sudden inspiration.

“I have a lot of clothes, haven't I, Mother?” she inquired as she spread marmalade on her toast.

Mrs. Gay smiled. She was a pretty woman, with the same dark hair and dark eyes as her daughter.

“I wouldn't say that, dear,” she replied. “I think you have enough. But if there is something you specially want, I guess you can have it. Is that why you ask?”

“No,” replied Mary Louise laughingly. “It's just the other way around. Instead of buying more, what I want to do is to give some away. A couple of dresses,

perhaps, and some lingerie. And a pair of slippers.”

Mrs. Gay nodded approvingly. Being both a neat housekeeper and a charitable woman, she loved to clear things out and, if possible, give them to someone who could use them.

“Yes,” she said. “I was thinking of making up a package to send to the Salvation Army today. That old blue sweater of yours could go, and the red woolen dress _____”

“No! No!” interrupted Mary Louise. “I didn’t mean things like that, Mother. I want to give away a couple of nice dresses. Like my green flowered silk, for instance, and my pink linen. May I?”

“Why, Mary Louise! I thought you especially liked those dresses. What’s the matter with them?”

“Nothing. I do like them a lot. That’s why I chose them. I want to give them to a girl who hasn’t had a new dress for over two years.”

“Who is she?” asked Mrs. Gay sympathetically.

“A niece of old Miss Grant. You know—that queer old maid who lives at Dark Cedars. About a mile out of town.”

Her mother nodded.

“Yes, I know where you mean, dear. But that woman is reputed to be rich—much better off than we are. I can’t understand——”

“Of course you can’t, Mother, unless you see poor Elsie Grant. She’s about my age—a year younger, to be exact—and she’s an orphan. Two years ago, when her mother died, she came to live with Miss Grant because she hadn’t anywhere to go and no money. And the old lady treats her shamefully. Dresses her in those old calico dresses that servants used to wear years ago. So Elsie can’t go anywhere, not even to school.”

Mrs. Gay’s lips closed tightly, and her eyes narrowed.

“So that’s the kind of woman Miss Grant is!” she muttered. “I always knew she

was queer, but I never thought she was cruel.... Yes, of course you can give the girl some clothing, dear. Go pick out anything you want, except those brand-new things we bought last week for our trip in August.”

Mary Louise lost no time in making her selection. She piled the clothing on her bed, after she had put her room in order, and called her mother in for her approval. But before tying up the package she whistled for Jane from her window.

Her chum came running across the grass that grew between the two houses and bounded up the steps. Briefly Mary Louise explained what she was doing.

“But I want to give Elsie something too,” Jane said. “She ought to have some kind of summer coat and a hat. Wait till I ask Mother.”

She returned in less than five minutes bringing a lovely white wool coat and a white felt hat to match it. Mary Louise tied up the bundle.

“Please ask Freckles to take care of Silky this morning, Mother,” she said. “I’m afraid that perhaps Miss Grant might not like him.”

The girls started off immediately through the streets of Riverside to the lonely road that led to Dark Cedars.

“I sort of wish we had Silky with us,” observed Jane as they approached the house. “He is a protection.”

Mary Louise laughed.

“But there isn’t anything to protect us from! Elsie said nothing ever happened in the daytime.”

A stifled sob coming from under the cedar trees caused the girls to stop abruptly and peer in among the low branches. There, half concealed by the thick growth, sat Elsie Grant, crying bitterly.

Mary Louise and Jane were beside her in a second.

“What’s the matter, Elsie?” demanded Mary Louise. “What happened?”

The girl raised her tear-stained face and attempted to smile. For Mary Louise and Jane came nearest to being her friends of all the people in the world.

“Aunt Mattie has been robbed,” she said. “And—everybody thinks I did it!”

“You!” cried Jane. “Oh, how awful!”

The girls sat down on the ground beside her and asked her to tell them all about it. The bundle of clothing was forgotten for the time being in this new, overwhelming catastrophe.

“My aunt has a big old safe in her room, that she always keeps locked,” Elsie began. “She hasn’t any faith in banks, she says, because they are always closing, so all her money is in this safe. I’ve often heard Aunt Grace try to make Aunt Mattie stop hoarding, but Aunt Mattie always refuses. She loves to have it where she can see it and count it.”

“A regular miser,” remarked Jane.

“Yes. It’s her one joy in life—besides the little kitten. Every morning after breakfast she opens that safe and counts her money over again.”

“Doesn’t she ever spend any?” asked Mary Louise.

“A little, of course. She pays William and Hannah a small amount, and she buys some food, especially in winter. But we have a garden, you know, and chickens and a cow.”

“When did she miss this money?”

“This morning. It was there yesterday. Aunt Mattie counted it right after you girls went home. You can hear her say the figures out loud and sort of chuckle to herself. But today she just let out a scream. It was horrible! I thought she was dying.”

“Maybe it was taken last night,” said Mary Louise. “Did you hear any of those queer noises—I mean the kind you heard before, when you thought somebody searched that old trunk in the attic?”

“No, I didn’t. That’s the worst part. Nobody else heard anything, either, all night

long, and no door locks were broken. Of course, a burglar might have entered over the front porch roof, through Aunt Mattie's window. But she's a light sleeper, and she says she never heard a sound."

"So of course she claims you stole it!"

Elsie nodded and started to cry again.

"But I didn't! I give you my word I didn't!"

"Of course you didn't, Elsie. We believe you."

"Aunt Mattie did everything but torture me to get a confession out of me. She said if I didn't own up to it and give it back she'd send me to a reform school, and I'd be branded as a criminal for the rest of my life."

"She couldn't do that!" exclaimed Mary Louise furiously. "If she has no proof ... I'll tell you what I'll do, Elsie! I'll put my father on the case when he comes home! He's a detective on the police force, and he's just wonderful. He'll find the real thief."

Elsie shook her head.

"No, I'm afraid you can't do that. Because Aunt Mattie distinctly said that she won't have the police meddling in this. She says that if I didn't steal the money somebody else in the family did."

"What family?"

"Aunt Grace's family. She's the Mrs. Grant, you know, who lives in Riverside. She has three grown-up children and one grandchild. Aunt Mattie says one of these relatives is guilty, if I'm not, and she'll find out herself, without bringing shame upon the Grant name."

Mary Louise groaned.

"The only thing I can see for us to do, then, is to be detectives ourselves. Jane and I will do all we can to help you, won't we, Jane?"

Her chum nodded. "At least, if we don't have to get into any spookiness at

night,” she amended. “Those mysterious sounds you told us about, Elsie——”

“They may all have some connection with this robbery,” announced Mary Louise. “And I’d like to find out!”

Elsie looked doubtful.

“I only hope Aunt Mattie doesn’t try the bread-and-water diet on me, to get a confession. Really, you have no idea how awful that is till you try it. You just get crazy for some real food. You’d be almost willing to lie to get it, even if you knew the lie was going to hurt you.”

“If she tries that, you let us know,” cried Jane angrily, “and we’ll bring our parents right over here!”

“All right, I will.” Elsie seemed to find some relief in the promise.

“Elsie,” said Mary Louise very seriously, “tell me who you really think did steal the money.”

The girl considered the problem carefully.

“I believe it was somebody in Aunt Grace’s family,” she replied slowly. “Because they used to be rich, and now they are poor. And I think that if a burglar had entered the house, somebody, probably Aunt Mattie, would have wakened up.”

“Couldn’t he have entered before your aunt went to bed?” suggested Mary Louise.

“Maybe. But Aunt Mattie was on the front porch all evening, and she’d probably have heard him.”

“All right, then,” agreed Mary Louise. “Let’s drop the idea of the burglar for the time being. Let’s hear about the family—your aunt Grace’s family, I mean.”

She reached into her pocket and took out a pencil and notebook, which she had provided for the purpose of writing down any items of clothing that Elsie might particularly want. Instead of that, she would list the possible suspects, the way her father usually did when he was working on a murder case.

“Go ahead,” she said. “I’m ready now. Tell me how many brothers and sisters your aunt Mattie had, and everything else you can.”

“Aunt Mattie had only two brothers, and not any sisters at all. My father was one brother, and Aunt Grace’s husband was the other. They’re both dead.”

“Then your aunt Grace isn’t your aunt Mattie’s real sister?” inquired Jane.

“No. But Aunt Mattie seems to like her better than any of her blood relations, even if she is only a sister-in-law. She comes over here pretty often.”

“Maybe she took the money.”

Elsie looked shocked.

“Not Aunt Grace! She’s too religious. Always going to church and talking about right and wrong. She even argued with Aunt Mattie to let me go to Sunday school, but Aunt Mattie wouldn’t buy me a decent dress.”

At the mention of clothing, Jane reached for the package they had carried with them to Dark Cedars, but Mary Louise shook her head, signalling her to wait until Elsie had finished.

“Well, anyway, Aunt Mattie’s father liked her better than her two brothers, and he promised to leave her his money if she wouldn’t get married while he was alive. And she didn’t, you know.”

“I guess nobody ever asked her,” remarked Jane bluntly.

“That’s what my mother used to say,” agreed Elsie. “She didn’t like Aunt Mattie, and Aunt Mattie hated her. So it’s no wonder I’m not welcome here!”

Mary Louise called Elsie back to her facts by tapping her pencil on her notebook.

“So far I have only one relative written down,” she said. “That’s your aunt Grace. Please go on.”

“As I told you, I think,” Elsie continued immediately, “Aunt Grace has three grown children. Two boys and a girl.”

“Names, please,” commanded Mary Louise in her most practical tone.

“John Grant, Harry Grant, and Mrs. Ellen Grant Pearson. The daughter is married.”

“How old are they?”

“All about forty, I guess. I don’t know. Middle-aged—no, I guess you wouldn’t call Harry middle-aged. He’s the youngest. Except, of course, the granddaughter—Mrs. Pearson’s only child. She’s a girl about eighteen or nineteen.”

“What’s her name?”

“Corinne—Corinne Pearson.”

“Is that everybody?” asked Mary Louise. “I mean, all the living relatives of Miss Mattie Grant?”

“Yes, that’s all.”

Mary Louise read her list aloud, just to make sure that she had gotten the names correctly and to impress them upon her own mind.

“Mrs. Grace Grant—aged about sixty-five, sister-in-law of Miss Mattie.

“John Grant—middle-aged.

“Ellen Grant Pearson—middle-aged.

“Harry Grant—about thirty.

“Corinne Pearson—about nineteen....”

“But you forgot me!” Elsie reminded her.

“No, we didn’t forget you, either,” replied Mary Louise, with a smile. “We’ve got something for you—in that package.”

“Something to make you forget your troubles,” added Jane. “Some new clothes.”

The girl’s eyes lighted up with joy.

“Honestly? Oh, that’s wonderful! Let me see them!”

Mary Louise untied the package and held the things up for Elsie to look at. The girl’s expression was one of positive rapture. A silk dress! In the latest style! And the kind of soft wooly coat she had always dreamed of possessing! A hat that was a real hat—not one of those outlandish sunbonnets her aunt Mattie made her wear! Dainty lingerie—and a pair of white shoes!

“Oh, it’s too much!” she cried. “I couldn’t take them! They’re your best things—I know they are.” And once again her eyes filled with tears.

“We have other nice clothes,” Mary Louise assured her. “And our mothers said it was all right. So you must take them: we’d be hurt if you didn’t.”

“Honestly?” The girl looked as if she could not believe there was so much goodness in the world.

“Absolutely! Now—don’t you want to go in and try them on?”

“I’ll do it right here,” said Elsie. “These cedars are so thick that nobody can see me. And if I went into the house they might not let me out again to show you.”

With trembling fingers she pulled off her shoes and stockings, and the old calico dress she was wearing, and put on the silk slip and the green flowered dress. Then the white stockings and the slippers, which fitted beautifully. And last of all, the coat.

Her eyes were sparkling now, and her feet were taking little dancing steps of delight. Elsie Grant looked like a different person!

“Wonderful!” cried Mary Louise and Jane in the same breath.

“Only—let me fix your hair,” suggested the former. “It’s naturally curly, isn’t it? But you have it drawn back so tightly you can scarcely see any wave.”

“I’d like to wear it like yours, Mary Louise,” replied the orphan wistfully. “But it’s too long, and I have no money for barbers or beauty parlors.”

“We’ll see what we can do next time we come,” answered Mary Louise. “But let’s loosen it up a bit now and put your knot down low on your neck so that the

hat will fit.”

Deftly she fluffed it out a little at the sides and pinned it in a modish style. Then she put the little white felt hat on Elsie’s head at just the correct angle and stepped back to survey the transformed girl with pride.

“You’re positively a knockout, Elsie!” she exclaimed in delight. “Take my word for it, you’re going to be a big hit in Riverside.” She chuckled to herself. “We’ll all lose our boy-friends when they see you!”

“Oh no!” protested Elsie seriously. “You are really beautiful, Mary Louise! And so clever and good. And so is Jane.”

Both girls smiled at Elsie’s extravagant praise. Then Mary Louise turned back to her notebook.

“I’d like to hear more about yesterday,” she said: “whether you think any of these five relatives had a chance to steal that money.”

“They all had a chance,” answered Elsie. “They were all here—and all up in Aunt Mattie’s room at some time or other during the day or evening!”

CHAPTER III

Suspects

“Let’s sit down again while you tell me every single thing that happened here yesterday,” suggested Mary Louise.

Elsie took off the white coat and folded it carefully. Then she removed her hat.

“But I can’t sit down in this silk dress,” she objected. “I might get it dirty, and I don’t want to take it off till I see myself in a mirror. I might not have another chance to put it on all day long!”

“You can sit on the paper,” advised Jane. “That will protect it. Besides, the ground is dry, and these needles are a covering.”

Very cautiously Elsie seated herself, and turned to Mary Louise, who had dropped down beside her on the ground.

“Begin when you got up in the morning,” she said.

“That was about seven o’clock,” replied Elsie. “But really, that doesn’t matter, because I’m sure Aunt Mattie counted her money after you girls brought the kitten back. I heard her. And she stayed in her room until after lunch.”

“Does this safe have a combination lock?” inquired Mary Louise.

“No, it doesn’t. Just a key. John Grant suggested to Aunt Mattie that she have one put on, and she refused. She said people can guess at combinations of figures by twisting the handle around, but if she kept the key with her day and night, nobody could open the safe.... But she got fooled!”

“The lock was broken?”

“Yes. But the door of the safe was closed, so she hadn’t noticed it until she went to count her money this morning.”

“Do you know how much was taken?”

“No, I don’t. Plenty, I guess. Only, there was one queer thing about it: the thief didn’t take the bonds she kept in a special drawer.”

“Overlooked them, probably,” remarked Mary Louise.

“Maybe. I don’t know. Well, as I said, Aunt Mattie was in her room until lunch time, and then she went out on the front porch. About two o’clock in the afternoon Aunt Grace and her son John drove over.”

“John—Grant,” repeated Mary Louise, consulting the list in her notebook. “He’s your aunt Grace’s oldest son?”

“Yes. He’s about forty, as I said. Fat and a little bit bald. An old bachelor. Probably you’d recognize him if you saw him, because he’s on the School Board. Aunt Mattie likes him because he does little repair jobs for her around the house that save her spending money for a carpenter.

“Yesterday he went upstairs and fixed a window sash in her bedroom.” Elsie paused thoughtfully. “So you see John had a good chance to open the safe and steal the money.”

“Why, he’s the guilty one, of course!” cried Jane instantly. “It’s just too plain. I should think your aunt would see that.”

Elsie shook her head.

“No, it would never occur to Aunt Mattie to accuse John. He’s the one person in the family she trusts. She always says she is leaving him all her money in her will—so why would he bother to steal it?”

“He might need it now, for some particular purpose,” replied Jane. “He is handy with tools, you say—and had such a good opportunity.”

“We better get on with the story,” urged Mary Louise. “Any minute Elsie may be called in.”

The girl shuddered, as if she dreaded the ordeal of meeting her aunt again.

“Was your aunt Grace in the bedroom at all during the afternoon?” questioned Mary Louise. “By herself, I mean?”

“I don’t know. She and Aunt Mattie went up together to look at the window after John finished fixing it, but whether or not Aunt Grace was there alone, I couldn’t say. Anyhow, there’s no use worrying about that. Aunt Grace just *couldn’t* steal anything.”

“According to the detective stories,” put in Jane, “it’s the person who just *couldn’t* commit the crime who always is the guilty one. The one you suspect least.”

“But this isn’t a story,” said Elsie. “I wish it were. If you knew how dreadful it is for me, living here and having everybody think I’m a thief!”

“Why don’t you run away, now that you have some decent clothes?” suggested Jane. “I just wouldn’t stand for anything like that!”

“But I have nowhere to go. Besides, running away would make me look guiltier than ever.”

“Elsie’s right,” approved Mary Louise. “She can’t run away now. But we’ll prove she’s innocent!” she added, with determination.

“There’s something else that happened during that visit,” continued Elsie. “I mean, while Aunt Grace and John were here. Part of a conversation I overheard that may give you a clue. Aunt Grace said her youngest son—Harry, you remember—had gotten into debt and needed some money very badly. She didn’t actually ask Aunt Mattie to help him out: she only hinted. But she didn’t get any encouragement from Aunt Mattie. She told Aunt Grace just to shut Harry out of the house till he learned to behave himself!”

“So this Harry Grant is in debt!” muttered Mary Louise, making a note of this fact in her little book. “Could he have stolen the money?”

“Yes, it’s possible. After Aunt Grace and John went home, Harry came over to Dark Cedars.”

“What time was that?”

“Around four o’clock, I think. I was out in the kitchen, helping Hannah shell some peas for supper. We heard his car—it’s a terribly noisy old thing—and then his voice.”

“What’s he like?” asked Mary Louise.

“I told you he was the youngest of Aunt Grace’s children, you know, and he’s rather handsome. He treats me much better than any of the other relations, except Aunt Grace, but still I don’t like him. He always insists on kissing me and teasing me about imaginary boy-friends. I usually run out into the kitchen when I hear him coming.”

“Is he here often?”

“Only when he wants something. He tries to flatter Aunt Mattie and tease her money away from her. But, as far as I know, he never gets any.”

“What did he want yesterday?”

“He said he wanted a loan. He didn’t bother to talk quietly: I could hear every word he said from the kitchen.”

“And your aunt refused?”

“Yes. She told him to sell his car if he needed money. As if he could sell that old bus!” Elsie laughed. “You’d have to pay somebody to take that away,” she explained.

Mary Louise tapped her pencil again. She hated to get away from the all-important subject.

“But how do you think Harry could have stolen the money if your aunt Mattie was with him all the time?” she asked.

“Aunt Mattie wasn’t. He had a fine chance. Something had gone wrong with his car, and he had to fix it on the way over. So his hands were all dirty, and he went upstairs to wash them.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Jane significantly.

“Looks bad for Harry Grant,” commented Mary Louise, “because he had a motive. Daddy always looks for two things when he’s solving a crime: the motive, and the chance to get away with it. And it seems that this young man had both.”

Elsie nodded.

“Yes, he had. And he was upstairs a good while, too. But then, he’s an awful dandy about everything. You never see grease in Harry Grant’s finger nails!”

“Did he go right out when he came downstairs?” inquired Mary Louise.

“No. He laughed and joked a lot. I heard him ask Aunt Mattie to lend him her finger-nail rouge because he had forgotten his. Then he said he’d like some cookies, and I had to make lemonade.”

“So, if he took the money, he must have had it in his pocket all this time? He didn’t go upstairs again?”

“No, he didn’t. And I know Aunt Mattie had a good deal of it in gold, so it must have been terribly heavy. Still, men have a lot of pockets.”

Mary Louise nodded. “Yes, that’s true. But you’d think if he really had taken it he’d have been anxious to get away. That story about asking for cookies and lemonade almost proves an alibi for him.”

She sighed; it was all getting rather complicated. “Did anything else happen yesterday?” she asked wearily. “I mean, after Harry went home?”

“Not till after supper. Then Mrs. Pearson and her daughter walked over to see Aunt Mattie. They used to be rich, but Mr. Pearson lost his job, and they had to sell their car. So now they have to walk wherever they go.”

Jane let out a groan.

“So every one of those five relations of Miss Grant was here yesterday and had a chance to steal that money!” she exclaimed.

“Yes,” agreed Elsie. “Every one of them!”

“What are the Pearsons like?” asked Mary Louise.

“Well, Mrs. Pearson looks like Aunt Grace—she’s her daughter, you remember—but she isn’t a bit like her. She isn’t religious; in fact, she doesn’t seem to care for anything in the world but that nasty daughter of hers. Corinne, you know. Have you ever seen Corinne Pearson?”

“I think I have,” replied Mary Louise. “Though she never went to our school. I believe she attended that little private school, and now she goes around with the Country Club set, doesn’t she?”

“Yes. Her one ambition, and her mother’s ambition for her, is to marry a rich man. I hate both of them. They’re so rude to me—never speak to me at all unless they give me a command as if I were a servant. Last night Corinne told me to bring her a certain chair from the parlor, because she thought our porch rockers were dirty. And the tone she used! As if I ought to keep them clean just for her!”

“I always imagined she was like that,” said Jane. “I was introduced to her once, and when I passed her on the street the next day she cut me dead.”

“Once she told me to untie her shoe and see if there was a stone in it,” continued Elsie. “In the haughtiest tone!”

“I’d have slapped her foot!” exclaimed Jane. “You didn’t obey her, did you?”

“I had to. Aunt Mattie would have punished me if I hadn’t. She dislikes Corinne Pearson and her mother, but she hates me worst of all... So you can easily see why I run off when I see the Pearsons coming. I went back into the kitchen with Hannah, but Aunt Mattie soon called me to bring some ice water. And the conversation I heard may be another clue for you, Mary Louise.”

“Oh, dear!” sighed Jane. “We’ve got too many clues already.”

A voice sounded from the house, making the girls pause for a moment in silence.

“Elsie! Oh, Elsie!”

“It’s Hannah. I’ll have to go in a minute,” said the girl, carefully getting to her

feet, not forgetting her new dress. “But first I must tell you about this conversation, because it’s important. It seems Corinne was invited to a very swell dance by one of those rich Mason boys, and she came over to ask Aunt Mattie for a new dress. Aunt Mattie laughed at her—that nasty cackle that she has. And then she said, ‘Certainly I’ll give you a dress, Corinne. Go up to my closet and pick out anything you want. You’ll find some old party dresses there!’

“Well, I could see that Corinne was furious, but she got up and went upstairs. And she did pick out an old lace gown—I thought maybe she was going to make it over. Perhaps she was just using it to hide the money, if she did steal it... Anyhow, she and her mother went home in a few minutes, carrying the dress with them.”

Mary Louise closed her notebook in confusion. “You better run along now, Elsie, or you’ll get punished,” she advised.

“All right, I will,” agreed the younger girl as she gathered up her things. “You know all the suspects now.”

“All but the servants,” replied Mary Louise. “And if I can, I’m going to interview Hannah immediately.”

CHAPTER IV

Interviewing Hannah

Keeping under cover of the cedar trees, Mary Louise and Jane followed Elsie Grant, at a discreet distance, to the back of the house. Unlike the front entrance, there was a screen at the kitchen door, so the girls could hear Hannah's exclamation at the sight of the transformation in Elsie's appearance.

"My land!" she cried in amazement. "Where did you get them clothes, Elsie?"

Elsie laughed; the first normal, girlish laugh that Mary Louise and Jane had ever heard from her.

"Don't I look nice, Hannah?" she asked. "I haven't seen myself yet in a mirror, but I'm sure I do. I feel so different."

"You look swell, all right," agreed the servant. "But no credit to you! If that's what you done with your aunt's money——"

"Oh, no, Hannah!" protested Elsie. "You're wrong there. I didn't *buy* these things. They were given to me."

The two girls were standing at the screen door now, in full view, and Elsie beckoned for them to come inside. "These are my friends, Hannah. The girls who rescued Aunt Mattie's kitten—remember? And they brought me the clothes this morning."

The woman shook her head.

"It might be true, but nobody'd believe it. Folks don't give away nice things like that. I know that, for I've had a lot of 'hand-me-downs' in my life.... Besides, they fit you too good."

“But we did bring them to Elsie,” asserted Jane. “You can see that we’re all about the same size. And we can prove it by our mothers. We’ll bring them over _____”

“You’ll do nuthin’ of the kind!” returned Hannah. “Miss Mattie don’t want a lot of strangers pokin’ into her house and her affairs. Now, you two run along! And, Elsie, hurry up and get out of that finery. Look at them dishes waitin’ fer you in the sink!”

The girl nodded and disappeared up the back stairs, humming a little tune to herself as she went. Mary Louise stood still.

“We want to ask you a question or two, Hannah,” she explained. “We want to help find the thief who stole Miss Grant’s money.”

The woman’s nose shot up in the air, and a stubborn look came over her face.

“Is that so?” she asked defiantly. “And what business is that of your’n?”

“We’re making it our business,” replied Mary Louise patiently, “because we’re fond of Elsie. We think it’s terrible for her to be accused of something she didn’t do.”

“How do you know she didn’t do it?”

“Why—we just know.”

“That ain’t no reason! Besides, what do you know about Elsie Grant? Seen her a couple of times and listened to her hard luck story and believe you know all about her!”

“But surely you don’t believe Elsie stole that money?” demanded Jane. “If she had, she’d certainly have run away immediately. Wouldn’t she?”

“Maybe—if she had the spirit. But, anyhow, it ain’t none of your business, and Miss Mattie don’t want it to get around. She don’t want no scandal. Now—get along with you!”

“Please, Hannah!” begged Mary Louise. “We’ll promise not to tell anybody about the robbery—not even our mothers. If you’d just answer a couple of

questions——”

The woman eyed her suspiciously.

“You think maybe I done it?” she demanded. “Well, I didn’t! Miss Mattie knows how honest I am. William too—that’s me husband. We’ve been in this house ever since Miss Mattie was a girl, and the whole family knows they can trust us.”

“Oh, my goodness!” exclaimed Mary Louise. “I’m not suspecting *you*, Hannah! All I want is a little information.”

“You’re not going to the police and tell what you know? Or to some detective?”

“No. On my word of honor, no! Jane and I are going to try to be detectives ourselves, that’s all. For Elsie’s sake.”

The woman’s expression softened. After all, Mary Louise’s brown eyes had a winning way.

“All right. Only hurry up. I got a lot of work to do.”

Mary Louise smiled. “I’ll be quick,” she promised. “I just want to know whether you think there was any time during the day or evening—before Miss Grant went to bed—when a burglar could have entered the house without being seen or heard.”

Hannah stopped beating the cake which she had been mixing while this conversation was taking place and gave the matter her entire consideration.

“Let me think,” she muttered. “Not all mornin’, fer Miss Mattie was in her room herself. Not in the afternoon, neither, fer there was too many people around. All them relations come over, and Miss Mattie was right on the front parch—and I was here at the back.... No, I don’t see how anybody could have got in without bein’ heard.”

“How about supper time?” questioned Mary Louise. “Couldn’t somebody have climbed in over the porch roof while the family were eating in the dining room?”

“It’s possible,” answered Hannah. “But it ain’t likely. Burglars ain’t usually as

quiet as all that. No; I hold with Miss Mattie—that Elsie or maybe that good-fer-nuthin' Harry took the money.”

Mary Louise sighed and turned towards the door.

“I’m sure it wasn’t Elsie,” she said again. “But maybe you’re right about Mr. Harry Grant. I hope we find out.... By the way,” she added, “you couldn’t tell me just how much was taken, could you, Hannah?”

“No, I couldn’t. Miss Mattie didn’t say.... Now, my advice to you girls is: fergit all about it! It ain’t none of your affairs, and Elsie ain’t a good companion fer you young ladies. She ain’t had no eddication, and probably, now she’s fifteen, her aunt’ll put her into service as a housemaid somewheres. And you won’t want to be associatin’ with no servant girl!”

Jane’s eyes blazed with indignation.

“It’s not fair!” she cried. “In a country like America, where education is free. Anybody who wants it has a right to it.”

“Then she can git it at night school while she’s workin’, if she sets her mind to it,” remarked Hannah complacently.

“Well, Hannah, we thank you very much for your help,” concluded Mary Louise as she opened the screen door. “And—you’ll see us again!”

Neither girl said anything further until they were outside the big hedge that surrounded Dark Cedars. Both of them felt baffled by the conflicting information they had gathered.

“I wish I could put the whole affair up to Daddy,” observed Mary Louise, as they descended the hill to the road. “He isn’t home now, but he soon will be.”

“Well, you can’t,” replied her chum. “It might get Elsie into trouble. And besides, we gave our promise.”

“It’ll be hard not to talk about it. Oh, dear, if we only knew where and how to begin!”

“I guess the first thing to do is to find out just what was stolen,” said Jane. “That

would make it more definite, at least. We have heard that it was money, but we don't know how much or what kind."

"Yes, that's true—and it would help considerably to know. For instance, if there was a lot of gold, as Elsie seems to think, it would be practically impossible for Harry Grant to have concealed it in his pockets, or for Corinne Pearson to have carried it back to Riverside without any car. But if, on the other hand, it was mostly paper money, it would be no trick at all for either one of them to have made away with it."

The shrill screech of a loud horn attracted the girls' attention at that moment. A familiar horn, whose sound could not be mistaken. It belonged on the roadster owned by Max Miller, Mary Louise's special boy-friend.

In another second the bright green car flashed into view, came up to the girls, and stopped with a sudden jamming on of the brakes. Two hatless young men in flannel trousers and tennis shirts jumped out of the front seat.

"What ho! and hi!—and greetings!" cried Max in delight. "Where have you two been?"

"Taking a walk," answered Mary Louise calmly.

"Taking a walk!" repeated Norman Wilder, the other young man, who was usually at Jane's elbow at parties and sports affairs. "You mean—giving *us* the air!"

"Giving *you* the air? In what way?" Jane's tone sounded severe, but her eyes were smiling into Norman's, as if she were not at all sorry to see him.

"Forgot all about that tennis date we had, didn't you?" demanded Max. "Is that a nice way to treat a couple of splendid fellows like ourselves?" He threw out his chest and pulled himself up to his full height, which was six feet one.

Mary Louise gasped and looked conscience-stricken.

"We did forget!" she exclaimed. "But we can play now just as well as not—at least, if you'll take us home to get our shoes and rackets."

"O.K.," agreed Max. He turned to Norman. "Get into the rumble, old man. I

crave to have Mary Louise beside me.”

The car started forward with its customary sudden leap, and Max settled back in his seat.

“We’ve got some great news for you, Mary Lou,” he announced immediately. “Big picnic on for this coming Saturday! Rounding up the whole crowd.”

Mary Louise was not impressed. Picnics seemed tame to her in comparison with the excitement of being a detective and hunting down thieves.

“Afraid I have an engagement,” she muttered. She and Jane had a special arrangement, by which every free hour of the day was pledged to the other, so that if either wanted to get out of an invitation, she could plead a previous date without actually telling a lie.

“The heck you have!” exclaimed Max, in disappointment. “You’ve got to break it!”

“Sez you?”

“Yeah! Sez I. And you’ll say so too, Mary Lou, when you hear more about this picnic. It’s going to be different. We’re driving across to Cooper’s woods——”

“Oh, I’ve been there,” yawned Mary Louise. “There’s nothing special there. Looks spooky and deep, but it’s just an ordinary woods. Maybe a little wilder ——”

“Wait! You women never let a fellow talk. I’ve been trying to tell you something for five minutes, and here we are at your house, and you haven’t heard it yet.”

“I guess I shan’t die.”

With a light laugh she opened the car door and leaped out, at the exact moment that Jane and Norman jumped from the rumble, avoiding a collision by a fraction of an inch.

“Tell me about it when I come out again,” called Mary Louise to Max as she and Jane ran into their respective houses to change.

Freckles met Mary Louise at the door.

“Can I go with you, Sis?” he demanded.

“Yes, if you’re ready,” she agreed, making a dash for the stairs. Her mother, meeting her in the hall, tried to detain her.

She asked, “Did the girl like the clothes, dear?”

“Oh, yes, she loved them,” replied Mary Louise. “I’ll tell you more about it when I get back from tennis. The boys are pestering us to hurry.”

Three minutes later both she and Jane were back in the car again, with Freckles and Silky added to the passenger list.

Max immediately went on about the picnic, just as if he hadn’t been interrupted at all.

“Here’s the big news,” he said, as he stepped on the starter: “There are gypsies camping over in that meadow beside Cooper’s woods! So we’re all going to have our fortunes told. That’s why we’re having the picnic there. Now, won’t that be fun?”

“Yes, I guess so. But I really don’t see how Jane and I can come——”

She was interrupted by a tap on her shoulder from the rumble seat.

“I think we can break that date, Mary Lou,” announced her chum, with a wink.

Mary Louise raised her eyebrows.

“Well, of course, if Jane thinks so——” she said to Max.

“It’s as good as settled,” concluded Max, with a chuckle.

But Mary Louise was not convinced until she had a chance, after the game was over, to talk to Jane alone and to ask her why she wanted to go on the picnic when they had such important things to do.

“Because I had an inspiration,” replied Jane. “One of us can ask the gypsy to solve our crime for us! They do tell strange things, sometimes, you know—and

they might lead us to the solution!”

CHAPTER V

The Stolen Treasure

“I’m not just tired,” announced Jane Patterson, dropping into the hammock on Mary Louise’s porch after the tennis was over. “I’m completely exhausted! I don’t believe I can even move as far as our house—let alone walk anywhere.”

“Oh, yes, you can,” replied Mary Louise. “You’ll feel lots better after you get a shower and some clean clothing. Four sets of tennis oughtn’t to do you up. Many a time I’ve seen you good for six.”

“I know, but they weren’t so strenuous. Honestly, you and Max ran me ragged. I tell you, Mary Lou, I’m all in. And I couldn’t walk up that hill to Miss Grant’s house if it meant life or death to me.”

“But think of poor Elsie! She may need us now.”

“Oh, what could we do?”

“I don’t know yet. But we have to go to find out just what was stolen, if for nothing else. She may know by this time.”

“Then why not let the boys drive us up?” asked Jane, with a yawn.

“You know why. We can’t let them into the secret: they’d tell everybody. And I bet, if the thing got out, Miss Grant would be so mad she’d have Elsie arrested then and there. No, there’s nothing for us to do but walk.... So please go get your shower.”

Wearily Jane struggled to her feet.

“O.K. But I warn you, I may drop in my tracks, and then you’ll have to carry me.”

“I’ll take a chance.”

Mary Louise met another protest from her mother, who tried to insist that her daughter lie down for a little rest before supper. But here again persuasion won.

“Really, I’m not tired, Mother,” she explained. “It’s only that I’m hot and dirty. And we have something very important to do—I wish I could tell you all about it, but I can’t now.”

Her mother seemed satisfied. She had learned by this time that she could trust Mary Louise.

“All right, dear,” she said. “Call Jane over, and you may all have some lemonade. Freckles said he had to have a cold drink.”

The refreshments revived even Jane, and half an hour later the two girls were walking up the shady lane which led towards the Grant place. It wasn’t so bad as Jane had expected; the road was so sheltered by trees that they did not mind the climb.

Once inside the hedge they peered eagerly in among the cedar trees for a glimpse of Elsie. But they did not see her anywhere.

“She’s probably in the kitchen helping Hannah with the dinner,” concluded Mary Louise. “Let’s go around back.”

Here they found her, sitting on the back step, shelling peas. She was wearing her old dress again, and the girls could see that she had been crying. But her eyes lighted up with pleasure at the sight of her two friends.

“Oh, I’m so glad to see you girls!” she cried. “I wanted you so much, and I didn’t know how to let you know. You see, I don’t even have your address—though that wouldn’t have done me much good, because I’m not allowed out of the gate, and I haven’t any stamp to put on a letter. The only thing I could do was pray that you would come!”

“Well, here we are!” announced Mary Louise, with a significant look at Jane. “Now tell us why you specially wanted us.”

“I wanted you to assure Aunt Mattie that you really did give me those dresses

and things. Right away she said I must have bought them with her money. Though how she thinks I ever had a chance to get to any store is beyond me. She knows I never leave this place.”

“How did she find out about them?” inquired Mary Louise. “You didn’t show them to her, did you?”

“No, I didn’t. She found them while she was searching through my things this morning, to see whether I had her money hidden anywhere.”

“That’s terrible!” exclaimed Jane. “Oh, how dreadful it must be to be all alone in the world, without anybody who trusts you!” Something of the same thought ran through Mary Louise’s brain at the same time.

“Tell us just what has happened today, since we left,” urged Mary Louise. “Has anybody been here?”

“No. Not a soul. But Aunt Mattie put me through a lot more questions at lunch, and afterward she gave my room a thorough search. When she found my new clothes, she was more sure than ever that I was the thief. She told me if I didn’t confess everything right away she’d have to change her mind and call the police.”

“Did she call them?” demanded Jane.

“Not yet. It’s lucky for me that she hasn’t a telephone. She said she guessed she’d send William after supper. So you can see how much it meant to me for you girls to come over now!”

Mary Louise nodded gravely, and Jane blushed at her reluctance in wanting to come. If Elsie had gone to jail, it would have been their fault for giving her the clothing!

“When can we see your aunt?” inquired Mary Louise.

“Right now. I’ll go in and tell her. She’s out on the front porch, I think.”

Elsie handed her pan to Hannah and went through the kitchen to the front of the house. She was back again in a moment, telling the girls to come with her.

They found the old lady in her favorite rocking chair, with her knitting in her lap. But she was not working—just scowling at the world in general, and when Elsie came out on the dilapidated porch an expression of pain crossed her wrinkled brows. Whether it was real pain from that trouble in her side which she had mentioned, or whether it was only a miserly grief over the loss of her money, Mary Louise had no way of telling.

“Good-afternoon, Miss Grant,” she said pleasantly. “How is your kitten today?”

A smile crept over the woman’s face, making her much more pleasant to look at.

“She’s fine,” she replied. “Come here, Puffy, and speak to the kind girls who rescued you yesterday!”

The kitten ran over and jumped into Miss Grant’s lap.

“She certainly is sweet,” said Mary Louise. She cleared her throat: why couldn’t the old lady help her out by asking her a question about the clothing?

But Elsie, nervously impatient, brought up the subject they were all waiting for.

“Tell Aunt Mattie about the dresses and the coat,” she urged.

“Oh, yes,” said Mary Louise hastily. “Your niece told us, Miss Grant, that she never gets to Riverside to buy any new clothes, so when I noticed we were all three about the same size, Jane and I asked our mothers whether we couldn’t give her some of ours. They were willing, and so we brought them over this morning.”

“Humph!” was the only comment Miss Grant made to this explanation. Mary Louise could not tell whether she believed her or not and whether she was pleased or angry.

“You didn’t mind, did you, Miss Grant?” she inquired nervously.

“No, of course not. Elsie’s mighty lucky... I only hope when she’s working as somebody’s maid that they’ll be as nice to her. It helps out, when wages are small. For nobody wants to pay servants much these days.”

A lump came into Mary Louise’s throat at the thought of Elsie’s future, which

Miss Grant had just pictured for them. She longed to plead the girl's cause, but she knew it would do no good. Especially at the present time, with Miss Grant poorer than she had ever been in her life.

The old lady's eyes suddenly narrowed, and she looked sharply at Mary Louise.

"See here!" she said abruptly. "You two girls are the only people besides those living in this house who know about this robbery, and I don't want you to say a word of it to anybody! Understand? I don't want the police in on this until I am ready to tell them. Or my other relatives, either. I expect to get that money back myself!"

All three girls breathed a sigh of relief: it was evident that the police would not be summoned that evening. And both Mary Louise and Jane gave their promise of utmost secrecy.

"But we'd like to help discover the thief, if we can," added Mary Louise. "You don't mind if we try, do you, Miss Grant—if it's all on the quiet?"

"No, I don't mind. But I don't see what you can do." Miss Grant looked sharply at Elsie, as if she thought maybe her niece might confess to these girls while she stubbornly refused to tell her aunt anything. "Yes," she added, "you might succeed where I failed.... Yes, I'll pay ten dollars' reward if you get my money back for me."

"We think it might have been a robber," remarked Mary Louise, to try to divert Miss Grant's suspicious eyes from her niece. "He could have slipped in while you were at supper."

"It wasn't a robber," announced Miss Grant, with conviction. "If it had been, he'd have taken everything. The most valuable things were left in the safe. My bonds. They're government bonds, too, so anybody could see the value of them—except a child! No, it was somebody right in this house!"

And she laughed with that nasty cackle which made Jane so angry, that, she said afterward, if Miss Grant hadn't been an old lady, she would have slapped her then and there in the face.

"Or maybe it was one of your other relations," said Mary Louise evenly.

“Possibly. I wouldn’t trust Harry Grant or Corinne Pearson. Or Corinne’s mother, either, for that matter!”

“How about Mrs. Grant?”

“My sister-in-law? No, I don’t think she’d take anything. And I know it wasn’t John—or either of the servants.... No.” She looked at Elsie again. “There’s your culprit. Make her confess—and you get ten dollars!”

She paused, while everybody looked embarrassed. But she was enjoying the situation. “I’ll make it ten dollars apiece!” she added.

“It isn’t the money we want, Miss Grant,” said Mary Louise stiffly. “It’s to clear Elsie of suspicion.”

“Nonsense! Everybody wants money!”

Mary Louise took her notebook out of her pocket.

“Would you tell us just how much money was taken, Miss Grant?” she asked. “And—all about it?”

“Yes, of course I will. There was a metal box in the safe with five hundred dollars in gold——”

“Gold!” exclaimed Jane. “I thought you were supposed to turn that in to the government!”

“You mind your business!” snapped Miss Grant.

“We will—We will!” said Mary Louise hastily. “Please go on, Miss Grant!”

“Five hundred dollars in twenty-dollar gold pieces,” she repeated. “Then there was eight hundred and fifty dollars in bills—all in fifty-dollar notes. I have the numbers of the bills written down in a book upstairs. Would you like to copy them down, Mary Louise?”

“Yes, indeed!” cried the latter rapturously. Miss Grant was treating her just like a real detective!

“Come upstairs, then, with me, and you can see the safe and my room at the same time.” The old lady turned to her niece, who was still waiting nervously beside the door. “Go back to your work, Elsie,” she commanded. “Hannah will be wanting you.”

The girl nodded obediently, but before she disappeared she softly asked Mary Louise, “Will you and Jane be back again tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course,” was the reply. “You can count on us.”

Miss Grant gathered up her knitting and picked up her kitten from the porch floor, where it had been rolling about with a ball of its mistress’s wool.

“I may want you girls to walk over to the bank with me tomorrow,” she remarked. “Unless John happens to come here in his car. I’ve about decided to put my bonds into a safe-deposit box at the bank.”

“We’ll be glad to go with you,” Mary Louise assured her.

The old lady struggled painfully to her feet and led the way through the house, up the stairs to her room. Both girls noticed the ominous creak which these gave when anything touched them, and Jane shuddered. It must be awful to live in a tumble-down place like this!

Miss Grant’s room on the second floor was at the front of the house, just as Elsie had said, and one window overlooked the porch. It was furnished with ugly, heavy wooden furniture, and a rug that was almost threadbare. Along one wall, opposite the bed, was a huge closet, in which, no doubt, Miss Grant kept those old dresses which she had offered to Corinne Pearson. And the most astonishing thing about the bedroom was the fact that it contained not a single mirror!

(“But, of course,” Jane remarked afterward, “you wouldn’t want to see yourself if you looked like that old maid!”)

Off in the corner was the iron safe, with the only comfortable chair in the room beside it. Here, evidently, Miss Grant spent most of her time, rocking in the old-fashioned chair and gloating over her money.

Now she hobbled directly to the safe and opened the door for the girls to look into it. “You can see how the lock has been picked,” she pointed out. “It’s broken

now, of course.” She suddenly eyed the girls suspiciously, as if they were not to be trusted either, and added, “The bonds aren’t in there now! I hid them somewhere else.”

Mary Louise nodded solemnly.

“Yes, that was wise, Miss Grant.... Now, may I write down the numbers of the bills that were stolen?”

After she had concluded this little task, she went to examine the windows. They were both large—plenty big enough for a person to step through without any difficulty. But the one over the porch proved disappointing, for the roof of the porch was crumbling so badly and the posts were so rotted that anyone who attempted to climb in by that method would be taking his life in his hands.

“I always keep that window locked,” said Miss Grant, following Mary Louise. “So you see why I don’t think it was a burglar who took my money. Locked—day and night!”

Mary Louise nodded and examined the other window. It was high from the ground; there was a tree growing near it, but not near enough to make it possible for a human being to jump from a branch to the window sill. Only a monkey could perform a trick like that!

Mary Louise turned away with a sigh. She was almost ready to admit that the robbery was an inside job, as Miss Grant insisted.

“May we see inside the closet before we go?” she asked as an afterthought.

Miss Grant nodded and opened the door, disclosing a space as large as the kitchenettes in some of the modern apartments. Miss Grant herself used it as a small storeroom for the things that she did not want to put up in the attic.

“Anybody could hide here for hours,” Jane remarked, “without being suffocated.”

“Which is just what I believe Elsie did!” returned Miss Grant, with a smirk.

And the girls, unhappy and more baffled than ever, went home to their suppers.

CHAPTER VI

A Wild Ride

“One of the best points in this case,” Mary Louise observed, in her most professional tone, “is its secrecy.”

“Why do you say that?” questioned Jane.

The girls were returning from their second visit that day to Dark Cedars and were walking as fast as they could towards home. It was almost six o’clock, and Mary Louise usually helped her mother a little with the supper. But Freckles was there; she knew he would offer his services.

“What I mean is, since the robbery hasn’t been talked about, nobody is on guard,” she explained. “If any of those relatives did take the money, probably they think the theft hasn’t been discovered yet, or Miss Grant would have called them over to see her. In a way, it’s pretty tricky of her.”

“But, do you know, I can hardly believe any of them stole all that gold,” returned Jane. “Because, what would they do with it? Nobody is supposed to use gold nowadays, and it would arouse all sorts of suspicions.”

“Yes, that’s true. But then, they might want to hoard it, the same as Miss Grant did.”

“A man like Harry Grant wouldn’t want to hoard any! From what I hear of him, he spends money before he even gets it.”

“True. But there are other relatives. And somebody did steal it!”

“Yes, somebody stole it, all right. Only, the fact that a lot of it was gold makes Elsie look guilty. She probably wouldn’t know about the new law.”

Mary Louise frowned: she didn't like that thought. "Well, I'm not going to suspect Elsie till I've investigated everybody else. Every one of those five relations—Mrs. Grant, John Grant, Harry Grant, Mrs. Pearson, and her daughter Corinne!"

"Have you any plan at all?" inquired Jane.

"Yes, I'd like to do a little snooping tonight."

"Snooping? Where? How?"

"Sneak around those two houses in Riverside—the Grants', where John and Harry live with their mother, and the Pearsons'! It's such a warm evening they'll probably be on their porches, and we might overhear something to our advantage."

"But suppose we were arrested for prowling?"

"Oh, they wouldn't arrest two respectable-looking girls like us! Besides, if they did, Daddy could easily get us out."

"Is he home?"

"No, he isn't. But he'll be back in a day or two."

"A day or two in the county jail wouldn't be so good!"

"Nonsense, Jane! Nothing will happen," Mary Louise assured her. "We've got to take some chances if we're going to be detectives. Daddy takes terrible ones sometimes."

"Do you know where these people live?" inquired her chum. "The Grants and the Pearsons, I mean?"

"I know where the Grants live: in that big red brick house on Green Street. Old-fashioned, set back from the street. Don't you remember?"

"Yes, I guess I do."

"We can pass it on our way home, if we go one block farther down before we

turn in at our street.”

“How about the Pearsons?” asked Jane.

“I don’t know where they live. But I think we can get the address from the phone book.”

The girls stepped along at a rapid rate, entirely forgetful of the tennis which had tired Jane so completely a couple of hours ago. In a minute or so they came in sight of the red brick house. It was an ugly place, but it was not run down or dilapidated like Miss Mattie Grant’s. John Grant evidently believed in keeping things in repair.

The house stood next to a vacant lot, and it was enclosed by a wooden fence, which was overgrown with honeysuckle vines. A gravel drive led from the front to the back yard, alongside of this fence, and there were half a dozen large old trees on the lawn.

“We could easily hide there after dark,” muttered Mary Louise. “Climb over that fence back by the garage and sneak up behind those trees to a spot within hearing distance of the porch.”

“I don’t see what good it would do us,” objected Jane.

“It might do us lots of good! Look at that car! That must be Harry Grant’s, judging from Elsie’s description. If his car’s there, he must be home. And if we hear him say anything about spending money, then we can be suspicious. Because, where would he get the money unless he stole his aunt’s?”

Jane nodded her head.

“Yes, I see your logic,” she agreed. “But there isn’t a soul around now, and likely as not there won’t be all evening.”

“They’re probably eating supper. Come on, let’s hurry and get ours over. And meet me as soon as you can afterwards.”

The girls separated at their gates, and Mary Louise ran inside quickly to be on hand to help her mother.

“Daddy isn’t home yet?” she asked, as she carried a plate of hot biscuits to the table.

“No, dear,” answered her mother. “He’s in Chicago—I had a special-delivery letter from him today. He can’t be back before the weekend—Saturday or Sunday.”

Mary Louise sighed. She had been hoping that perhaps she could get some advice from him without giving away any names or places.

Freckles dashed into the room, with Silky close at his heels.

“Where have you been, Sis?” he demanded. “Why didn’t you take Silky with you? He’s been fussing for you.”

“Jane and I had an errand to go,” the girl explained. “And we couldn’t take him along. But we’ll take him with us for a walk after supper.”

“Walk again?” repeated Mrs. Gay, her forehead wrinkled in disapproval. “Mary Louise, you’re doing too much! You must get some rest!”

“We shan’t be out long, Mother. It isn’t a date or anything. Jane and I want to take a little stroll, with Silky, after supper. Isn’t it all right if I promise to go to bed very early?”

“I suppose so. If you get in by nine-thirty——”

“I promise!” replied Mary Louise, little thinking how impossible it was going to be for her to keep her word.

She did not start upon her project until she had finished washing the dishes for her mother. Then, slipping upstairs, she changed into a dark green sweater dress and brown shoes and stockings. Through the window of her bedroom she signaled to her chum to make a similar change.

“Might as well make ourselves as inconspicuous as possible,” she explained, as the two girls, followed by Silky, walked down the street ten minutes later. “Did you have any trouble getting away, Jane? I mean, without giving any explanation?”

“Yes, a little. Mother can’t understand all this sudden passion for walking, when I used to have to ride everywhere in Norman’s or Max’s car. I really think she believes I have a new boy-friend and that I meet him somewhere so as not to make Norman jealous. As if I’d go to all that trouble!”

Mary Louise nodded.

“A little jealousy does ’em good,” she remarked. “Of course, Mother doesn’t think it’s so queer for me, because I always did have to take Silky for walks. And he’s a good excuse now.”

“Oh, well, we’ll be home early tonight,” concluded Jane. “So there won’t be any cause for worry.”

“There’s somebody on the porch—several people, I think,” said Mary Louise as the girls turned into the street on which the Grants’ house was situated.

“Two men,” added Jane as they came nearer. “I think the person sitting down is a woman. But it’s getting too dark to see clearly.”

“All the better! That’s just what we want. Let’s cut across the lot to the back of the place, and sneak up behind the car in the driveway. We can see the porch from there.”

“But I’m afraid we’ll be caught,” objected Jane fearfully.

Nevertheless, she followed Mary Louise around a side street to the rear of the lot, and together they climbed the Grants’ fence, cautiously and silently. Once inside, they crept noiselessly along the grass near the fence until they came to the back of Harry Grant’s car.

There could be no doubt that it was his. At least five years old, with battered mudguards and rusted trimmings, it looked like the relic Elsie had laughed about. It was a small black coupé, with a compartment behind for carrying luggage.

“If Mr. Harry Grant goes for a ride in this, we’re going with him!” announced Mary Louise.

“No!” cried her chum. “How could we?”

“In the luggage compartment.”

“We’d smother.”

“No, we wouldn’t. We’d open the lid after we got started.”

“Suppose he locked us in?”

“He can’t. I just made sure that the lock has rusted off.”

“But what good would it do us to ride with him?” demanded Jane.

“Sh! They might hear us!” warned Mary Louise. She turned to the dog and patted him. “You keep quiet too, Silky.... Why,” she explained in a whisper, “we could watch to see whether Mr. Harry spends any money. If he brings out a fifty-dollar bill, he’s a doomed man!”

“You are clever, Mary Lou!” breathed her chum admiringly. “But it’s an awful risk to take.”

“Oh no, it isn’t. Mr. Grant isn’t a gangster or a desperate character. He wouldn’t hurt us.”

Jane looked doubtful.

“Have you made out who the people are on the porch?” she asked.

“It must be Mrs. Grace Grant—and her two sons. Yes, and I feel sure that is Harry, coming down the steps now.... Listen!”

The girls’ eyes, more accustomed to the darkness, could distinguish the figures quite plainly by now. The younger of the two men, with a satchel in his hand, was speaking to his mother.

“I ought to be back by Saturday,” he said in a loud, cheerful voice. “And if this deal I’ve been talking about over in New York goes through, I’ll be driving home in a new car.”

“You better pay your debts first, Harry,” cautioned his mother.

“I hope to make enough money to do both,” he returned confidently. “And if you

see Aunt Mattie, you can tell her I don't need her help!"

Mary Louise nudged Jane's arm at this proud boast and repressed a giggle.

"Maybe he can fool his mother," she whispered. "But he can't fool us! Come on, get in, Jane."

Holding open the lid of the car's compartment she lifted Silky in and gave her hand to her chum.

"Suppose he puts his satchel in here," said Jane, when they were all huddled down in the extremely small space and Mary Louise had cautiously let down the lid, shutting them in absolute darkness.

"He won't—not if it has money in it. He'll keep it right on the seat beside him.... He will anyway, because it doesn't take up much room."

The car rocked to one side, indicating that Harry Grant had stepped in and was seating himself at the wheel. Jane's lip trembled.

"It's so dark in here! So terribly dark! Where's your hand, Mary Lou?"

"Here—and here's Silky. Oh, Jane, this is going to be good!"

The motor started, and the car leaped forward with a sudden uneven bound. Jane repressed a cry of terror. It turned sharply at the gate and buzzed along noisily for several minutes before Mary Louise cautiously raised the lid and looked out.

Oh, how good it was to see the lights again, and the sky—after that horrible blackness!

The car had reached the open highway which led out of Riverside, and it picked up speed until it was rattling along at a pace of about sixty miles an hour. Growing bolder, Mary Louise continued to raise the lid of the compartment until it was upright at its full height. The girls straightened up, with their heads and shoulders sticking out of the enclosure.

"Quite a nice ride after all, isn't it?" observed Mary Louise, gazing up at the stars.

“I don’t know,” returned Jane. “It sounds to me as if there were something wrong with that engine. If we have an accident——”

“That’s just what I’m hoping for,” was the surprising reply. “Or rather, a breakdown.”

“Whatever would you do?”

“I’ll tell you. Listen carefully, so we’ll be prepared to act the minute the car stops. While Harry gets out on the left—he surely will, because his wheel is on the left—we jump out on the right. If there are woods beside the road, as I remember there are for some distance along here, we disappear into them. If not, we get to the path, and just walk along as if we were two people out for a walk with their dog. He won’t think anything about that, for he doesn’t know us, or know that we came with him.”

“But how will that help us to find out whether he is the thief?” inquired Jane.

“My plan is to grab that satchel, if we get a chance, and run off with it!”

“But that’s stealing, Mary Lou! He could have us arrested.”

“Detectives have to take chances like that. It isn’t really stealing, for we want to get hold of it merely to give its contents to the rightful owner. Of course, if there’s no money in it, we could return it later.”

They were silent for a while, listening to the pounding of the engine. Fifteen minutes passed; Mary Louise saw by her watch when they rode under a light that it was quarter after nine, and she recalled her promise to her mother. But she couldn’t do anything about it now.

They were ascending a hill, and the speed of the car was diminishing; it seemed to the girls that they were not going to make it. The engine wheezed and puffed, but the driver was evidently doing his best. Ahead, on the left, shone the lights of a gas station, and this, Mary Louise decided, must be the goal that Harry was now aiming for.

But the engine refused to go the full distance: it sputtered and died, and the girls felt the car jerked close to the right side, with no sign of civilization about except the lighted gas station about fifty yards ahead.

But, lonely or not, the time had come for action, and there was not a second to be lost. Before Harry Grant's feet were off the running board both girls were out of the car on the other side, holding Silky close to them and hiding in the shadow.

Mr. Grant stepped forward and raised the hood of his motor, peering inside with a flashlight. Keeping her eye on him through the open window of the car, Mary Louise crept cautiously along the right side towards the front.

The young man turned about suddenly and swore softly to himself. But it was not because he had seen or heard the girls, although Jane did not wait to find that out. Desperately frightened, she dashed wildly into the protecting darkness of the bushes at the side of the road.

Mary Louise, however, remained steadfastly where she was, waiting for her opportunity.

It came in another moment. Lighting a cigarette, Mr. Grant started to walk to the gas station.

"What could be sweeter!" exclaimed Mary Louise rapturously to herself, for Jane was out of hearing distance by this time. "My big chance!"

She reached her hand quickly through the open window and picked up the satchel from the seat. Then, with Silky close at her heels, she too made for the protecting woods. In another moment she was at Jane's side, breathless and triumphant.

"You're all right?" demanded her chum exultantly. "Oh, Mary Lou, you're marvelous!"

"Not so marvelous as you think," replied the other, feeling for Jane's hand in the darkness. "Lift that satchel!"

Jane groped about, and took it from Mary Louise, expecting a heavy weight.

But it was surprisingly, disappointingly light!

"It can't possibly contain any gold," said Mary Louise, dropping to the ground in disgust. "All our trouble—and we're only a common pair of thieves ourselves!"

Silky came close to her and licked her hand reassuringly, as if he did not agree with her about the name she was calling herself and Jane.

“Stranded on a lonely road—at least ten miles from home!” wailed Jane.

“Sh!” warned Mary Louise. “They’re at the car—Harry and another man. We might be caught!”

But she stopped suddenly: something was coming towards them, as they could sense from the snapping of a twig close by. Not from the road, however, but from the depth of the woods!

CHAPTER VII

“Hands Up!”

The two girls sat rigid with terror, Mary Louise holding tightly to Silky. In the darkness they could see nothing, for the denseness of the trees blotted even the sky from view. The silence of the woods was broken only by a faint rustle in the undergrowth, as something—they didn't know what—came nearer.

Silky's ears were alert, his body as tense with watching, and Jane was actually trembling.

“Got your flashlight, Mary Lou?” she whispered.

“Yes, but I'm afraid to put it on till Harry Grant gets away. He might see it from the road.”

The sudden roar of the motor almost drowned out her words. The noise startled whatever it was that was near them, and the girls felt a little animal pass so close that it nearly touched them. They almost laughed out loud at their fear: the cause of their terror was only an innocent little white rabbit!

Mary Louise took a tighter grip upon her dog.

“You mustn't leave us, Silky! You don't want that bunny! We need you with us.”

The engine continued to roar; the girls heard the car start, and drive away. Jane uttered a sigh of relief.

“I wonder whether he missed his satchel,” she remarked.

“Probably he didn't care if he did,” returned her chum. “I don't believe it has anything in it but a toothbrush and a change of linen.”

“Let’s open it and see.”

Mary Louise turned on her flashlight and looked at the small brown bag beside them.

“Shucks!” she exclaimed in disappointment. “It’s locked.”

“It would be. Well, so long as we have to carry it home, maybe we’ll be glad that it’s so light.”

“I’ve got my penknife. I’m going to cut the leather.”

“But, Mary Lou, it doesn’t belong to us!”

“Can’t help that. We’ll buy Harry Grant a new one if he’s innocent.”

“O.K. You’re the boss. Be careful not to cut yourself.”

“You hold the flashlight, Jane,” said Mary Louise. “While I make the slit.”

The operation was not so easy, for the leather was tough, but Mary Louise always kept her knife as sharp as a boy’s, and she succeeded at last in making an opening.

Excitedly both girls peered into the bag, and Jane reached her hand into its depths. She drew it out again with an expression of disappointment.

“An old Turkish towel!” she exclaimed in dismay.

But Mary Louise’s search proved more fruitful. Her hand came upon a bulky paper wad, encircled by a rubber band. She drew her hand out quickly and flashed the light upon her find.

It was a fat roll of money!

The girls gazed at her discovery in speechless joy. It seemed more like a dream than reality: one of those strange dreams where you find money everywhere, in all sorts of queer, dark places.

“Hide it in your sweater, Mary Lou!” whispered Jane. “Now let’s make tracks for home.”

Her companion concealed it carefully and then took another look into the satchel to make sure that none of the gold was there. She even inserted the flashlight into the bag, to confirm her belief. But there was nothing more.

Both girls got to their feet, Jane with the satchel still in her hands.

“I wish we were home,” she remarked after the flashlight had been turned off, making the darkness seem blacker than before.

“We can pick up a bus along this road, I think,” returned Mary Louise reassuringly. “They ought to run along here about every half hour.”

“Shall we use some of this money for carfare?”

“No, we don’t have to. I have my purse with me.”

Choosing their way carefully through the bushes and undergrowth, the two girls proceeded slowly towards the road. But their adventures in the wood were not over. They heard another rustle of twigs in front of them, and footsteps. Human footsteps, this time!

“Hands up!” snarled a gruff voice.

The reactions of the two girls and the dog were instantaneous—and utterly different. Jane clutched her chum’s arm in terror; Mary Louise flashed her light upon the man—a rough, uncouth character, without even a mask—and Silky flew at his legs. The dog’s bite was quick and sharp: the bully cried out in pain. Mary Louise chuckled and, pulling Jane by the hand, dashed out to the road, towards the lights of the gas station in the distance. As the girls retreated, they could hear groans and swearing from their tormentor.

When they slowed down across the road from the gas station, Mary Louise looked around and whistled for Silky. Jane, noticing that she still clutched the empty bag in her hand, hurled it as far as she could in the direction from which they had come.

In another moment the brave little dog came bounding to them. Mary Louise stooped over and picked him up in her arms.

“You wonderful Silky!” she cried, as she led the way across the road. “You

saved our lives!”

“Suppose we hadn’t taken him!” said Jane in horror. “We’d be dead now.”

“Let’s go ask the attendant about buses,” suggested Mary Louise, still stroking her dog’s head.

“We better not!” cautioned Jane. “He may suspect us, if Harry Grant told him about his loss of the satchel.”

“Oh no, he won’t,” replied Mary Louise. “Because we’ll tell him about the tramp, or the bandit, or whatever he is—and he’ll suspect him.”

They walked confidently up to the man inside the station.

“We’re sort of lost,” announced Mary Louise. “We want to get to Riverside. There was a tramp back there about fifty yards who tried to make trouble for us. Can we stay here until a bus comes along—they do run along here, don’t they?”

“Yes, certainly,” replied the man, answering both questions at once. “About fifty yards back, you say? Did he have a brown satchel with him?”

“I saw a brown satchel lying in the road,” replied Mary Louise innocently. “Why?”

“Because a motorist stopped there a few minutes ago with engine trouble, and while he came to me for help his grip was stolen.”

“Did it have anything valuable in it?” inquired Jane, trying to keep her tone casual.

“Yes. I believe there was about eight hundred dollars in it.”

Mary Louise gasped in delight. That meant that practically all of Miss Grant’s paper money was there—in her sweater! All but one fifty-dollar bill!

“Well, I wouldn’t go back there for eight thousand dollars!” said Jane.

“You can be sure there ain’t any money in the bag now,” returned the attendant shrewdly. “Here comes your bus. You’re lucky: they only run every half hour....”

I'll go stop it for you."

Mary Louise kept Silky in her arms, and the two girls followed their protector to the middle of the road. The bus stopped, and the driver looked doubtfully at Silky.

"Don't allow no dogs," he announced firmly.

"Oh, please!" begged Mary Louise in her sweetest tone. "Silky is such a good, brave dog! He just saved our lives when we were held up by a highwayman. And we have to get home—our mothers will be so worried."

"It's agin' the rules——"

"Please let us this time! I'll hold him in my lap." Her brown eyes looked into his; for a moment the man thought Mary Louise was going to cry. Then he turned to the half a dozen passengers in his car.

"I'll leave it up to youse. Would any of youse people report me if I let this here lady's dog in the bus?"

"We'd report you if you didn't," replied a good-natured woman with gray hair. "These girls must get home as quickly as possible. It's not safe for them to be out on a lonely road like this at night."

"Oh, thank you so much!" exclaimed Mary Louise, smiling radiantly at the kind woman. "It's so good of you to help us out."

The door closed; the girls waved good-bye to the attendant, and the bus started. Mary Louise gazed dismally at her watch.

"Even now we'll be an hour late," she remarked. "We promised our mothers we'd be home by half-past nine!"

"Girls your age shouldn't go lonely places after dark," observed the motherly woman. "Let this be a lesson to you!"

"Oh, it will be, we assure you!" Jane told her. "One experience like this is enough for us."

The bus rumbled on for twenty minutes or so and finally deposited the girls in Riverside, half a block from their homes.

“Still have the money?” whispered Jane, as they ran the short distance to their gates.

“Yes, I can feel the wad here. I was so afraid somebody in the bus would notice it. But having Silky in my lap helped.”

“It seems we have company,” remarked Jane, recognizing a familiar roadster parked in front of their houses.

“Now what can Max want at this time of night?” demanded Mary Louise impatiently. She longed so terribly to get into her room by herself and count the money.

“Here they are, Mrs. Gay!” called a masculine voice from the porch. “They’re all right, apparently.”

The two mothers appeared on Mary Louise’s porch.

“What in the world happened?” demanded Mrs. Patterson. “Mrs. Gay and I have been worried to death.”

“Not to mention us,” added Norman Wilder from the doorstep. “We phoned all your friends, and nobody had seen a thing of you.”

“I wish we could tell you all about it,” answered Mary Louise slowly. “But we aren’t allowed to. All I can say is, it’s something in connection with Elsie Grant—the orphan, you know, Mother, whom we told you about.”

Mrs. Gay looked relieved but not entirely satisfied.

“I can’t have you two girls going up that lonely road at night, dear,” she said. “To the Grants’ place, I mean. It isn’t safe.”

“Oh, we weren’t there tonight,” Jane assured her, not going on to explain that they had gone somewhere far more dangerous.

“Well, if you do have to go there, let Max or Norman drive you,” suggested Mrs.

Patterson. "The boys are willing, aren't you?"

"Sure thing!" they both replied.

"Let's all come inside and have some chocolate cake," said Mrs. Gay, delighted that everything had turned out all right. "You girls must be hungry."

They were, of course; but Mary Louise was more anxious to be alone to count her treasure than to eat. However, she could not refuse, and the party lasted until after eleven.

Her mother followed her upstairs after the company had gone home.

"You must be tired, dear," she said tenderly. "Just step out of your clothes, and I'll hang them up for you."

"Oh, no, thanks, Mother. I'm not so tired. We rode home in the bus... Please don't bother. I'm all right."

"Just as you say, dear," agreed Mrs. Gay, kissing her daughter good-night. "But don't get up for breakfast. Try to get some sleep!"

Mary Louise smiled.

("Not if I know it," she thought to herself. "I'm going after the rest of that treasure! The gold! Maybe if I get that back for Miss Grant, she'll consent to let Elsie go to high school in the fall.")

Very carefully she drew off her sweater and laid the bills under the pillow on her bed. Then, while she ran the shower in the bathroom, behind a locked door, she counted the money and checked the numbers engraved on the paper.

The attendant was right! There were eight hundred dollars in all, in fifty-dollar notes. And the best part about it was the fact that the numbers proved that the money belonged to Miss Mattie Grant!

CHAPTER VIII

A Confession

It was a little after nine o'clock the following morning that Mary Louise and Jane set off for Dark Cedars. The money was safely hidden in Mary Louise's blouse, and Silky was told to come along for protection.

"I'll never leave him home again," said Mary Louise. "Miss Grant will have to get used to him. But when we tell her about last night I guess she'll think he's a pretty wonderful dog."

"I dreamed about bandits and robbers," remarked Jane, with a shudder. "No more night adventures for me!"

"Well, it was worth it, wasn't it? Think of the pleasure of clearing Elsie of suspicion!"

"It won't, though. Her aunt will insist that she took that gold."

"We're going to get that back too," asserted Mary Louise confidently.

"By the way," observed Jane, "Norman tried to make me promise we'd drive over to the Park with them this afternoon and have our supper there, after a swim. I said I'd let him know."

Mary Louise shook her head.

"We can't make dates, Jane. It's out of the question, for we don't know what may turn up. I want to investigate the Pearsons today. That disagreeable Corinne may have had a part in the theft.... I'm sorry now that we promised the boys we'd go on that picnic."

"That picnic's going to be fun! You know what marvelous swimming there is

down by Cooper's woods. And don't forget the gypsies! I love to have my fortune told."

"Yes, that's fun, I admit. But a whole day——"

"Oh, well, maybe we'll solve the whole crime today! And maybe Miss Grant will let us take Elsie with us, now that she has some nice dresses."

Mary Louise's eyes brightened.

"That is an idea, Jane. I'll ask Miss Grant today—as our reward for returning her money."

The increasing heat of the day and the steepness of the climb to Dark Cedars made the girls long for that swimming pool in the amusement park, and Jane at least wished that they were going with the boys. But one glance at her chum's determined face made her realize that such a hope was not to be fulfilled.

Both girls felt hot and sticky when they finally mounted the porch steps at Dark Cedars and pulled the old-fashioned knocker on the wooden door. It was opened almost immediately by Hannah, who evidently had been working right there in the front of the house.

The woman looked hot and disturbed, as if she had been working fast, under pressure.

"Good-morning," said Mary Louise brightly. "May we see Miss Grant, Hannah?"

"I don't know," replied the servant. "She's all of a fluster. We're at sixes and sevens here this mornin'. The ghosts walked last night."

"What ghosts?" asked Mary Louise, trying to repress a smile.

"You know. Elsie's told you about 'em. The spirits that wanders through this house at night, mussin' up things. They had a party all over the downstairs last night."

"Hannah!" exclaimed Jane. "You know that isn't possible. If there was a disturbance, it was caused by human beings. Burglars."

The woman shook her head.

“You don’t know nuthin’ about it! If it was burglars, why wasn’t somethin’ stolen?”

“Wasn’t anything stolen?” demanded Mary Louise incredulously. “Not Miss Grant’s bonds?”

“Nope. They’re all there—safe. Pictures was taken down—old pictures that must-a belonged to the spirits when they was alive. That old desk in the corner of the dinin’ room—the one that belonged to Miss Mattie’s father—was rummaged through, and all the closets was upset. But nuthin’s missin’!”

“It looks as if somebody were searching for a will,” remarked Jane. “You know—‘the lost will’ you so often read about.”

“There ain’t no will in this house,” Hannah stated. “Miss Mattie give hers to Mr. John Grant to keep, long ago. No, ma’am, it ain’t nateral what’s goin’ on here, and William and I are movin’ out——”

“What’s this? What’s this?” interrupted the shrill, high voice of the old lady. “What are you gossiping about, Hannah? And to whom?”

“I’m just tellin’ them two young girls—the ones that come here before, you know——”

“Well, never mind!” snapped the spinster. “We haven’t time to bother with them this morning. Tell them to run along and not to take up Elsie’s time, either. She’s got plenty to do.”

Jane laughed sarcastically.

“Somebody ought to teach that woman manners,” she whispered to Mary Louise. “Serve her right if we didn’t give her the money!”

Her chum smiled. “We couldn’t be so cruel,” she replied. “Besides, it wouldn’t be honest.” She raised her voice. “Miss Grant, we have some money for you.”

“Money? My money?” The old lady’s voice was as eager as a child’s. For the moment she forgot all about the pain in her side and came downstairs more

rapidly than she had done for many a day.

Both girls watched her in surprise. She looked different today—much younger. Instead of the somber old black sateen which she usually wore, she was dressed in a gray gown of soft, summery material, and her cheeks were flushed a pale pink. Her black eyes were alight with vivacity.

“You’re not fooling me?” she demanded fearfully.

Mary Louise reached into her blouse and produced the roll of bills.

“No, Miss Grant. We have eight hundred dollars here—your money! The numbers on the bills correspond to the figures you gave me.”

“Where’s the other fifty?” asked the woman greedily. “Did you keep it yourselves?”

“No, of course not. We don’t know where it is. But if you sit down, Miss Grant, we’ll tell you our story.”

The spinster reached out her hand for the roll of money and clasped it as lovingly as a mother might fondle her lost child.

“Come into the parlor,” she said, leading the way from the hall, “and tell me all about it.”

The girls followed her into the ugly room with its old-fashioned furniture, and saw for themselves the chaos which Hannah had been describing. Instinctively Mary Louise glanced at the windows to determine how an intruder could enter, for she did not believe Hannah’s story of the ghosts. Although the shutters were half closed, she could see that the catch on the side window had been broken. But everything in this house was so dilapidated that perhaps no one had noticed it.

When they were all seated, Jane told the story of the previous evening’s adventure, stressing the part that Silky had played at the end. Miss Grant was impressed and actually asked to see the wonderful little dog. Mary Louise replied that he was waiting for them on the porch.

“So it was Harry Grant after all!” the old lady muttered. “I’m not surprised. But I

still believe Elsie had some part in it—and got the gold pieces for herself. She'd rather have them than the paper money.”

“Oh no, Miss Grant!” protested Mary Louise. “We’re going to track them down too. We want to go over to Harry Grant’s now, if you’ll write us a note of introduction and explanation. He may have the gold at his house—it isn’t likely that he’d carry it around.”

“Possibly. But I don’t believe I’ll write a note—I think I’ll go along with you! I want to talk to that good-for-nothing nephew of mine myself—if he’s home. And he probably is, since you got the money... Yes, and I’m going to put this money and my bonds in the bank!” She hesitated a moment. “If you girls get me back that other fifty-dollar bill, I’ll give you a reward.”

“We don’t want a reward, Miss Grant,” objected Mary Louise. “If you’ll just let us take Elsie with us to a picnic the young people in Riverside are planning, we’ll be satisfied.”

“I’ll think about it,” replied the woman. “Hannah!” she called. “You go up and get my bonnet, and a brown paper package that’s underneath it in the box. I’m going to Riverside.”

“You ain’t a-goin’ a walk, Miss Mattie?” demanded the servant in horror.

“Of course I am. I haven’t any car. John may not be over for several days.”

“But your side——”

“Fiddlesticks! Do as you’re told, Hannah.”

The girls hated to leave without seeing Elsie, but they knew that Hannah would tell her what had happened. Besides, they would probably return with Miss Grant; perhaps they could get Norman or Max to drive them over. Jane chuckled at the idea of putting the old lady in the rumble seat—just for spite!

Silky came darting up to them as they came out of the door, and Miss Grant reached over and patted his head. (“It’s her one redeeming trait,” thought Mary Louise—“her kindness to animals.”)

“I’m glad you brought him,” she said, “in case we meet anybody like that man

you encountered last night!”

They proceeded slowly, although the road was downhill; every few minutes Miss Grant stopped and held her hand over her side. Mary Louise wondered what they would do if the old lady collapsed, and decided that Jane would have to run for a doctor while she and Silky stayed to protect her and administer first aid.

But they reached the Riverside bank without any such mishap, and Miss Grant attended to her business while the girls waited outside. Then, very slowly, they walked the three blocks to the home of Harry Grant.

“He is back!” exclaimed Mary Louise jubilantly as she recognized the battered old car in the driveway. “I didn’t expect he would be. I thought he’d stay away as long as that fifty-dollar bill lasted him.”

“Maybe he didn’t have it,” remarked Miss Grant.

Jane turned on her angrily.

“You think we kept that, don’t you, Miss Grant?” she demanded.

“No, no! Nothing of the kind!”

Before they had mounted the porch steps, Mrs. Grace Grant had rushed out of her house in amazement and stood gazing at her sister-in-law as if she were a ghost. She was a woman of about the same age, but much pleasanter looking, with soft gray hair and a sweet smile. As Elsie had said, nobody could believe anything bad about Mrs. Grace Grant.

“Why, Mattie, this is a surprise!” she exclaimed. “It’s been five years at least _____”

“It’ll be more of a surprise when I tell you why I’m here, Grace,” snapped the other, sinking into a chair on the porch with a sigh of relief. “I’ve got bad news. I’ve been robbed.”

“Robbed?”

“Yes.” In a few words the spinster told the story of her loss of thirteen hundred and fifty dollars, and of the two girls’ offer of assistance in discovering the thief.

“Of course, I suspected Elsie immediately,” she said, “but it seems I made a mistake. Or partly a mistake, for there is still five hundred missing—all in gold. But these girls found out who took the bills and have got them all back for me—all but fifty dollars.”

“Who was the thief?” demanded Mrs. Grant excitedly.

“*Your son Harry!* I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Grace.”

“I don’t believe it!” protested the other woman. “What proof have you, Mattie?”

“Tell the story, Jane,” said Miss Grant. “I’m too tired.” She leaned against the back of her chair in exhaustion.

Briefly Jane related the incidents of the previous evening, describing their perilous ride in Harry Grant’s car. The story rang true; Jane repeated the very words the young man had uttered as he drove away, words which Mrs. Grant recalled easily. Before she had finished, the unhappy mother was crying softly.

“What are you going to do to him, Mattie?” she asked finally. “Have him arrested?”

“That depends on him,” replied her visitor. “If he gives me back the other bill, maybe I’ll let him go. I don’t want to drag the Grant name into the papers if I can help it.... Is he home?”

“Yes. He’s upstairs, dressing.”

“Just getting up, eh?”

“He was out late last night.”

“Carousing with my fifty dollars, I suppose.”

“I hope not.” Mrs. Grant rose and went through the screen door. Five minutes later she returned with her son.

As Elsie had remarked, Harry Grant was a good-looking man. He was stylishly dressed, in an immaculate linen suit, and he came out smiling nonchalantly at his aunt, as if the whole thing were a joke.

“Well, I’ll be darned!” he exclaimed, staring incredulously at Mary Louise and Jane. “Are these the girls Mother says I took for a ride last night?”

“It’s a terrible car,” remarked Jane.

Miss Grant stamped her foot to put a stop to what she considered nonsensical talk.

“Tell me just how you managed to steal my money, Harry,” she commanded. “And where the other fifty-dollar bill is—and my five hundred in gold.”

The young man’s chin went up in the air.

“I didn’t steal your money, Aunt Mattie,” he said. “I was never inside your bedroom in my life—at least, not since I was grown up!”

“Don’t lie, Harry! How did you get it if you didn’t steal it out of my safe?”

“It was given to me.”

“By whom?” Miss Grant looked scornful: she couldn’t believe any such foolish statement.

The young man hesitated. “I don’t think I ought to tell that,” he replied.

“Oh yes, you ought! And you have to, or I’ll have you arrested,” threatened his aunt.

“Tell the truth, dear,” urged his mother. “Whoever stole that money deserves to suffer for it.”

“All right—I will! It was Corinne—my niece, Corinne Pearson. She took it. Eight hundred and fifty dollars in bills. She gave me eight hundred dollars—half of it to spend for her, and half for myself. I was to buy a certain evening gown and cloak in a shop in New York with which she had been corresponding. With my four hundred I was going to get a new car and drive back to Riverside and announce that I had a present for Corinne, because I was sorry for her about the party, and because I had put a good sale through. That’s all.... It simply didn’t work.”

“Corinne!” repeated Miss Grant. “I’m not surprised. I always did suspect her... And has she the other fifty dollars?”

“Yes, I believe she kept that for slippers and the beauty parlor,” answered Harry.

Miss Grant got up from her chair.

“You surely haven’t any of the gold, have you, Harry?” she inquired.

“No. Corinne didn’t say anything about any gold pieces. You can’t use them now, anyhow.”

“No doubt she’s keeping them put away,” surmised the old lady. “Come, girls! We’re going to the Pearsons’ now.”

“Can I drive you over, Aunt Mattie?” offered Harry jovially.

“I wouldn’t put a foot in that rattletrap for anything in the world!” was his aunt’s ungracious retort.

So she hobbled down the steps with Mary Louise and Jane beside her and Silky close at their heels.

CHAPTER IX

The Fifty-Dollar Bill

The Pearsons' home, an attractive house of the English cottage type, was half a mile from Mrs. Grant's, in the best residential section of Riverside. Mary Louise, noticing Miss Grant's increasing weakness, suggested a taxicab.

The old lady scorned such a proposal.

"Use your common sense, Mary Louise!" she commanded, in that brusque manner which Jane so resented. "You know I've lost five hundred and fifty dollars, and now you suggest that I throw money away on luxuries like taxicabs!"

"I'll pay for it," offered the girl. "I have my purse with me."

"Fiddlesticks!"

The hot sun of the June day poured mercilessly down upon their heads as they made their slow progress along the streets of Riverside, but Miss Grant refused to give up, although it was evident that she was suffering intensely. When they finally reached the porch of the Pearson home she almost collapsed.

Corinne Pearson was sitting in the swing, idly smoking a cigarette when the little party arrived. She was a blonde, about nineteen years of age, pretty in an artificial way. Even her pose, alone on the porch, was theatrical. She rose languidly as her great-aunt came up the steps.

"Mother's inside, Aunt Mattie," she said, ignoring the two girls completely. "I'll go and tell her that you are here."

Miss Grant opened her eyes wide and looked sharply at Corinne.

“Don’t trouble yourself!” she snapped, gasping for breath. “It’s *you* I came to see, Corinne Pearson!”

The girl raised her delicately arched eyebrows.

“Really? Well, I am honored, Aunt Mattie.” There was nothing in her manner to indicate nervousness, and Mary Louise began to wonder whether Harry Grant’s story were really true.

“You won’t be when I tell you why I’m here! Though of course you can guess.” Miss Grant paused and took a deep breath. “It’s about that money you stole from my safe!”

“What money?” The girl’s indifference was admirable, if indeed she were guilty, as Harry Grant claimed.

“You know. Eight hundred and fifty dollars in bills and five hundred in gold pieces.”

Corinne laughed in a nasty superior way.

“Really, Aunt Mattie, you are talking foolishly. I’m sorry if you have been robbed, but it’s just too absurd to connect me with it.”

“Stop your posing and lying, Corinne Pearson!” cried the old lady in a shrill voice. “I know all about everything. Harry Grant has confessed.”

Mary Louise, watching the girl’s face intently, thought that she saw her wince. Anyway, the cigarette she was smoking dropped to the floor. But her voice sounded controlled as she spoke to her great-aunt.

“Please don’t scream like that, Aunt Mattie,” she said. “The neighbors will hear you. I think you had better come inside and see Mother.”

“All right,” agreed the old lady. Then, turning to the girls, she requested them to help her get to her feet.

“I’ll help you,” offered Corinne. “These young girls can wait out here.”

“No, they can’t, either! They’re coming right inside with me!”

Corinne shrugged her slim shoulders and opened the screen door. Her mother, a stout woman of perhaps forty-five, was standing in the living room, which opened directly on the porch.

“Why, Aunt Mattie!” she exclaimed. “This is a surprise. You must be feeling better——”

“I’m a lot worse!” interrupted the old lady, sinking into a chair beside the door. “Your daughter’s the cause of it, too!”

“My daughter? How could Corinne be the cause of your bad health, Aunt Mattie? You’re talking foolishly.”

“Don’t speak to me like that, Ellen Grant Pearson! Your daughter Corinne’s a thief—and she stole my money, out of my safe. Night before last, when she went upstairs to get that old lace dress of mine.”

“Impossible!” protested Mrs. Pearson. “You didn’t, did you, Corinne?”

“Certainly not,” replied the girl. “I think Aunt Mattie’s mind is wandering, Mother. Send these girls home, and I’ll call up Uncle John. He’ll come and drive Aunt Mattie back to Dark Cedars.”

“You’ll do nothing of the kind!” announced Miss Grant. “There’s not a thing the matter with my mind—it’s my side and my breathing.” She turned to her two young friends. “Jane, you tell them all about everything that has happened since I was robbed.”

Jane nodded and again related the story, telling of their wild ride in Harry Grant’s car, the capture of the satchel with the bills in it, and concluding with Harry’s confession concerning Corinne’s part in the crime. Mrs. Pearson leaned forward in her chair, listening to the recital with serious attention, but her daughter acted as if she were bored with such nonsense and wandered about the room while Jane was talking, rearranging the flowers on the tables and lighting herself a fresh cigarette.

“It isn’t true, is it, dear?” asked Mrs. Pearson eagerly.

Corinne laughed scornfully.

“It’s just too absurd to contradict,” she replied. “Uncle Harry made it all up about me just to save his own face.” She turned about and faced her great-aunt. “You know yourself, Aunt Mattie, that if I had stolen that money I wouldn’t pay him four hundred dollars just to buy me some clothes in New York. It’s all out of proportion.”

Miss Grant nodded: she could see the sense to that. A hundred dollars would have been ample commission.

“May I say something?” put in Mary Louise meekly.

“Certainly,” replied Miss Grant.

The girl felt herself trembling as all eyes in the room turned upon her. But she spoke out bravely, disregarding Corinne’s open scorn.

“I believe I can explain why Miss Pearson divided the money evenly with Mr. Harry Grant,” she said. “It was a clever trick, to throw the suspicion on him. Because you know, Miss Grant, if you saw him drive home with a new car, wouldn’t you naturally jump to the conclusion that he had bought it with your money?”

The old lady nodded her head: the idea sounded reasonable to her.

“And as for Miss Pearson’s evening dress and cloak,” continued Mary Louise, “if she didn’t buy them in Riverside, you’d probably never know what she paid for them, or suspect them of being particularly expensive.”

“That’s true, Mary Louise,” agreed Miss Grant. “I’d never dream anybody would spend four hundred dollars for two pieces of finery.”

Exasperated with the discussion, Corinne Pearson started towards the stairway.

“I’m not going to listen to any more of this ridiculous babble!” she said to her mother, with a scathing glance towards Mary Louise. “You’ll have to excuse me, Aunt Mattie,” she added condescendingly. “I have a date.”

“You stay right here!” commanded the old lady. “I’m not through with you. You hand over that other fifty-dollar bill!”

Corinne shrugged her shoulders and looked imploringly at her mother, as if to say, "Can't something be done with that crazy woman?"

Mrs. Pearson looked helpless: she didn't know how to get rid of her aunt.

The situation was apparently at a standstill. Corinne Pearson wouldn't admit any part in the theft, and Miss Grant refused to allow her to go off as if she were innocent. But Mary Louise, recalling Harry Grant's explanation of the use to which Corinne had put that last fifty-dollar bill, had a sudden inspiration. She stood up and faced Mrs. Pearson.

"May I use your telephone?" she asked quietly.

"Why, yes, certainly," was the reply. "Right there on the table."

Again all eyes in the room were turned upon Mary Louise as she searched through the telephone book and gave a number to the operator. Everybody waited, in absolute silence.

"Hello," said Mary Louise when the connection was made. "Is this the Bon Ton Boot Shop? Yes? Can you tell me whether you took in a fifty-dollar bill yesterday from any of your customers?"

It seemed to her that she could actually feel the tenseness of the atmosphere in that room in the Pearsons' house while she waited for the shop girl to return with the information she had asked for. Her eyes turned towards Corinne to see how the question had affected her, but Mary Louise could not see her face from where she was seated. In another moment the voice at the other end of the wire summoned her thoughts back to the phone. And the answer was in the affirmative!

"So you did take in a fifty-dollar bill?" Mary Louise repeated for the benefit of her listeners. "Could you possibly read me the number engraved on it?"

Her hand trembled as she fumbled for her little notebook in which the notations were made, and Jane, guessing her intention, dashed across the room to assist her. When the salesgirl finally read out the number on the bill, Mary Louise was able to check it with the one marked "missing." It was the identical bill!

"Will you keep it out of the bank for an hour or two—in case we want to identify

it—for a certain purpose?” she inquired. “My name is Mary Louise Gay—Detective Gay’s daughter.... Oh, thank you so much!”

She replaced the receiver and jumped up from the chair, squeezing Jane’s arm in delight. She noticed that Miss Grant’s black eyes were beaming upon her with admiration and that Mrs. Pearson’s were shifting uneasily about the room. Corinne was standing at the window with her back to the other people.

Suddenly she burst into hysterical sobs. Wheeling about sharply, she turned on Mary Louise like a cat that is ready to spit.

“You horrible girl!” she screamed. “You nasty, vile creature! What right have you——”

“Hush, Corinne!” admonished Miss Grant. “Be quiet, or I’ll send you somewhere where you will be! Dry your eyes and sit down there in that chair and tell us the truth. And throw that cigarette away!”

Frightened by her great-aunt’s threat, the girl did as she was told.

“I suppose you won’t believe me now when I tell you that I didn’t take any gold pieces,” she whined. “But that’s the solemn truth. I admit about the bills——”

“Begin at the beginning,” snapped Miss Grant.

“All right. It was night before last, when Mother and I walked over to ask you for money for a dress. It means so much to me to look nice at the dance on Saturday night——”

“I don’t care what it means to you,” interrupted the spinster. “Go ahead with your story.”

“Well, I thought it was pretty stingy of you not to help me out, Aunt Mattie,” continued Corinne. “But I never thought of taking the money till I went up in your room.”

“How did you get the safe open?”

“That’s the queer part. *It was open!* I thought you had forgotten to close the door.”

Miss Grant gasped in horror.

“I never forget. Besides, I saw that the lock had been picked. Somebody did break it, if you didn’t, Corinne.”

“There wasn’t a bit of gold there, Aunt Mattie. I’m willing to swear to that!” Corinne looked straight into the old lady’s black eyes, and Mary Louise could see that her aunt believed her and was already trying to figure out who else was guilty.

“No, you didn’t have time to fiddle with a lock,” she agreed. “I can believe that.... I think I was right in the beginning: Elsie must have stolen the box of gold pieces.”

“Of course!” cried Corinne in relief. “That would explain it perfectly. An ignorant child like her would want only the gold—that’s why the paper money and the bonds were untouched. Did you lose the bonds too, Aunt Mattie?”

“No, they were still there. I put them in the bank today, with the eight hundred dollars these girls got from Harry Grant.... Well, Corinne, you did give your uncle Harry that money then?”

“Yes, I did. For the exact purpose he told you about.”

Mary Louise sighed. They were right back where they started, with only this difference: that while Elsie had been suspected of the theft of the whole amount in the beginning, now she was thought to be guilty of stealing only the gold. But stealing is stealing, no matter what the amount, and Mary Louise was unhappy.

Miss Grant grasped hold of the arms of her chair and struggled to her feet. She stood there motionless for a moment, holding her hand on her side. The flush on her cheeks had disappeared; her face was now deathly white. Both girls knew that she could never make that climb in the heat to Dark Cedars.

“You won’t do anything to Corinne, will you, Aunt Mattie?” pleaded Mrs. Pearson fearfully.

“No—I guess not. Go get me—” Mary Louise expected her to ask for aromatics, to prevent a fainting fit, but she was mistaken—“go get me—my fifty dollars—what you have left of it, Corinne. You can owe——”

But she could not complete her sentence: she reeled, and would have fallen to the floor had not Mary Louise sprung to her side at that very second. As it was, Miss Grant fainted in the girl's arms.

Very gently Mary Louise laid her down on the davenport and turned to Mrs. Pearson.

"Water, please," she requested. But it failed to revive the patient.

"I think she ought to go to the hospital, Mrs. Pearson," she said. "There's something terribly wrong with her side."

Mrs. Pearson looked relieved: she had no desire to nurse a sick old lady in her house, even though she was her aunt. She told Corinne to call for an ambulance.

It was not until two white-uniformed attendants were actually putting her on the stretcher that Miss Grant regained consciousness. Then she opened her eyes and asked for Mary Louise.

"Come with me, child!" she begged. "I want you."

The girl nodded, and whispering a message for her mother to Jane, she climbed into the ambulance and rode to the hospital with the queer old spinster.

CHAPTER X

Night at Dark Cedars

Mary Louise sat in the waiting room of the Riverside Hospital, idly looking at the magazines, while the nurses took Miss Grant to her private room. She couldn't help smiling a little as she thought how vexed the old lady would be at the bill she would get. Corinne Pearson had carelessly told the hospital to have one of the best rooms in readiness for the patient.

("But, if she had her own way, Miss Grant would be in a ward," thought Mary Louise.)

However, it was too late now to dispute over details. The head nurse came into the waiting room and spoke to Mary Louise in a soft voice.

"Miss Matilda Grant is your aunt, I suppose, Miss——?" she asked.

"Gay," supplied Mary Louise. "No, I'm not any relation. Just a friend—of her niece."

"Oh, I see.... Yes, I know your father, Miss Gay. He is a remarkable man."

Mary Louise smiled.

"I think so too," she said.

"As you no doubt expected," continued the nurse, "an operation is absolutely necessary. The nurses are getting Miss Grant ready now."

"Has she consented?"

"Yes. She had to. It is certain death if the surgeon doesn't operate immediately. But before she goes under the anesthetic she wants to see you. So please come

with me.”

A little surprised at the request, Mary Louise followed the nurse through the hall of the spotless hospital to the elevator and thence to Miss Grant’s room. The old lady was lying in a white bed, attired in a plain, high-necked nightgown which the hospital provided. Her face was deathly pale, but her black eyes were as bright as ever, and she smiled at Mary Louise as she entered the room.

With her wrinkled hand she beckoned the girl to a chair beside the bed.

“You’re a good girl, Mary Louise,” she said, “and I trust you.”

Mary Louise flushed a trifle at the praise; she didn’t know exactly what to say, so she kept quiet and waited.

“Will you do something for me?” asked the old lady.

“Yes, of course, Miss Grant,” replied Mary Louise. “If I can.”

“I want you to live at Dark Cedars while I’m here in the hospital. Take Jane with you, if you want to, and your dog too—but plan to stay there.”

“I can’t be there every minute, Miss Grant. Tomorrow I’ve promised to go on a picnic.”

“Oh, that’s all right! I remember now, you told me. Take Elsie with you. But go back to Dark Cedars at night. *Sleep in my room.* And shut the door!”

Mary Louise looked puzzled; she could not see the reason for such a request.

“But there isn’t anything valuable for anybody to steal now, is there, Miss Grant?” she inquired. “You put your money and your bonds in the bank today.”

The sick woman gasped for breath and for a moment she could not speak. Finally she said, “You heard about last night from Hannah? And saw the way things were upset?”

“Yes. But if the burglars didn’t take anything, they won’t be likely to return, will they?”

Miss Grant closed her eyes.

“It wasn’t common burglars,” she said.

Mary Louise started. Did Miss Grant believe in Hannah’s theory about the ghosts?

“You don’t mean——?”

“I don’t know what I mean,” answered the old lady. “Somebody—living or dead—is trying to get hold of something very precious to me.”

“What is it, Miss Grant?” demanded Mary Louise eagerly. Oh, perhaps now she was getting close to the real mystery at Dark Cedars! For that petty theft by Corinne Pearson was only a side issue, she felt sure.

The old lady shook her head.

“I can’t tell—even you, Mary Louise! Nobody!”

“Then how can I help you?”

“You can watch Elsie and try to find out where she hid my box of gold pieces. You can keep your eye open for trouble at night—and let me know if anything happens.... Will you do it, Mary Louise?”

“I’ll ask Mother—at least, if you’ll let me tell her all about what has happened. It won’t get around Riverside—Mother is used to keeping secrets, you know, for my father is a detective. And if she consents, I’ll go and stay with Elsie till you come home.”

Tears of gratitude stood in the sick woman’s eyes; the promise evidently meant a great deal to her.

“Yes, tell your mother,” she said. “And Jane’s mother. But nobody else.”

Mary Louise stood up.

“I must go now, Miss Grant. Your nurse has been beckoning to me for the last two minutes. You have to rest.... But I’ll come in to see you on Sunday.”

She walked out of the room, closing the door softly behind her and thinking how sad it must be to face an operation all alone, with no one's loving kiss on your lips, no one's hopes and prayers to sustain you. But, sorry as Mary Louise was for Miss Grant, she could not show her any affection. She couldn't forget or forgive her cruelty to Elsie.

Her mother was waiting for her on the porch when she arrived at her house.

"You must be starved, Mary Louise!" she exclaimed. "I have your lunch all ready for you."

"Thanks heaps, Mother—I am hungry. But so much has happened. Did Jane tell you about Miss Grant?"

"Yes. But I can't see why *you* had to go to the hospital with her when she has all those relatives to look after her."

Mary Louise shrugged her shoulders.

"They don't like her, Mother—and consequently she doesn't trust them."

"Do you like her?" inquired Mrs. Gay.

"No, I don't. But in a way I feel sorry for her."

Mary Louise followed her mother into the dining room and for the next fifteen minutes gave herself up to the enjoyment of the lovely lunch of dainty sandwiches and refreshing iced tea which her mother had so carefully prepared. It was not until she had finished that she began her story of the robbery at Dark Cedars and of her own and Jane's part in the partial recovery of the money. She made no mention, however, of the bandit who had tried to hold them up, or of the queer disturbances at night at Dark Cedars. She concluded with the old lady's request that they—Mary Louise and Jane—stay with Elsie and watch her.

Mrs. Gay looked a little doubtful.

"I don't know, dear," she said. "Something might happen. Still, if Mrs. Patterson is willing to let Jane go, I suppose I will say yes."

Fifteen minutes later Mary Louise whistled for her chum and put the proposition

up to her.

Jane shivered.

“I’m not going to stay in that spooky old place!” she protested. “Not after what happened there last night.”

“Who’s afraid of the big, bad wolf?” teased Mary Louise. “Jane, I thought you had more sense!”

“There’s something uncanny about Dark Cedars, Mary Lou, and you know it! Not just that the house is old, and the boards creak, and there aren’t any electric lights. There’s something *evil* there.”

“Of course there is. But that’s the very reason it thrills me. I don’t agree with Miss Grant and just want to go there because I believe Elsie is guilty of stealing that gold and that maybe we can find out where she has hidden it. Somebody else took it, I’m sure—and that somebody keeps coming back to Dark Cedars to get *something* else. Something valuable, ‘precious to me,’ Miss Grant called it. And we’ve got to catch them!”

“You didn’t tell your mother that?”

“No. I told her about only what has actually been stolen so far. No need to alarm her. And will you do the same with your mother?”

Jane rose reluctantly.

“I suppose so. If you’ve made up your mind to go through with it, you’ll do it. I know you well enough for that. And I don’t want you over there at Dark Cedars alone—or only with Elsie. Even Hannah and William are moving out, you remember.... Yes, I’ll go. If Mother will let me.”

“You’re a peach, Jane!” cried her chum joyfully.

It was several hours, however, before the girls actually started to Dark Cedars. Arrangements for the picnic the following day had to be completed; their suitcases had to be packed, and their boy-friends called on the telephone. It was after five o’clock when they were finally ready.

From the porch of Mary Louise's house they saw Max Miller drive up in his car.

"I'm taking you over," he announced, for Mary Louise had told him that she and Jane were visiting Elsie Grant for a few days.

"That's nice, Max," replied Mary Louise. "We weren't so keen about carrying these suitcases in all this heat."

"It is terribly hot, isn't it?" remarked Mrs. Gay. "I'm afraid there will be a thunderstorm before the day is over."

Jane made a face. Dark Cedars was gloomy enough without a storm to make it seem worse.

"Come on, Silky!" called Mary Louise. "We're taking you this time."

"I'll say we are!" exclaimed her chum emphatically.

Elsie Grant was delighted to see them. She came running from behind the hedge attired in her pink linen dress and her white shoes. Mary Louise was thankful that Max did not see her in the old purple calico. His sense of humor might have got the better of him and brought forth a wisecrack or two.

As soon as they were out of the car she introduced them to each other.

"You didn't know we were coming for a visit, did you, Elsie?" she inquired. "Well, I'll tell you how it happened: Your aunt Mattie is in the hospital for an operation, and she wanted Jane and me to stay with you while she was away."

The girl wrinkled her brows.

"It doesn't sound like Aunt Mattie," she said, "to be so thoughtful of me. She must have some other motive besides pity for my loneliness."

"She has!" cried Jane. "You can be sure——"

Mary Louise put her finger to her lips.

"We'll tell you all about it later," she whispered while Max was getting the suitcases from the rumble seat. "It's quite a story."

“Is Hannah still here?” inquired Jane. “Or do we cook our own supper?”

“Yes, she’s here,” answered Elsie. “She expects to come every day to work in the house, and William will take care of the garden and the chickens and milk the cow just the same. But they’re going away every night after supper.”

Max, overhearing the last remark, looked disapproving.

“You don’t mean to tell me you three girls will be here alone every night?” he demanded. “You’re at least half a mile from the nearest house.”

“Oh, don’t worry, Max, we’ll be all right,” returned Mary Louise lightly. “There’s a family of colored people who live in a shack down in the valley behind the house. We can call on them if it is necessary.”

“Speaking of them,” remarked Elsie, “reminds me that William says half a dozen chickens must have been stolen last night. At least, they’re missing, and of course he blames Abraham Lincoln Jones. But I don’t believe it. Mr. Jones is a deacon in the Riverside Colored Church, and his wife is the kindest woman. I often stop in to see her, and she gives me gingerbread.”

Mary Louise and Jane exchanged significant looks. Perhaps this colored family was the explanation of the mysterious disturbances about Dark Cedars.

Mary Louise suggested this to Elsie after Max had driven away with a promise to call for the girls at nine o’clock the following morning.

“I don’t think so,” said Elsie. “But of course it’s possible.”

“Let’s walk over to see this family after supper,” put in Jane. “We might learn a lot.”

“All right,” agreed Elsie, “if a storm doesn’t come up to stop us.... Now, come on upstairs and unpack. What room are you going to sleep in—Hannah’s or Aunt Mattie’s—or up in the attic with me?”

“We have to sleep in your aunt Mattie’s bedroom,” replied Mary Louise. “I promised we would.”

Elsie looked disappointed.

“You’ll be so far away from me!” she exclaimed.

“Why don’t you sleep on the second floor too?” inquired Jane.

“There isn’t any room that’s furnished as a bedroom, except Hannah’s, and I think she still has her things in that. Besides, Aunt Mattie wouldn’t like it.”

“Oh, well, we’ll leave our door open,” promised Jane.

“No, we can’t do that either,” asserted Mary Louise. “Miss Grant told me to close it.”

“Good gracious!” exclaimed her chum. “What next?”

“Supper’s ready!” called Hannah from the kitchen.

“So that’s next,” laughed Mary Louise. “Well, we’ll unpack after supper. I’m not very hungry—I had lunch so late—but I guess I can eat.”

Hannah came into the dining room and sat down in a chair beside the window while the girls ate their supper, so that she might hear the news of her mistress. Mary Louise told everything—the capture of the bills, the part Harry Grant played in the affair, and Corinne Pearson’s guilt in the actual stealing. She went on to describe Miss Grant’s collapse and removal to the Riverside Hospital, concluding with her request that the two girls stay with Elsie while she was away.

“So she still thinks I stole her gold pieces!” cried the orphan miserably.

“I’m afraid she does, Elsie,” admitted Mary Louise. “But there’s something else she’s worrying about. What could Miss Grant possibly own, Hannah, that she’s afraid of losing?”

“I don’t know for sure,” replied the servant. “But I’ll tell you what I think—if you won’t laugh at me.”

“Of course we won’t, Hannah,” promised Jane.

“Well, there was something years ago that old Mr. Grant got hold of—something valuable—that I made out didn’t belong to him. I don’t know what it was—

never did know—but I'd hear Mrs. Grant—that was Miss Mattie's mother, you understand—tryin' to get him to give it back. 'It can't do us no good,' she'd say—or words like them. And he'd always tell her that he meant to keep it for a while; if they lost everything else, this possession would keep 'em out of the poorhouse for a spell. Mrs. Grant kept askin' him whereabouts it was hidden, and he just laughed at her. I believe she died without ever findin' out....

“Well, whatever it was, Mr. Grant must have give it to Miss Mattie when he died, and she kept it hid somewheres in this house. No ordinary place, or I'd have found it in house-cleanin'. You can't houseclean for forty years, twicet a year, without knowin' 'bout everything in a house.... But I never seen nuthin' valuable outside that safe of her'n.

“So what I think is,” continued Hannah, keeping her eyes fixed on Mary Louise, “that Mrs. Grant can't rest in her grave till that thing is give back to whoever it belongs to. I believe her spirit visits this house at night, lookin' for it, and turnin' things upside down to find it. That's why nuthin' ain't never stolen. So anybody that lives here ain't goin' have no peace at nights till she finds it.”

Hannah stopped talking, and, as Jane had promised, nobody laughed. As a matter of fact, nobody felt like laughing. The woman's belief in her explanation was too sincere to be derided. The girls sat perfectly still, forgetting even to eat, thinking solemnly of what she had told them.

“We'll have to find out what the thing is,” announced Mary Louise finally, “if we expect to make any headway. I wish I could go see Miss Mattie at the hospital tomorrow.”

“Well, you can't,” said Jane firmly. “You're going to that picnic. We can ask the gypsies when we have our fortunes told.”

“Gypsies!” exclaimed Hannah scornfully. “Gypsies ain't no good! They used to camp around here till they drove Miss Mattie wild and she got the police after 'em. Don't have nuthin' to do with gypsies!”

“We're just going to have our fortunes told,” explained Jane. “We don't expect to invite them to our houses.”

“Well, don't!” was the servant's warning as she left the room.

When the girls had finished their supper they went upstairs to Miss Grant's bedroom and unpacked their suitcases. But they were too tired to walk down the hill to call upon Abraham Lincoln Jones. If he wanted to steal chickens tonight, he was welcome to, as far as they were concerned.

Hannah and William left about eight o'clock, locking the kitchen door behind them, and the girls stayed out on the front porch until ten, talking and singing to Jane's ukulele. The threatening storm had not arrived when they finally went to bed.

It was so still, so hot outdoors that not even a branch moved in the darkness. The very silence was oppressive; Jane was sure that she wouldn't be able to go to sleep when she got into Miss Mattie's wooden bed with its ugly carving on the headboard. But, in spite of the heat, both girls dropped off in less than five minutes.

They were awakened sometime after two by a loud clap of thunder. Branches of the trees close to the house were lashing against the windows, and the rain was pouring in. Mary Louise jumped up to shut the window. As she crawled back into bed she heard footsteps in the hall. Light footsteps, scarcely perceptible above the rain. But someone—something—was stealthily approaching their door!

Her instinct was to reach for the electric-light button when she remembered that Miss Grant used only oil lamps. Trembling, she groped in the darkness for her flashlight, on the chair beside her. But before she found it the handle rattled on the door, and it opened—slowly and quietly.

There, dimly perceptible in the blackness of the hall, stood a figure—all in white!

CHAPTER XI

The Picnic

The figure in white remained motionless in the doorway of Miss Grant's room. Mary Louise continued to sit rigid in the bed, while Jane, who was still lying down, clutched her chum's arm with a grip that actually hurt.

For a full minute there was no sound in the room. Then a flash of lightning revealed the cause of the girls' terror.

Mary Louise burst out laughing.

"Elsie!" she cried. "You certainly had us scared!"

Jane sat up angrily.

"What's the idea, sneaking in like a ghost?" she demanded.

The orphan started to sob.

"I was afraid of waking you," she explained. "I didn't mean to frighten you."

"Well, it's all right now," said Mary Louise soothingly. "Ordinarily we shouldn't have been scared. But in this house, where everybody talks about seeing ghosts all the time, it's natural for us to be keyed up."

"Why that woman doesn't put in electricity," muttered Jane, "is more than I can see. It's positively barbarous!"

"Come over and sit here on the bed, Elsie, and tell us why you came downstairs," invited Mary Louise. "Are you afraid of the storm?"

"Yes, a little bit. But I thought I heard something down in the yard."

“Old Mrs. Grant’s ghost?” inquired Jane lightly.

“Maybe it was Abraham Lincoln Jones, returning for more chickens,” surmised Mary Louise. “But no, it couldn’t be, or Silky would be barking—he could hear that from the cellar—so it must be just the wind, Elsie. It does make an uncanny sound through all those trees.”

“May I stay here till the storm is over?” asked the girl.

“Certainly.”

If it had not been so hot, Mary Louise would have told Elsie to sleep with them. But three in a bed, and a rather uncomfortable bed at that, was too close quarters on a night like this.

The storm lasted for perhaps an hour, while the girls sat chatting together. As the thundering subsided, Jane began to yawn.

“Suppose I go up to the attic and sleep with Elsie?” she said to Mary Louise, “if you’re not afraid to stay in this room by yourself.”

“Of course I’m not!” replied her chum. “I think that’s a fine idea, and your being there will prevent Elsie from being nervous and hearing things. Does it suit you, Elsie?”

“Yes! Oh, I’d love it! If you’re sure you don’t mind, Mary Louise.”

“I don’t expect to mind anything in about five minutes,” yawned Mary Louise. “I’m dead for sleep.”

She was correct in her surmise: she knew nothing at all until the bright sunshine was pouring into her room and Jane wakened her by throwing a pillow at her head.

“Wake up, lazybones!” she cried. “Don’t you realize that today is the picnic?”

Mary Louise threw the pillow back at her chum and jumped out of bed.

“What a glorious day!” she exclaimed. “And so much cooler.”

Elsie, attired in her new pink linen dress, dashed into the room.

“Oh, this is something like!” she cried. “I haven’t heard any gayety like this for three years!”

“Mary Louise is always ‘Gay,’” remarked Jane demurely. “In fact, she’ll be ‘Gay’ till she gets married.”

Her chum hurled the other pillow from Miss Grant’s bed just as Hannah poked her nose into the room.

“Don’t you girls throw them pillows around!” she commanded. “Miss Mattie is that careful about her bed—she even makes it herself. And at house-cleanin’ time I ain’t allowed to touch it!”

“It’s a wonder she let you sleep on it, Mary Louise,” observed Elsie.

“*Made* me sleep on it, you mean.” Then, of Hannah, she inquired, “How soon do we have breakfast?”

“Right away, soon as you’re dressed. Then you girls can help pack up some doughnuts and rolls I made for your picnic.”

“You’re an angel, Hannah!” exclaimed Mary Louise. To the girls she said, “Scram, if you want me downstairs in two minutes.”

Soon after breakfast the cars arrived. There were three of them—the two sports roadsters belonging to Max Miller and Norman Wilder, and a sedan driven by one of the girls of their crowd, a small, red-haired girl named Hope Dorsey, who looked like Janet Gaynor.

Max had brought an extra boy for Elsie, a junior at high school, by the name of Kenneth Dormer, and Mary Louise introduced him, putting him with Elsie in Max’s rumble seat. She herself got into the front.

“Got your swimming suit, Mary Lou?” asked Max, as he started his car with its usual sudden leap.

“Of course,” she replied. “As a matter of fact, I brought two of them.”

“I hadn’t noticed you were getting that fat!”

“That’s just about enough out of you! I don’t admire the Mae West figure, you know.”

“Then why two suits?” inquired the young man. “Change of costume?”

“One for Elsie and one for me,” explained Mary Louise. “I don’t believe Elsie can swim, but she’ll soon learn. Will you teach her, Max?”

“I don’t think I’ll get a chance to, from the way I saw Ken making eyes at her. He’ll probably have a monopoly on the teaching.”

Mary Louise smiled: this was just the way she wanted things to be.

The picnic grounds near Cooper’s woods were only a couple of miles from Riverside. A wide stream which flowed through the woods had been dammed up for swimming, and here the boys and men of Riverside had built two rough shacks for dressing houses. The cars were no sooner unloaded than the boys and girls dashed for their respective bath houses.

“Last one in the pool is a monkey!” called Max, as he locked his car.

“I guess I’ll be the monkey,” remarked Elsie. “Because I have a suit I’m not familiar with.”

“I’ll help you,” offered Mary Louise.

They were dressed in no time at all; as usual the girls were ahead of the boys. They were all in the water by the time the boys came out of their shack.

The pool was empty except for a few children, so the young people from Riverside had a chance to play water games and to dive to their hearts’ content. Everybody except Elsie Grant knew how to swim, and Mary Louise and several of the others were capable of executing some remarkable stunt diving.

Before noontime arrived Elsie found herself venturing into the deeper parts of the pool, and, with Kenneth or Mary Louise beside her, she actually swam several yards. All the while she was laughing and shouting as she had not done since her parents’ death; the cloud of suspicion that had been hanging over her

head for the past few days was forgotten. She was a normal, happy girl again.

The lunch that followed provided even more fun and hilarity than the swim. It seemed as if their mothers had supplied everything in the world to eat. Cakes and pies and sandwiches; hot dogs and steaks to be cooked over the fire which the boys built; ice cream in dry ice, and refreshing drinks of fruit juices, iced tea, and soda water. Keen as their appetites were from the morning's swim, the young people could not begin to eat everything they had brought.

"We'll have enough left for supper," said Mary Louise, leaning back against a tree trunk with a sigh of content.

"If the ants don't eat it up," returned Jane. "We better cover things up."

"We'll do it right away," announced Hope Dorsey. "Come on, boys! you burn rubbish, and we girls will pack food."

"I can't move," protested Max. "The ants are welcome to their share as far as I'm concerned. I don't think I'll ever eat again."

"I hate *aunts*," said Elsie, with a sly look at Mary Louise and Jane. "I don't want them to get a thing, so I'll help put the food away."

Max and a couple of the other lazier boys were pulled to their feet by Kenneth and Norman, and the picnic spot was soon as clean as when the party had arrived. Hope Dorsey suggested that they drive back to her home later in the afternoon and have supper on the lawn. Then they could turn on the radio and dance on her big screened porch.

"When do we visit these gypsies you were talking about, Max?" demanded Jane. "I'm keen to hear my fortune."

"They're back towards Riverside," replied the youth. "About half a mile from Dark Cedars," he added, to Mary Louise.

"They used to camp at Dark Cedars—at least, some gypsies did," Elsie informed the party. "If they're the same ones, you'd think they wouldn't come back, after they were driven away by the police."

"Is that what your aunt did?" inquired Kenneth.

“Yes, so Hannah says—Hannah is the maid, you know. She says Aunt Mattie hates them.”

The young people piled into the cars again, and Max led the way, off the main highway to a dirt road extending behind Dark Cedars. Through the trees they could catch a glimpse of the gypsy encampment.

“Has everybody some money—in silver?” inquired Max, after the cars were parked beside the road. “The gypsies insist on gold and silver.”

Mary Louise nodded; she was prepared for herself as well as for Elsie.

“Do we all go in in a bunch?” asked Hope.

“Certainly not!” replied Max. “You don’t think we could tell our secrets in front of the whole bunch, do you?”

“Must be pretty bad,” observed Jane.

“All right, then, if that’s the way you feel about it, I’ll go in with you!” challenged Norman.

“Suits me,” returned the girl, with a wink at Mary Louise.

As the crowd came closer to the gypsy encampment, they saw the usual tents, the caravan, which was a motor truck, and a fire, over which a kettle was smoldering. Half a dozen children, dressed in ordinary clothing but without shoes and stockings, were playing under a tree, and there were several women about. But there did not appear to be any men at the camp at the time.

One of the women, who had been standing over the fire, came forward to meet the young people. She was past middle age, Mary Louise judged, from her dark, wrinkled skin, but her hair was jet black, and her movements were as agile and as graceful as a girl’s. She wore a long dress of a deep blue color, without any touch of the reds and yellows one usually associates with gypsies.

“Fortunes?” she asked, smiling, and revealing an ugly gap in her front teeth, which made her look almost like a story-book witch.

“How much?” asked Max, holding up a quarter in his hand.

The gypsy shook her head. “One dollar,” she announced.

Max pulled down the corners of his mouth and looked doubtfully at his friends.

“There are fourteen of us,” he said. “Fourteen at fifty cents each is seven dollars. All in silver.... Take it or leave it.”

The woman regarded him shrewdly; she saw that he meant what he said.

“All right,” she agreed. “I’ll go into my tent and get ready.”

The young people turned to Max with whispered congratulations.

“She certainly speaks perfect English,” remarked Mary Louise.

They sat down on the grass while they waited for the gypsy woman to summon them, and when the tent flap finally opened, Jane Patterson and Norman Wilder jumped to their feet and walked over to the fortune teller first.

“She’ll think you two are engaged, Jane,” teased Hope, “if you go in together.”

“Then she’ll get fooled,” returned the other girl laughingly.

The couple were absent for perhaps five minutes. When they came out of the tent Jane dashed down the hill to the road.

“The gypsy told her that her class ring is in my car,” explained Norman to the others. “The one she lost, you remember? She said it’s under the seat.”

“I could have suggested that she look there myself,” remarked Max. “Only I thought, of course, that she already had.... Shall I try my luck next, or will one of you girls go?”

“I’d love to go,” offered Hope Dorsey. “I simply can’t wait. By the way, did she think you two were engaged?”

“No, she didn’t. She’s pretty wise, after all. She told me some astounding things. One was that a relation had just died—my uncle did, you know—and that we’re going to get some money.... I hope that part’s true.... You have to hand it to her. I don’t believe it’s all just the bunk.”

Hope ran into the tent, and while she was gone Jane returned triumphantly from the car with her lost ring. Mary Louise's eyes flashed with excitement: perhaps the gypsy was really possessed of second sight. Oh, if she could only solve that mystery at Dark Cedars!

Mary Louise was last of all the group to enter the fortune teller's tent. The woman was seated on the ground with a dirty pack of cards in her hands. She indicated that the girl should sit down beside her and gave her the cards to shuffle.

"I'm really not interested in my fortune half so much as I am in a mystery I'm involved in," explained Mary Louise. She paused, wondering whether the gypsy would understand what she was talking about. Perhaps she ought to use simpler language.

"You mean you want to ask me questions?" inquired the woman.

"Yes, that's it," replied Mary Louise. "I'm staying at Dark Cedars now, and there are strange things going on there. Maybe you can explain them."

"Dark Cedars!" repeated the gypsy. "I know the place.... You don't live there?"

"No, I don't live there. I'm just staying there while Miss Grant is in the hospital."

The black eyes gleamed, and the woman held two thin, dirty hands in front of her face.

"Mattie Grant is *evil*," she announced. "Keep away from her!"

Mary Louise wrinkled her brows. "I'm not with her," she said. "I'm only staying at Dark Cedars while Miss Grant is away."

"But why is that?"

"That's just what I want to ask you! Miss Grant's money has already been stolen, and I thought maybe you could tell me what I'm supposed to be protecting—by sleeping in her bed every night."

“In the old witch’s bed? Oh-ho!”

“Yes.” It struck Mary Louise funny that this gypsy woman should call Miss Grant a witch when she herself looked much more like one.

The gypsy, however, was giving her attention to the cards, shuffling them, and finally drawing one of them out of the deck. She laid it face up in Mary Louise’s lap and nodded significantly. It was the eight of hearts.

“Mattie Grant’s treasure—is—a ruby necklace,” she announced slowly, staring hard at the card. “With eight precious rubies!” She handed the card to Mary Louise. “Count them for yourself!” she said.

Mary Louise gazed at the woman in amazement, not knowing whether to believe her or not. The explanation was plausible, but it seemed rather foolish to her—that the eight of hearts should mean eight rubies.... Would the ace of diamonds have indicated a diamond ring?

But there was no use in questioning the gypsy’s power, no point in antagonizing her. So, instead, she changed the subject by telling her that a box of gold pieces had been stolen from the safe in Miss Grant’s bedroom.

“Perhaps you can tell me who took them?” she suggested.

The woman picked up the cards and shuffled them again, muttering something unintelligible to herself as she did it. Once more she drew out a card, seemingly at random. This time it was the queen of diamonds.

“A light-haired girl—or woman,” she announced. “That’s all I can say.”

Mary Louise gasped. Elsie Grant had light hair—but, then, so did Corinne Pearson.... And Mrs. Grace Grant’s hair was gray.

The gypsy rose from the ground as lightly and as easily as a girl.

“I think you’ve had more than your time, miss,” she concluded. “Now, please to go!”

CHAPTER XII

Bound and Gagged

“How was your fortune, Mary Louise?” inquired Max, as the former emerged from the gypsy’s tent and joined the merry group in the field. “Did she say you’d marry a tall, good-looking fellow, with lots of personality?”

Mary Louise laughed.

“No, she didn’t. I guess I’m going to be an old maid.”

“Then you’re the only one,” remarked Hope. “All the rest of us get rich husbands and trips around the world.”

Elsie came up close to Mary Louise and whispered in her ear.

“She told me to leave Dark Cedars,” she said. “How do you suppose she knew that I lived there?”

“Must have seen you around, I suppose,” replied Mary Louise. “She warned me to get out too, but then I told her I was staying there.... But don’t tell Jane, Elsie. She’d go in a minute if she heard that.”

“Hadn’t we better all go—till Aunt Mattie gets back from the hospital? Wouldn’t your mother let me stay at your house if I worked for my board?”

“Of course she would. You wouldn’t have to work any more than I do—just help Mother a little. But I promised your aunt I’d live at her place and sleep in her bed, and I’m going to stay. There’s some explanation for all this superstition about Dark Cedars, and I mean to find it out!”

“Stop whispering secrets!” commanded Max Miller, separating the two girls forcibly. “Of course, Ken and I know you’re talking about us, and what you’re

saying is probably complimentary.”

Elsie laughed and followed Mary Louise into the car. The group drove to Hope Dorsey’s, as she had suggested, and ate the rest of the picnic food for their supper. Another round of fun followed, and it was after ten when the party finally broke up.

Dropping Kenneth Dormer at his own home, Max ran the three girls back to Dark Cedars.

“Don’t you think I better go into the house and light the lamps for you?” he inquired. “It looks so spooky in there.”

“Oh, we have Silky for protection,” returned Mary Louise lightly. “Thank you just the same, Max.”

The young man waited, however, until he saw the girls unlock the front door and light the lamp in the hall.

“Everything’s O.K.!” shouted Mary Louise. “We’ll be asleep inside of ten minutes.”

Max waved back again and started his engine. Elsie lighted two more lamps which Hannah had left in readiness for the girls, and all together, with Silky at their heels, they mounted the creaking staircase.

“You can’t sleep upstairs, Silky!” said Mary Louise to her dog. “Miss Grant would never allow that. Go down to your box in the cellar.”

The spaniel seemed to understand, for he stood still, wagging his tail and looking pleadingly at his mistress.

“I think it’s a shame to send him off by himself,” remarked Jane.

“So do I,” agreed Mary Louise. “But it’s got to be done. He’d get up on the bed, as likely as not—the way he does at home. And just imagine what Miss Grant would think of that! Her precious bed!”

Turning about, she led the little dog to the cellar, and there, in a box next to the kitten’s, he settled down to sleep. When she returned the girls were waiting for

her in Miss Grant's bedroom.

"How do we sleep tonight?" inquired Elsie.

"Oh, you can have Jane again if you want her," agreed Mary Louise. "It doesn't make any difference to me."

The younger girl was delighted.

"Only," added Mary Louise, "if you expect to do any prowling around tonight, please shout your presence in the room."

"I expect to go right to sleep," replied Elsie. "With Jane beside me, I'll feel safe."

Mary Louise smiled and kissed her goodnight. In many ways Elsie Grant seemed like a child to her, in spite of her fifteen years.

Alone in the room, she undressed quickly, hanging her clothing on a chair, for she could not bring herself to use that big, old closet, filled with Miss Grant's things. She was very tired, and, thankful that the night was so much cooler than the preceding one, she blew out the lamp and crawled into bed.

The utter blackness of the room was rather appalling, even to a courageous girl like Mary Louise. Accustomed as she was to the street lights of Riverside, the darkness was thick and strange, for the denseness of the trees about Dark Cedars shut out even the sky, with its stars, from the windows. But Mary Louise closed her eyes immediately, resolved not to let anything so trivial bother her.

The girls in the attic had quieted down; the house was in absolute silence. Mary Louise, too, lay very still. Listening.... She almost believed that she heard somebody breathing!

"But that's absurd!" she reprimanded herself sharply. "It couldn't be a ghost, as Hannah insists, for ghosts don't breathe. And it couldn't be a robber trying to get into the house, or Silky would be barking. That dog has keen ears."

She turned over and put the thought out of her mind by recalling the high lights of the picnic, and soon dozed off. But she knew that she had not been asleep long when she was suddenly awakened by the low, squeaking creak of a door.

Thinking it was probably Elsie, restless after too much picnic food, Mary Louise opened her eyes and peered about in the darkness. Now she heard that breathing distinctly—and something big and dark seemed to be moving towards her, something blacker than the darkness of the room. No face was visible to her until the figure bent over close to her in the bed. Then she beheld two gleaming eyes!

She opened her lips to scream, but at the same instant a thin hand was clapped over her mouth, making utterance impossible. Both her hands were caught and held in an iron grip, and a bag was pulled over her head and tied so tightly under her chin that she believed she would choke.

Mary Louise could see nothing now, but she felt a rope being twisted around her body, tying her arms to her sides. In another second she was lifted bodily and tossed roughly into Miss Grant's closet.... The key was turned in the lock.

In wild desperation Mary Louise tried to shout, but the thickness and tightness of the bag over her head muffled the sound, and the closet walls closed it in. The girls in the attic would never hear her, for they were at the back of the house, and probably sleeping soundly. So she abandoned the effort, and became quiet, twisting her hands about under the rope, and listening to the sounds from the room.

Whoever, whatever it was that had attacked her was moving about stealthily, making a queer noise that sounded like the tearing of a garment. For a brief moment the thought of Corinne Pearson jumped into her mind. Had the girl come here to get revenge on Mary Louise for disclosing her guilt, and was she tearing her clothes to pieces?

But such an explanation was too absurd to be possible. It couldn't be Corinne—she was at that dance with Ned Mason. But it might be Harry Grant, searching for that precious possession of his aunt Mattie's—that ruby necklace, if the gypsy was correct.... But, no, Mary Louise did not believe it was Harry—or any man. Something about the motion of the figure, the touch of its hands, proclaimed it to be feminine.... She thought of that ghost Hannah had described, the spirit of dead Mrs. Grant, looking for the hidden treasure, and she shuddered.

The tearing and ripping was becoming more pronounced. Mary Louise listened more intently, still twisting her hands about in an effort to free them.

She heard a chair being moved away from the window, and the screen being

taken away.... She twisted her hands again.... Her right hand—was free!

In spite of her terror, Mary Louise almost sang out with joy.

The next sound she heard was a dear, familiar noise, a sound that sent a thrill through her whole body. It was the infuriated bark of her little dog Silky from the cellar.

Mary Louise lost no time in freeing her other hand and in untying the knot about her chin which fastened the bag over her head. She was free at last—as far as her limbs were concerned. But she was still locked securely in Miss Grant's closet.

Through the crack of the door she perceived a streak of light; the intruder had not worked in darkness. But in a second it was extinguished, and she heard a noise at the window.

Then—utter blackness and silence again!

Mary Louise raised her voice now and screamed at the top of her lungs. She was rewarded by the sound of hurrying footsteps and the incessant bark of her dog, coming nearer and nearer. In another moment she heard the girls in the room and saw the gleam of a flashlight through the crack.

“I'm locked in the closet!” she shouted. “Let me out, Jane!”

Her chum turned the key in the door. Thank heaven, it was still there! Blinded by the light from the flash, Mary Louise staggered out.

“What happened?” demanded Jane, her face deathly pale with terror.

Mary Louise stumbled towards the bed. “No bones broken, thank goodness!” she exclaimed, sitting down carefully upon the bed. But she jumped up immediately.

“What's happened to this bed?” she demanded. “It's full of pins and needles!”

Her chum turned the flashlight upon the ugly piece of furniture, and Mary Louise perceived at once the explanation of the ripping sound she had heard. The bed clothing was literally torn to pieces; the mattress was cut in a dozen places, and straw strewn all over the floor. No wonder it felt sharp to sit down on!

“So the ruby necklace was hidden in the bed!” she muttered.

“What ruby necklace?” demanded Jane.

“That’s what the gypsy said Miss Grant was treasuring so carefully. She probably just made a guess at it—to seem wise. It may be a diamond ring, for all I know.... Anyhow, somebody stole it. Who could it have been?”

“Tell us exactly what happened,” begged Jane.

Briefly Mary Louise told the grim story. Elsie had lighted the lamp, and the girls sat about on chairs, listening intently. Silky, who had stopped barking now, climbed into his mistress’s lap.

“Funny Elsie didn’t hear you try to scream the first time,” remarked Jane. “She was awake.”

“You were?” asked Mary Louise. “What time is it?”

“It’s only quarter-past eleven,” answered Elsie. “I couldn’t go to sleep—too much chocolate cake and apple pie, I suppose.”

“It was Silky who waked me up,” said Jane. “I heard him barking. And I looked for Elsie and saw she wasn’t in bed. So I thought he was just barking at her, prowling around the house.”

Mary Louise opened her eyes wide.

“Where were you, Elsie?”

“I—was down in the kitchen, getting some baking soda.” She burst into tears. “You don’t think I did that fiendish thing, do you, Mary Louise?”

“No, of course not.” But Mary Louise knew that Miss Grant would not be so ready to accept her niece’s innocence.

“We better make a tour of the house,” she suggested, standing up and going over to the window, where she noticed that the screen was out, lying on the floor. “I think the intruder must have gotten out this way.”

“But that’s not the window with the porch underneath,” objected Jane.

“No, but he could have used a ladder,” returned Mary Louise.

The girls slipped coats over their pajamas and put on their shoes. With Silky close at their heels, they went downstairs and out the front door, around to the side of the house.

The first thing that they spied was a ladder, lying on the ground perpendicular to the wall.

“That’s William’s ladder,” announced Elsie. “He often leaves it around. It seems to me he had it out yesterday, nailing up a board on the porch roof.”

“If only we could find some footprints,” said Mary Louise, flashing her light on the ground.

But she could see no marks. If the intruder had made off that way, he had been wise enough to walk over the rounds of the ladder. And everywhere cedar needles covered the ground, making footprints almost impossible.

“Wait till Aunt Mattie hears about this!” sobbed Elsie. “It’ll be the end of me.”

“We won’t tell her till she gets better,” decided Mary Louise. “Maybe by that time we’ll discover a clue that will help us solve the mystery.”

“Oh, I hope so!” breathed the young girl fervently.

All this time, however, Jane said nothing. But she was watching Elsie closely, as if she was beginning to believe that she might be guilty.

“Let’s go to bed,” concluded Mary Louise when the tour of inspection was finished. “I’m going to sleep in Hannah’s room—and I’m going to keep Silky with me this time.”

“I wish you had taken that precaution before,” sighed Jane.

“So do I. But it’s too late now. Let’s get some sleep, for tomorrow we have to get to work—and work fast!”

CHAPTER XIII

Detective Work

Sunday morning dawned clear and peaceful. As Mary Louise awakened to hear the birds singing in the trees outside the window of Hannah's old room at Dark Cedars, she could hardly believe in the terrifying experience of the previous night. It was just like a horrible dream, incredible in the morning sunshine.

"I believe I'd like to go to Sunday school," she said to Jane at the breakfast table. "It's a lovely day, and we'd see all our friends. Don't you want to come along too, Elsie?"

The young girl, still pale and nervous from the night before, shook her head.

"No, thank you, Mary Louise," she replied. "I'll stay home and help Hannah."

Mary Louise glanced up apprehensively. As yet the servant had not been informed of the mysterious intruder.

"Will you tell her what happened last night?" she asked, in a low tone. "Or shall we?"

"No, I will," agreed Elsie. "She'll be sure it was Mrs. Grant's ghost again.... And I'll help her fix up the bedroom."

Mary Louise nodded. "You'll come, Jane?" she inquired.

"I'm leaving—for good!" announced her chum. "I wouldn't spend another night at Dark Cedars for all the necklaces in the world!"

Mary Louise said nothing: there was no use arguing with Jane. As she went out of the door with Silky at her heels she called to Hannah that she alone would be back to dinner.

“About two o’clock,” returned the woman. “And ain’t Miss Jane comin’?”

“No, Hannah,” answered the girl for herself. “I shan’t see you again. Good-bye.”

The girls were some distance beyond the hedge of Dark Cedars when Mary Louise asked her companion her reason for leaving. “Because,” she added, “now that everything valuable has been stolen, I don’t see what you have to fear.”

Jane hesitated a moment.

“I hate to say it, Mary Lou, but I feel I must tell you—for your own protection. It’s *Elsie* I’m afraid of. I really believe she is guilty. I think she has those gold pieces hidden somewhere at Dark Cedars—and now the necklace. I think she’s a sneak, and I believe she’s planning a getaway. But if one of us should discover her theft, I’m afraid she’d do something desperate to us.”

An expression of pain passed over Mary Louise’s face. “Go on, and tell me why you suspect her,” she said.

“On account of last night. Figure it out for yourself. If that had been a burglar, why wouldn’t Silky have barked when he was getting into the house? Why wouldn’t Elsie have heard him, if she was down in the kitchen, as she said? And how could he have gotten away so quickly? You think maybe he went out that window at the side of the house, but that’s only a guess. Elsie could have *pretended* to make an escape from the window while you were locked in the closet and then have slipped out the door and down to the kitchen.”

Mary Louise gasped in horror.

“It doesn’t sound possible,” she admitted.

“And the way she protested her innocence immediately,” added Jane. “Remember that?”

“Yes, I do. But there is a possible explanation, Jane. The burglar might have broken into the house while we were away and been hiding in the closet while I got ready for bed. I didn’t open the door.”

“But why would he do that? Why wouldn’t he finish the job and leave before we came back?”

“He might have just gotten in about the time we arrived at Dark Cedars.” She paused, thinking of Corinne Pearson. “Suppose it was Corinne—on her way to that dance——”

Jane shook her head. “Possible, but not probable,” she said. “No, I believe it was Elsie. Do you remember how pleased she was that I wasn’t going to sleep with you in Miss Mattie’s room? And how she sneaked in there night before last, scaring us so? Oh, Mary Lou, I think all the evidence points that way. And she’s beginning to notice our suspicion. That’s why she was so quiet at breakfast—and so glad to get rid of us.”

Mary Louise was silent; she did not tell Jane that she felt convinced that the burglar was of the feminine gender.

“Well, don’t say anything about our experience to anybody,” cautioned Mary Louise as the girls entered the Sunday school building. “I may talk it over with Daddy, if he’s home. But nobody else.”

Jane promised, and they both dismissed their troubles for the time being in the presence of their friends.

It was eleven o’clock when the two girls came out of the building, to find Silky patiently waiting for them.

“You take him home, Jane,” said Mary Louise, “and I’ll stop at the hospital. If I can do so tactfully, I want to find out whether it really was a ruby necklace that was hidden in the bed.”

But Mary Louise’s visit proved a disappointment; she was told at the desk that it would be impossible for her or anyone else to see Miss Mattie Grant at the present time.

“The operation was successful,” the attendant stated, in that matter-of-fact tone officials so often assume, “but Miss Grant is under the influence of a narcotic. She wouldn’t know anybody.... Come back tomorrow.”

Mary Louise nodded and walked slowly out of the door, uncertain as to what her next move should be.

Still thinking deeply, she strolled down the street until she came within a block

of Mrs. Grace Grant's home. Here a sudden impulse decided her to visit these relations of Miss Mattie. If anyone in the world knew about the necklace, that person would be the trusted nephew, John Grant.

Mary Louise paused a moment in front of the gate, a little nervous about going in. Suppose Harry Grant were home alone and he started to tease her in that familiar way of his! John she had never seen, except that night on his porch, in the dark; and of course Mrs. Grant would be at church.

But the sight of a nice-looking sedan parked in front of the house reassured her. In all probability that was John's car, she decided, for it certainly was not Harry's. Bravely she opened the gate and walked up to the porch.

She had to wait several minutes before there was any answer to her ring. Then a middle-aged man, stout and rather bald, as Elsie had described John, opened the door.

"Is this Mr. John Grant?" she asked, trying to make her tone sound business-like.

"Yes," replied the man.

"I am Mary Louise Gay," she stated. "The girl who found Miss Mattie Grant's money for her, you know."

John Grant did not know; he shook his head. Evidently the story had been suppressed by his mother out of consideration for Harry.

"You didn't hear about the robbery?" she inquired.

"No. I only know that Aunt Mattie is in the hospital. My sister—Mrs. Pearson—phoned yesterday. But when was she robbed?"

"Can you come out on the porch and talk to me for a few minutes, Mr. Grant?" asked Mary Louise.

"Certainly," he answered, glancing at his watch. "I have to drive to church for Mother at half-past twelve. But that's over an hour from now."

"Thank you, Mr. Grant," said Mary Louise, as she seated herself in one of the chairs. "I won't tell you the whole story—it's too long. But before your aunt

went to the hospital, all her money was stolen out of her safe. My chum and I succeeded in getting most of it back—all but a box of gold pieces—and your aunt put the money and her bonds into the bank.

“Then, when she had to go to the hospital so suddenly, she became panic-stricken and made me promise to sleep in her room while she was away. She had something hidden in her room, something valuable, but she wouldn’t tell me what it was. I’d like to find out just what it was.”

“Why?” demanded the man fearfully. “Has that been taken too?”

Mary Louise nodded and briefly told her story of the mysterious intruder the preceding night.

“It was a ruby necklace,” said John. “A necklace someone gave to my grandfather, I believe. Aunt Mattie didn’t know much about how he got it, but he told her it was very valuable and that she must guard it above everything else in the world. So she had it hidden in her straw mattress, and told me where it was, because it is willed to me. Nobody else knew anything about it, to my knowledge.”

“A ruby necklace!” repeated Mary Louise. “That’s what the gypsy said it was. I asked a fortune teller whom our crowd visited yesterday, and she told me. Claimed it was ‘second sight’ on her part.”

John Grant laughed.

“More likely a rumor she had heard. The family knew there was something—I mean Aunt Mattie’s family—my father and my uncle. But even they never knew where Grandfather got it or from whom. There must have been something queer about it, though, for I understood from my father that Grandmother wanted him to give it back. And then, when Aunt Mattie got hold of it, she kept it hidden.”

“Yes, that’s what Hannah says,” agreed Mary Louise. “She says all this disturbance is old Mrs. Grant’s spirit trying to get it back again. But I can’t be expected to believe that.”

“Naturally.” John smiled, and Mary Louise thought what a nice, pleasant face he had. No wonder his aunt Mattie trusted him!

“Miss Grant is going to blame Elsie, of course,” continued Mary Louise. “She accused her of stealing the gold pieces.”

“Hm!” observed John, as if he too thought the idea possible. “Did she take the rest of the money?”

“No, she didn’t. We proved that.”

“Then who did?” inquired John.

“I think I had better not say,” answered Mary Louise. “That’s over and done with. Your mother knows—if you want, you can ask her.”

John smiled. Mary Louise believed he had guessed the solution himself.

“You don’t really think Elsie would take the gold or the necklace, do you, Mr. Grant?” she asked anxiously. “Of course, you know her a lot better than I do.”

“I don’t know. She might argue that she had a right to some of that money. It wasn’t quite fair that Aunt Mattie got all of Grandfather’s fortune, and Elsie’s father didn’t get a penny.... Yes, she might take it, while I don’t believe she would ever steal anything else.”

Mary Louise shuddered: it seemed as if she were the only person in the world who still considered Elsie innocent.

“There’s a colored family who live down the hill in back of Dark Cedars. Could they know about the necklace, Mr. Grant, do you suppose?”

“Abraham Lincoln Jones? Yes, they could have heard rumors about it—just as those gypsies did. But I happen to know that man, and I am sure he is thoroughly honest.”

“Would he steal chickens?”

“Not even chickens.... Of course, his children might. Colored people love chicken, you know.”

“I’m going to get Elsie to take me to see them this afternoon.” Mary Louise rose from her chair. “I won’t take any more of your time, Mr. Grant—unless you can

tell me what to do. I don't like to go to the police without Miss Grant's consent."

"No, I wouldn't do that. If there is something queer about her possession of the necklace, it would be better for her to lose it than to have an old disgrace exposed. At Aunt Mattie's age, I mean. We better wait until she gets well."

Mary Louise nodded: that was exactly her idea too. Unless, of course, one of the family had taken it—Corinne Pearson or Harry Grant.

"But I guess it would be all right to speak to Daddy in confidence about it," she said, "and get his advice."

"Your father?"

"Yes. He is Detective Gay, of the police force. You've heard of him?"

"Oh, yes, certainly. But tell him not to bring in the police—yet."

Mary Louise held out her hand.

"Thank you so much, Mr. Grant, for giving me your time," she said. "I'll get in touch with you later."

Well satisfied with her interview, she left the Grants' porch and determined to do a little more investigating for herself before she consulted her father. A little farther down the street was the home of Bernice Tracey, an attractive young woman of about twenty-five, who had once been a lieutenant in Mary Louise's Girl Scout troop. To this girl she decided to go for some information concerning Corinne Pearson, for she knew that Miss Tracey was a member of the Country Club set.

Miss Tracey herself answered Mary Louise's ring at the door.

"Why, Mary Lou!" she exclaimed in surprise. "You are a stranger! And you almost caught me in bed, too! I just finished my breakfast. Come in—or shall I come out on the porch?"

"Oh, I can only stay a minute, Miss Tracey," replied Mary Louise. "I just wanted to ask you a couple of questions, if you don't mind.... And please don't think I'm crazy."

“I know there never was a girl with a more level head on her shoulders!” answered the other admiringly. “Go ahead and ask me the questions, Mary Lou.”

“Well—er—you went to that dance last night, didn’t you, with the Country Club people? Was Corinne Pearson there?”

“Yes, she and Ned Mason ate supper with us. Why?”

“Please don’t ask me why! What time did the dance begin?”

“About eleven o’clock.”

Mary Louise frowned; it was possible, then, that Corinne could have been at Dark Cedars a little after ten.

“And—and—can you remember what Miss Pearson wore?”

“Yes. A white organdie. It was very simple, but awfully nice for a summer dance. I wish I had been as sensible.”

Now for the final question! Mary Louise had to summon all her courage to put forth this one.

“Do you remember what kind of jewelry she had on? What color?”

Miss Tracey’s face lighted up with a smile.

“I know why you’re asking me these questions, Mary Lou!” she exclaimed. “You’re a society reporter on the *Star*—aren’t you? But I don’t see why you don’t ask me what I wore. Aren’t I as pretty and as important as Corinne Pearson?”

“You’re twice as important and five times as pretty, Miss Tracey!” replied Mary Louise instantly. “But I’m not a reporter-or even trying to become one.... I’ll explain some time later.... Just tell me about the jewelry, if you can remember.”

“All right, my dear. Corinne wore red with her white dress. Imitation rubies, I suppose. Earrings and necklace and two bracelets.”

“Oh!” gasped Mary Louise. “That’s what I want to know. Thank you, Miss

Tracey, thank you just heaps!”

Chapter XIV

Bad News

Mary Louise's first impulse, upon leaving Miss Tracey's home, was to rush right over to Corinne Pearson with a demand to see the necklace which she had worn at the dance the night before. But she had not taken more than a few steps before she saw the foolishness of such a proceeding. In the first place, Corinne would not be likely to show her the necklace; in the second place, Mary Louise could tell nothing by examining it. She wasn't a connoisseur in rubies; it was doubtful whether she could spot a real stone if she saw one. No, nothing was to be gained by a visit to the Pearsons' at this time.

So instead she directed her course towards home, resolving to discuss the whole affair with her father, if he had returned from his business trip, as her mother had expected.

She found him on the porch, reading the Sunday paper and smoking his pipe. He was a big man with a determined chin and fine dark eyes which lighted up with joy at the sight of his daughter.

"Mary Lou!" he exclaimed, getting up out of his chair and kissing her. "I was so afraid you wouldn't be home to see me!"

"I just had to see you, Daddy," returned the girl. "I need your help."

"Sit down, dear. Your mother tells me that you are engaged in some serious business. I feel very proud of my detective daughter."

"I'm afraid I'm not so good after all," she replied sadly. "Now that I'm really up against a hard problem, I don't know which way to turn. I'd like to tell you about it, if you have time."

She seated herself in the hammock and took off her hat. It was lovely and cool

on the shaded porch after the heat of the Riverside streets.

“Of course I have time,” Mr. Gay assured her. “Begin at the beginning.”

“I will, Daddy. Only, first of all, you must promise not to tell anybody—except Mother, of course. Miss Grant seems to dread publicity of any kind.”

“Why?”

“The reason she gives is that she firmly believes some member of her own family to be guilty and wants to avoid scandal. But I think there’s another—a deeper reason.”

“And what do you think that is, Mary Lou?”

“A desire to keep her possession of a ruby necklace a secret. She kept it hidden in the mattress of her bed and never mentioned it to anybody except one trusted nephew.”

Mr. Gay wrinkled his brows. “I guess you had better tell me the facts in order, dear.”

Mary Louise settled herself more comfortably in the hammock, and told her story, just as everything had happened. When she finally came to the description of the robbery the previous night, and of her own shameful treatment at the hands of the thief, her father cried out in resentment.

“Don’t tell Mother about my being bound up and put in the closet,” she begged. “It would worry her sick.”

“It worries me sick!” announced Mr. Gay. “And I don’t want you to spend another night at that dreadful place.... In fact, I forbid it!”

Mary Louise nodded: she had been expecting the command.

“Then may I bring Elsie Grant home with me while her aunt is in the hospital?” she asked.

“Yes, I suppose so—if your mother is willing.” But his consent was rather reluctant; Mary Louise sensed his distrust of the orphan.

“Daddy, do you think Elsie is guilty?” she asked immediately.

“I don’t know what to think. You believe that your intruder was a woman, don’t you? Then, if it was a woman in Miss Grant’s family, how many possible suspects have you?”

Mary Louise checked them off on her fingers. “Old Mrs. Grant, Mrs. Pearson, Corinne Pearson—and Elsie.”

“Which are most likely to have heard about the necklace? Old Mrs. Grant and Elsie, I should say, offhand.”

“Yes,” agreed his daughter. “And I’m sure Mrs. Grace Grant wouldn’t steal. Besides, she’s too old to get down a ladder.”

“Hold on a minute!” cautioned her father. “You’re not sure that your thief got away in that manner. Suppose, as you are inclined to believe, she was at Dark Cedars when you arrived last night, and suppose she did hide in the closet until she thought you were asleep. When she finished her job, why couldn’t she have walked down the stairs and out the door—it must unlock from the inside—while you were still locked in the closet?”

“That’s true. But wouldn’t Elsie have heard her?”

“Probably. But, then, she’d have been likely to hear anybody getting out of a window.... Yes, I think suspicion points to the young girl, with one possible exception.”

“You mean Corinne Pearson?”

“No, I don’t. I think the very fact that she wore a red necklace to the dance practically proves her innocence. If she even knew her aunt owned a ruby necklace, she wouldn’t have done that, after she was caught in another theft.”

Mary Louise sighed: she felt as if her visit to Miss Tracey had been wasted time, and she said as much to her father. But he reassured her with the statement that real detectives make many such visits, which may seem to lead to nothing, but which all have their part in leading to the capture of the criminal.

“Then whom else do you suspect, Daddy?” she asked.

“The most obvious person of all. The person who had every reason to believe that there was something valuable hidden in Miss Grant’s bed from the way the old lady guarded it. The person who made up all the stories about ghosts to throw you girls off the track. I mean Hannah, of course.”

“Hannah!” repeated Mary Louise in amazement. She had never thought of her as guilty since her interview with her that very first day.

“You may be right, Daddy. But if she was going to steal, why did she do it at night, when we were there? She had plenty of chance all day alone at Dark Cedars—except for William, her husband.”

“Yes, but then you would immediately suspect her or William. This threw you off the track.”

Mary Louise pondered the matter seriously.

“I still can’t believe that, Daddy. Knowing Hannah as I do, I would stake my word on the fact that both she and old Mrs. Grant are absolutely honest.”

“Well, it may not have been a member of the family at all,” observed Mr. Gay. “Maybe it was an outsider, someone who had heard a rumor about the necklace and visited the house systematically at night, searching for it. That would account for those strange noises and the disturbances. It might even have been the person who owned the necklace in the first place, who would know, of course, that it was still at Dark Cedars. There is only one thing to do that I can see, and that is to notify the pawnshops and jewelers all over the country.”

“But that would take forever,” protested Mary Louise. “And besides, we couldn’t mention Miss Grant’s name without her permission.”

Mr. Gay smiled; there was a great deal for Mary Louise to learn about the detective business.

“It wouldn’t take any time at all,” he said. “The police have a list of all such places and a method of communication. And Miss Grant’s name need not be mentioned—my name is sufficient. But I wish we could get a more accurate description of the necklace.”

“I wish we could. I’ll try to see Miss Grant again tomorrow.”

“It doesn’t make so much difference, however,” her father told her. “If the rubies are real, they can easily be detected. It isn’t likely that many ruby necklaces are being pawned at the same time.”

“Will you do this for me, Daddy?” asked Mary Louise, rising from the hammock and opening the screen door. “I just want to say ‘hello’ to Mother, and then I must be on my way. I’m due back at Dark Cedars at two o’clock.”

Mr. Gay frowned.

“Must you go, dear? I don’t forbid it, in broad daylight, but I don’t like it.”

“Yes, I must get my suitcase, Daddy. And bring Elsie back, if she wants to come.”

“All right, Mary Lou. I’ll drive you over, if our dinner isn’t ready. And I’ll come back for you about five o’clock, so that I’m sure of getting you home here safely before dark.”

It was a simple matter for Mary Louise to gain her mother’s consent to bring Elsie Grant home with her. Believing the girl to be just a poor downtrodden orphan, Mrs. Gay adopted a motherly, sympathetic attitude, totally unaware that both Jane Patterson and Mr. Gay suspected the girl of the crime. She was delighted that her daughter had decided to leave Dark Cedars.

“It’s bad enough to have your father away on dangerous work, without having to worry about you too, Mary Louise,” she said as she kissed her daughter good-bye. “Be back in time for supper.”

“I will,” promised the girl. “Daddy is going to drive me over and come back for me.”

During the short ride in her father’s car the theft was not mentioned. If possible, Mary Louise wanted to forget it for the time being. She hated to go to Dark Cedars and eat Hannah’s dinner as Elsie’s guest and all the while suspect one or the other of them of a horrible crime.

Mr. Gay left Mary Louise at the hedge, and she ran up the path lightly, just like an ordinary girl visiting one of her chums for a Sunday dinner. But Elsie did not come out to meet her, and she had to knock on the door to gain admittance.

In a minute or two Hannah answered it.

“Hello!” she said. “Ain’t Elsie with you?”

Mary Louise shook her head.

“No. She said she’d stay and help you,” she replied. “Didn’t she tell you about what happened last night?”

“No!” Hannah’s eyes opened wide. “Was the spirits here again?”

“Somebody was here,” answered Mary Louise. “Haven’t you been up in Miss Grant’s room?”

The woman shook her head.

“No, I ain’t. I’ve been too busy out in the garden helpin’ William and gettin’ dinner ready. I figured you girls’d make your own bed. Elsie always did most of the upstairs work.”

“Well, I couldn’t very easily make the first bed I slept in,” remarked Mary Louise. “Because the mattress was torn to pieces.”

“Miss Mattie’s?” gasped Hannah, in genuine terror. She looked so frightened that Mary Louise could not believe she was acting.

“Yes. Somebody bound and gagged me and locked me in the closet and then proceeded to strip the bed. They must have found Miss Grant’s precious necklace—for that’s what it was, John Grant said.”

The servant woman bowed her head.

“May the Lord have mercy on us!” she said reverently. “It’s His way of punishin’ Miss Mattie fer keepin’ the thing her dead mother warned her agin’.” She looked up at Mary Louise. “Eat your dinner quick,” she said. “Then let’s get out of here, before the spirits come agin!”

“But where’s Elsie?” insisted Mary Louise, knowing that it was no use to argue with Hannah about the “spirits.”

“She went off soon after you girls left. I thought she changed her mind and went to Sunday school. She had on her green silk.”

“And hasn’t she come back all morning?” demanded Mary Louise in dismay.

“Nary a sign of her.”

Mary Louise groaned. This was bad news—just what she had been fearing ever since her conversations with Jane and with her father. If Elsie had run away, there could be only one reason for her going: she must be guilty!

“I had better go right home and see my father,” she said nervously.

“You set right down and eat your dinner, Miss Mary Louise!” commanded Hannah. “You need food—and it’s right here. You ain’t a-goin’ to take no hot walk on an empty stomach! Besides, Elsie may come in any minute. She probably run down to show them colored people her pretty green dress.”

Mary Louise’s eyes brightened.

“Abraham Lincoln Jones’s family?” she inquired.

“Yeah. Elsie’s awful fond of them. They kind of pet her up, you know.”

Mary Louise smiled and sat down to her dinner. The food tasted good, for it was fresh from the garden, and Hannah was an excellent cook. But all the time she was eating she kept her eyes on the door, watching, almost praying that Elsie would come in.

“Maybe you had better not touch that room of Miss Grant’s,” she cautioned Hannah. “I think it might be better to leave it just as it is—for the sake of evidence. My clothes are in your old room now, and I’ll get them from there.”

“Don’t you worry!” returned the woman, with a frightened look in her eyes. “I ain’t givin’ no spirits no chance at me! I’m leavin’ the minute these dishes is done, and I ain’t comin’ back day or night. If Elsie ain’t home by the time I go, you can take the key, Miss Mary Louise, and turn it over to Miss Mattie.”

Mary Louise nodded: perhaps this was for the best.

“I’ll leave my suitcase on the porch while I run down to see the Jones family,” she said, as she finished her apple pie. “And you had better clear out the refrigerator and take all the food that is left, because, if I find Elsie, I’ll take her home with me.”

“Maybe she’s havin’ a chicken dinner with them colored people,” returned Hannah and for the first time since Mary Louise’s arrival she smiled.

CHAPTER XV

An Alibi

The wooden shack where the Jones family lived was picturesque in its setting among the cedar trees behind Miss Grant's home. In summer time Mary Louise could understand living very comfortably in such a place. But, isolated as it was, and probably poorly heated, it must be terribly cold in winter.

She ran down the hill gayly, humming a tune to herself and smiling, for she did not want the colored family to think that her visit was anything but a friendly one. As she came to a clearing among the cedar trees she saw two nicely dressed children playing outside the shack and singing at the top of their lungs. They beamed at Mary Louise genially and went on with their song.

"Do you children know Miss Elsie Grant?" she shouted.

They both nodded immediately.

"Sure we know her! You a friend o' hers?"

"Yes," answered Mary Louise. "I've been visiting her, up at her aunt's place. But she didn't come home for dinner, so I thought maybe she was here."

"No, ma'am, she ain't," replied the older child. "You-all want to see Ma?"

"Yes, I should like to. If she isn't busy."

"Ma!" yelled both children at once, and a pleasant-faced colored woman appeared at the door of the shack. "Here's a frien' of Miz Elsie's!"

The woman smiled. "Come in, Honey," she invited.

"I just wanted to ask you whether you had seen Miss Elsie this morning," said

Mary Louise.

Mrs. Jones opened the bright-blue screen door and motioned her caller into her house. There were only two rooms in the shack, but Mary Louise could see immediately how beautifully neat they were, although the color combinations made her want to laugh out loud. A purple door curtain separated the one room from the other, and some of the chairs were red plush, some brown leather, and one a bright green. But there was mosquito netting tacked up at the windows, and the linoleum-covered floor was spotless.

“Set down, Honey,” urged the woman, and Mary Louise selected a red-plush chair. She repeated her question about Elsie.

“Yes and no,” replied Mrs. Jones indefinitely.

“What do you mean by ‘yes and no,’ Mrs. Jones?” inquired Mary Louise.

“I saw her but didn’t have no talk wid her,” explained the other. “She was all dressed up in a fine dress and had a bundle unde’ her arm. I reckoned she was comin’ down to visit us, but she done go off through de woods. Why you ask, Honey? She ain’t lost, am she?”

“She didn’t come back for dinner,” answered Mary Louise. “So Hannah and I were worried.”

Mrs. Jones rolled her eyes.

“Runned away, I reckon. Miz Grant didn’t treat her good.”

“But Miss Grant isn’t there—she’s in the hospital.”

“You don’t say!”

“Yes, and I wanted to take Elsie home with me while she was away. So you wouldn’t think she’d want to run away now.”

“No, you wouldn’t. Not when she’s got a nice friend like you, Honey. Mebbe she was kidnaped.”

“Nobody would want to kidnap Elsie Grant. She’s too poor—and her aunt would

never pay ransom money.”

Mrs. Jones chuckled.

“You right ’bout dat, Honey, fo’ sure. Miz Grant’s de stingiest white woman eve’ lived. Wouldn’t give away a bone to a dog if she could help he’self. Served her right ’bout dem chickens!”

Mary Louise turned sharply. “Chickens?” she repeated, trying to keep her voice calm.

“Yes. Her chickens is bein’ stolen all de time. Half a dozen to oncet—and me and Abraham won’t lift a finger to put a stop to it!”

“You know who has been taking them?” asked Mary Louise incredulously.

“We knows fo’ sure, Honey. But we ain’t tellin’ no tales to Miz Grant.”

“Suppose she accuses your husband?” suggested Mary Louise.

“Dat’s sumpin’ diff’rent. Den we’d tell. But it’d be safe enough by dat time. De gypsies has wandered off by now.”

“Gypsies!” exclaimed Mary Louise. “Did they steal the chickens?”

“Dey sure did. We could see ’em, sneakin’ up at night, by de light of de moon. If Miz Grant eve’ caughted ’em, it’d sure go right bad wid ’em. She hates ’em like pison.”

“But you think the gypsies have gone away, Mrs. Jones?” questioned Mary Louise.

“I reckon so, or dey’d be stealin’ mo’ chickens. But we ain’t seen nor heard ’em fo’ several nights. Guess dey done cleaned out of de neighborhood.”

Mary Louise cleared her throat. She wanted to ask this woman what she knew about the robbery at Dark Cedars, but she did not like to seem abrupt or suspicious. So she tried to speak casually.

“Since you know about the chickens being stolen, Mrs. Jones, did you happen to

hear anything unusual last night at Dark Cedars?”

“Lem’me see.... Las’ night was Sattiday, wasn’t it? Abraham done gone to lodge meetin’ and got home bout ten o’clock, he said. No, I was in bed asleep, and we neve’ wakened up at all.... Why? Did anything happen up there? Mo’ chickens took?”

“Not chickens—but something a great deal more valuable. A piece of jewelry belonging to Miss Grant.”

“You don’t say! Was dere real stones in it—genu-ine?”

“Yes.”

The colored woman shook her head solemnly.

“Abraham always say de old lady’d come to trouble sure as night follows day. De mean life she’s done lived—neve’ goin’ to church or helpin’ de poor. She neve’ sent us so much as a bucket of coal fo’ Christmas. But we don’t judge her—dat’s de Lord’s business.”

“Did you know she kept money and jewels in her house?” inquired Mary Louise.

“No. It warn’t none of our business. Abraham ain’t interested in folks’ money—only in der souls. He’s a deacon in Rive’side Colored Church, you know!”

“Yes, I’ve heard him very highly spoken of, Mrs. Jones,” concluded Mary Louise, rising from her chair. “If you see Elsie, will you tell her to come to our house? Anybody can direct her where to find the Gays’ home, in Riverside.”

“I sure will, Miz Gay. Dat’s a perty name.... And you a perty gal!”

“Thanks,” stammered Mary Louise in embarrassment.... “And good-bye, Mrs. Jones.”

She stepped out of the shack and waved to the children as she passed them again on her way back to Dark Cedars. Glancing at her watch as she climbed the hill, she observed that it was only half-past three. What in the world would she do to pass the time until her father came for her at five o’clock?

It occurred to her as she approached Miss Grant's house that she might try to interview Hannah concerning her whereabouts the preceding night, and she was thankful to catch sight of the woman in the back yard, talking to William, her husband. It was evident from both the old servants' attitudes that they were having an argument, and Mary Louise approached slowly, not wishing to interrupt.

William Groben looked much older than his wife, although Hannah was by no means a young woman. Hadn't she claimed that she had done the house-cleaning for forty years at Dark Cedars? Even if she had begun to work there in her teens, Mary Louise figured that she must be fast approaching sixty. But William looked well over seventy. He was thin and shriveled and bent; what little hair he had left was absolutely white. There could be no doubt about William's innocence in the whole affair at Dark Cedars: a frail old man like that could not have managed to handle a healthy girl like Mary Louise in the manner in which the criminal had treated her.

"There ain't no use sayin' another word, Hannah," Mary Louise heard William announce stubbornly. "I ain't a-goin' a-change me mind. Duty is duty, and I always say if a man can't be faithful to his employer—"

"I've heard that before, never mind repeatin' it!" snapped his wife. "And nobody can say I ain't been faithful to Miss Mattie, fer all her crankiness. But we've got a little bit saved up, and we can manage to live on it, with my sister Jennie, without you workin' here. In a place that's haunted by spirits!"

The man looked up sharply.

"How long do you think four hundred dollars would keep us?" he demanded. "Besides, it's invested for us—to bury us. You can't touch that, Hannah. No, I want me regular wages. I like good victuals!"

"So do I. But what's the use of good victuals if you're half scared of your life all the time? I'll never step inside that there house again!"

William shrugged his shoulders.

"Do as you're a mind to, Hannah—you always have. And I'll go on livin' over to Jennie's with you. But I'm still workin' here in the daytime. I couldn't let them chickens starve and the garden go to seed. And what would become of the cow?"

“You could sell her and turn the money over to Miss Mattie.”

William smiled sarcastically.

“And have her half kill me for doin’ it? Not me! Besides, it wouldn’t be fair to the poor old lady in the hospital. Dependin’ on me as she is. No, siree! Duty is duty, and I always say——”

“Shut up!” yelled Hannah in exasperation. And then, all of a sudden, she spied Mary Louise.

“Don’t you never get married, Miss Mary Louise,” she advised. “I never seen a man that wasn’t too stubborn to reason with. Did you find Elsie?”

Mary Louise shook her head.

“No. Mrs. Jones saw her cutting across the woods this morning. But she didn’t stop there.”

“I guess she must have them gold pieces of her aunt Mattie’s after all, and took her chance to clear out when the clearin’ was good. Can’t say as I blame her!”

Mary Louise sighed: that was the logical conclusion for everybody to come to.

“So I think I’ll go home now, Hannah,” she said. “I won’t wait for my father to come for me. And shall I take the key, or will William want to keep it?”

“You take it,” urged the old man. “I don’t want to feel responsible for it. My duty’s outside the house.”

Hannah handed it over with a sigh of relief.

“I’m that glad to get rid of it! And you tell Miss Mattie that I’m livin’ at my sister Jennie’s. I’ll write the address down for you, if you’ve got your little book handy.”

Mary Louise gladly produced it from her pocket: this was easy—getting Hannah’s address without even asking for it.

“Is this where you were last night?” she inquired casually, as the woman wrote

down the street and number.

“Yes. At least, except while we was at the movies. My sister Jennie made William go with us—he never thought he cared about them before. But you ought to see him laugh at Laurel and Hardy. I thought I’d die, right there in the Globe Theater.”

William grinned at the recollection.

“They was funny,” he agreed. “When the show was over, I just set there, still laughin’!”

“They almost closed the theater on us,” remarked Hannah. “It was half-past eleven when we got home, and that’s late for us, even of a Saturday night.”

Mary Louise chuckled. She couldn’t have gotten any information more easily if she had been a real detective. Yet here was a perfect alibi for Hannah; if she had been at the movies until half-past eleven, she couldn’t have stolen that necklace from Dark Cedars. Maybe that bit of detective work wouldn’t make an impression upon her father!

“Of course, I can check up on it at the Globe Theater,” she decided in her most professional manner.

She held out her hand to Hannah.

“It’s good-bye, then, Hannah—and thank you for all the nice things you cooked for me.”

“You’re welcome, Miss Mary Louise. And if you come over to see me at my sister Jennie’s, I’ll make some doughnuts for you.”

“I’ll be there!” promised the girl, and with a nod to William, she went around to the porch to get her suitcase.

Thankful that it was not heavy, she walked slowly down to the road and on to Riverside. She had plenty of chance to think as she went along, but her thoughts were not pleasant. Hannah’s alibi only made Elsie’s guilt seem more assured. And how she hated to have to tell her father and Jane of the girl’s disappearance! There was bound to be publicity now, for the newspapers’ help would have to be

enlisted in the search for the missing orphan. Miss Grant would have to know the whole story, including the theft of the necklace....

Mary Louise shuddered, hoping that she would not be the bearer of the evil tidings to the sick old lady.

Chapter XVI

Spreading the Net

Mary Louise spied Norman Wilder's car in front of Jane Patterson's house as she turned into her own street in Riverside; a moment later she recognized both Norman and Max on her chum's porch. As soon as they, in their turn, saw her, they rushed down to the gate to meet her, and Max seized her suitcase.

"If you wouldn't be so doggone independent," he exclaimed, "and just let a fellow know when you needed a lift, Mary Lou, I'd have driven over for you!"

"That's all right, Max," returned Mary Louise. "As a matter of fact, Dad was coming for me at five o'clock, but I didn't want to wait that long. There was nothing to do at Dark Cedars."

"Nothing to do?" echoed Jane. "Are you going to stay home now and leave Elsie all alone?"

"Dad wants me home," was all the explanation Mary Louise would make before the boys. Later, she would tell her chum about the girl's disappearance. "I've got to go right in now," she added. "After I have a bath and my supper, I'll join you people."

"After supper!" repeated Max in disgust. "We were just considering a little picnic in the woods. It's a marvelous day for a swim."

"Picnic? Why, we had one yesterday!"

"And it was such fun that we thought we'd have an encore."

"I'm afraid I have too much to do to be in on any picnic," answered Mary Louise. "But I'll go for a walk or a drive with you all after supper—maybe."

Seeing that she was firm in her resolve, the young people released her, and she hurried into her own house. Mr. Gay was standing in the living room, holding the keys to his car in his hand and trying to persuade his wife to drive over to Dark Cedars with him.

“Why, Mary Lou!” he exclaimed in surprise. “We were just getting ready to go for you. Why didn’t you wait for me?”

“And where is Elsie?” inquired Mrs. Gay. Mary Louise dropped despondently into a chair.

“She—went away,” she replied briefly.

Mr. Gay turned sharply. “Where?” he demanded.

Mary Louise shook her head.

“I don’t know. Hannah said she went out soon after Jane and I left for Sunday school this morning, and the colored woman who lives in back of Dark Cedars saw her go through the woods. But she didn’t come back in time for dinner—or at all, before I left.”

“The poor child is lost!” exclaimed Mrs. Gay sympathetically. “If she wandered into Cooper’s woods, it’s no wonder.” She turned to her husband. “Hadn’t we better get out a searching party, dear, immediately? The Boy and the Girl Scouts, anyhow.”

Mr. Gay frowned.

“No, my dear,” he replied slowly. “I don’t think Elsie Grant is lost. Neither does Mary Lou. I’m afraid she’s headed straight for Harrisburg—and may have arrived by this time.”

“Harrisburg?” repeated Mrs. Gay. “Why, that’s sixty miles away! She couldn’t walk that far.”

“No, I don’t expect her to walk. I think she took the train—not from Riverside, but from the next station.”

“How could she take a train? She couldn’t buy a ticket, for she hasn’t any

money.”

“We are afraid, my dear, that Elsie Grant has plenty of money, though she may encounter a little difficulty in spending it, since the new law was passed. We believe that she stole those gold pieces from her aunt—and last night a necklace was taken, so it looks as if she had that too.”

“How terrible!” exclaimed Mrs. Gay, looking at Mary Louise as if she expected her to protest, or at least explain, her father’s accusation. But the girl was sitting disconsolately with her head bowed, as if she believed that every word was true.

“What shall we do, Daddy?” Mary Louise asked finally, in a hopeless tone.

“Notify the railroad stations to be on watch for a girl of Elsie’s description, who probably tried to buy a ticket with a gold piece. Of course, it’s possible she may have stolen some change from her aunt’s pocketbook and used that for carfare.... Do you happen to know what kind of dress she was wearing, Mary Lou?”

“My green silk—with little flowers in it. I gave it to her.” The reply was almost a sob.

“I’ll attend to that part, then,” announced Mr. Gay. “And you will have to go over to see Mr. John Grant, Mary Lou, and tell him that Elsie has gone. It will be up to him to take charge of the affair.”

“Suppose he doesn’t want the police notified that Elsie is missing?” asked his daughter.

“It isn’t his place to decide that question. If a person is missing, it’s the law’s duty to step in and try to find him or her. The loss of the necklace is a different matter, which concerns the Grant family alone.”

Mary Louise nodded and picked up her suitcase. She wanted to be alone in her own room; she felt too miserable to talk to anybody—even her father. What would be the use of telling him about her interview with Mrs. Jones, or the establishment of Hannah Groben’s alibi? He no longer entertained any suspicions about these people: the finger of accusation pointed too surely at Elsie Grant.

Taking off her hat and her dress, Mary Louise threw herself down upon the bed.

How tired she was! And how discouraged! How dreadful it was to believe in somebody and to have that trust betrayed! Elsie Grant had appeared to be such a sweet, innocent person, so worthy of sympathy. It didn't seem possible that while she was accepting the girls' friendship and their gifts she could be plotting this wicked thing.

The laughter of Mary Louise's young friends rose from the porch next door and came through the open window, but the weary girl on the bed had no desire to join them. For once in her life she felt as if she wanted to avoid Jane. She couldn't bear to tell her that her suspicions about Elsie had been as good as proved.

Tired and unhappy, Mary Louise closed her eyes, and before she realized it she was fast asleep. The experience of the previous night and the strain of this day had overpowered her, and for an hour she forgot all her troubles in a dreamless rest. Her mother wakened her by announcing that supper was on the table.

Mary Louise sat up and rubbed her eyes.

"I'm sorry, Mother," she said. "I meant to help you. I haven't been much use to you for the last few days."

"That's all right, dear," replied Mrs. Gay. "You needed the sleep, and Freckles has been fine.... Now, come to supper."

Mary Louise was delighted to find that she felt much better after her nap. And much more cheerful. She no longer dreaded the coming necessary interview with John Grant, which she meant to seek after supper.

However, she was saved the trouble of going to his house, for scarcely had the Gays finished eating when John Grant arrived. Mary Louise and her father received him in the living room.

"I have a message for you, Miss Gay," he announced, "from my aunt."

"Oh!" exclaimed Mary Louise. "You were able to see her, then?"

"Late this afternoon. She seemed much better and asked the nurse to send for me. So I went over to the hospital about five o'clock."

“Did you tell her about the necklace?” asked Mary Louise eagerly.

“Yes, I did. I thought it would be best to get it over with. She asked me whether it was safe, and I couldn’t lie. So I told her what happened last night.”

Mary Louise gasped.

“Wasn’t the shock too much for her? And wasn’t she just furious at me?”

“No, she stood it quite well. She said she knew something had happened because of a dream she had last night. And she said, ‘Tell Mary Louise not to worry, because I don’t blame her. And I want to see her myself tomorrow morning.’”

“Why, that’s wonderful!” exclaimed the girl, with a sigh of relief. “I had no idea she would take it so well.”

“Neither did I,” admitted John. “There’s something queer about it—but maybe she’ll explain tomorrow. I wasn’t allowed to stay with her long today, and she was too weak to talk much.”

It was Mr. Gay who put the question that was trembling on Mary Louise’s lips:

“Does she think her niece—Elsie Grant, I mean—stole the necklace?”

“She didn’t say,” answered John. “But I don’t believe so, because she asked whether Elsie had confessed yet about the gold pieces. That wouldn’t indicate that she believed her guilty of another theft.”

“No, it wouldn’t,” agreed Mr. Gay. “But everything points that way. We have bad news for you, Mr. Grant: Elsie has disappeared.”

“Humph!”

John Grant’s grunt and his nod were significant. “I was afraid of that,” he said.

“I have already notified the police,” announced Mr. Gay. “They are watching for her at the railroad stations, and I have wired the pawnshops and jewelers in Harrisburg and other cities nearby. We’ll probably catch her by tonight.”

“I hope so,” sighed John. “It’s too bad. I feel sort of guilty about the whole thing.

If we had taken the child into our home, instead of letting her go with Aunt Mattie, it would never have happened. But we were feeling the depression and didn't see how we could assume any more expense. My brother isn't earning anything, and Mother lost most of her inheritance. While Aunt Mattie, of course, had plenty.... But it was a mistake."

Mary Louise looked gratefully at the man: John Grant was the only person besides herself who felt any pity for Elsie. How she wished he had been able to bring her up!... But it was too late now for regrets.

"What will be done with her when they do find her?" she inquired tremulously. "Will she be sent to prison if she is proved guilty?"

John shrugged his shoulders.

"That will be for Aunt Mattie to decide. But you know she has talked nothing but reform school since the child came to her."

"Maybe I can persuade her to give Elsie another chance," murmured Mary Louise hopefully.

"Maybe," agreed John as he shook hands with Mr. Gay and departed.

Mary Louise turned to her father after the man left.

"I have some things to tell you, Daddy," she said. "Some clues I followed up this afternoon. Do you want to hear them?"

"By all means," returned Mr. Gay.

"One thing I learned is that the gypsies stole those chickens. At least—the wife of the colored man who lives in back of Dark Cedars claims that they did."

Mr. Gay smiled.

"You don't think that's important?" asked Mary Louise in disappointment, for she could read his thought. "It occurred to me that, if they stole the chickens, maybe it was they who stole the necklace."

"I'm afraid not, daughter. If we have only a colored woman's word for it, that's

no proof. She's probably shielding herself or her husband.... Besides, while gypsies might steal something on the outside, they very seldom have been known to break into people's houses."

"Yes, I was afraid you would say that."

"It might be worth following up as a clue if we had nothing else to go on. But now we feel pretty sure that Elsie Grant is guilty.... But did this colored woman hear them last night—the gypsies, I mean?"

"No, she didn't. It was several nights ago, and about the same time that William, the hired man, reported that the chickens were gone."

"What else did you learn this afternoon?" inquired her father.

"I sounded this Mrs. Jones out about the necklace, and she had never heard of any jewels at Dark Cedars. I believe her—I don't think she could have stolen that necklace—or her husband, either."

"I never thought they did, for a minute. If the thief had been a colored person, you would have known it, I'm sure. The hands alone are different. Didn't you say that the hand that touched you was thin?"

"Yes. Almost bony. That's one reason why I didn't suspect Elsie."

"And how about Hannah? Did you learn her whereabouts last night?"

"Yes," answered Mary Louise, and she told of the woman's visit, with her husband and sister, to the moving-picture house—an alibi which the girl could easily check up on tomorrow.

"I hear Jane's whistle!" exclaimed Mr. Gay. "The young people want you, dear. You better go out with them and forget all this sad business for the rest of the evening. I think you need a little diversion."

Mary Louise thought so too, and dashed off joyously to join her friends.

CHAPTER XVII

The Empty House

Mr. Gay was seated at the telephone table in the dining room the following morning when Mary Louise came downstairs to breakfast. She waited breathlessly for the news, for she felt sure that he was talking to some of the police about the whereabouts of Elsie Grant.

“That’s strange,” she heard him say. “I can hardly believe it.... You checked up with the bus companies as well as the railroads?... O.K., then. Keep on searching,” he concluded.

Replacing the receiver, he turned to his daughter.

“Not a trace of Elsie anywhere,” he announced.

Mary Louise smiled: she was almost glad that the girl had not been found. It gave her more time to believe in Elsie’s innocence.

“Do you think she could have been kidnaped, Daddy?” she inquired. “People are, pretty often, nowadays.”

“But they’re always rich or important,” returned Mr. Gay. “No: that’s one of the blessings of being poor—nobody would kidnap Elsie Grant unless he knew that she had the ruby necklace. Then the criminal would be much more likely to steal it and let her go.”

“That’s what I think,” agreed Mary Louise.... “What are you going to do now?”

“There’s nothing more I can do. I suppose you are planning to go over to the hospital to see Miss Grant?”

“Yes, for a few minutes after breakfast. Then—Daddy—” Mary Louise

hesitated: she didn't want her father to laugh at her next request, but she just had to ask him—"would you be willing to go on a search with me through Cooper's woods? It's just possible that all our detective work may be wrong and my unsuspecting mother right. Elsie might be lost in Cooper's woods!"

"I'm not going to smile," replied her father. "Because I think your suggestion is a very good one. Elsie may even be guilty of the thefts—and have the necklace and the gold pieces with her—and still be lost or hiding in those woods. I'll be glad to go with you."

Mary Louise's brown eyes sparkled. What a good sport her father was!

"Don't let's take the car, Daddy," she urged. "At least, not any farther than Dark Cedars. I'd like to set out from the back of Miss Grant's yard and try to trace Elsie's steps—with Silky to help us. If I get her old calico dress and shoes and let him sniff them, I think he'd understand."

Mr. Gay gazed at his daughter admiringly.

"Mary Lou, that is an idea!" he cried. "You're a better detective than I am."

She blushed at the praise.

"Wait till we see how my plan turns out," she answered. "It may lead to nothing at all.... Still, we'll be having fun. It'll be a regular hiking trip."

"Of course it will be fun," agreed her father, for he loved the out-of-doors. "And we'll carry blankets in case we stay overnight."

"What's this I hear?" demanded Mrs. Gay, appearing from the kitchen with the coffee pot in her hands. "What mischief are you two up to now?"

"Only an all-day hike, my dear," explained Mr. Gay calmly. "You don't mind, do you? And will you drive us as far as Dark Cedars and bring the car back?"

"Certainly," replied Mrs. Gay graciously.

"May I go?" asked Freckles as he came into the dining room with Silky at his heels.

“I’m afraid you’ll have to stay home and take care of your mother, Son, for we may be gone overnight,” replied his father. “But just wait till I get my real vacation, later on. We’ll have a whale of a trip. All four of us together.”

“Don’t you expect to be home in time for supper?” asked Mrs. Gay.

“That all depends upon our luck.” And Mr. Gay went on to explain to his wife the nature of their excursion and the reason for making it.

While he assembled the necessary equipment for the hike, Mary Louise hurried off to the hospital to see Miss Grant. It was early, but she was told that she might go up to the patient’s room immediately. The old lady was expecting her.

Mary Louise found her looking pale and wasted, but her black eyes beamed as brightly as ever, and she smiled faintly at her visitor.

“I brought you some flowers, Miss Grant,” began the girl cheerfully as she handed them to the nurse. “And I’m so glad to hear that you are better.”

Miss Grant nodded her thanks and indicated that she wanted Mary Louise to sit down in the chair beside her high white bed.

“Any news?” she asked in a weak but eager voice.

Mary Louise shook her head.

“Nothing more,” she replied. “Mr. John Grant told you about my awful experience on Saturday night, didn’t he?”

“Yes. I was afraid something like that might happen. I’m sorry, Mary Louise, and thankful that you weren’t injured.”

“You mean you’re sorrier for me than for yourself—about losing the necklace?” asked the girl incredulously. This didn’t sound at all like the miser she believed Miss Grant to be.

“Yes, I am. Because, somehow, I never thought that necklace would do me any good. I should have been afraid to sell it for fear it would bring up some old scandal or some disgrace about my father. I don’t know how he got hold of it—I was always afraid it had something to do with gambling or a bet of some kind—

but I do know that my mother never approved of his keeping it. And so I'm almost thankful it's gone."

"Who do you think could have taken it?"

"Either the original owner—whoever he is—or my mother's ghost. You read of queer things like that sometimes, things that never can be explained by the living. Perhaps when we are dead we shall understand.... I don't know.... I dreamed about Mother night before last, and in the dream I promised her to throw away the necklace.... So I'm almost thankful it's gone."

Mary Louise let out a sigh of relief.

"I'm so glad it doesn't worry you, Miss Grant. I was afraid you'd suspect Elsie."

The sick woman's eyes flashed angrily.

"I do still suspect Elsie of taking my gold!" The old expression of greed crossed her face. "You haven't found it for me yet, have you, Mary Louise?"

"No, I haven't, Miss Grant."

"Where is Elsie?" was the next question.

Mary Louise hesitated: she hated to answer this.

"She is—lost. She went away yesterday—Sunday morning—and hasn't come back yet."

Miss Grant nodded significantly.

"I was expecting it. Well, you don't believe any longer that she's innocent, do you, Mary Louise?"

"I'm still hoping," replied the girl.

Miss Grant was silent for some minutes, and Mary Louise felt that it was time for her to go. But before she made a move, she told the sick woman of Hannah's decision to leave Dark Cedars, and she held out the key.

"But I should like to keep it today, if you don't mind, Miss Grant," she added,

“so I can get some clothing of Elsie’s for Silky to sniff at. I want to take him down to the woods to see whether he can get on her trail.”

“Keep it as long as you want it,” agreed the old lady. “If Hannah is gone, I shan’t return to Dark Cedars very soon. John wants me to go to his home, anyhow, when I get out of the hospital, so I suppose I had better agree.”

“Do you want to see William about your cow and your garden?” inquired Mary Louise.

“Yes, tell him to stop in to see me here at the hospital.... And now you had better go, child.... I’m very tired.”

Enormously relieved that the interview had been so easy, Mary Louise left the hospital and hurried back to her home. She met Jane Patterson as she entered her own gate.

“What next?” inquired her chum, who had been told the previous evening of Elsie’s disappearance. “Still acting the detective?”

“I should say,” answered Mary Louise. “Dad and I are going off now in search of Elsie.”

“Where are you going? Harrisburg?”

“No. Cooper’s woods. Want to come along, Jane?”

The other girl shook her head.

“I don’t believe so. I have a tennis date with Norman, and Hope Dorsey is rounding up the crowd to drive over to a country fair tonight. She’ll be furious if you don’t go—and so will Max. Kenneth was expecting we’d bring Elsie Grant along.”

“I only wish we could!” sighed Mary Louise. “But maybe we shall be able to. Maybe we’ll find her and bring her back home in time for supper.”

“And maybe not,” remarked Jane.

“I’ve got to be off now,” concluded the other, giving her chum a hasty kiss.

“Wish me good luck!”

“You know I do!” was the reply.

Mary Louise ran into the house and found her father all ready to start. He had made up a pack for each of them to carry; his own, the heavier, included a small tent for use if they were obliged to sleep in the woods. The food and equipment were sufficient but not overabundant, for Mr. Gay was a good camper and knew just what was necessary and what could be left at home.

“Get into your knickers, Mary Lou,” he advised. “And bring a sweater along.”

“You don’t think we’ll be cold?”

“The woods are chilly at night.”

“Bring me back a bearskin,” suggested Freckles jokingly. “I could use one.”

“I don’t expect to shoot anything,” replied his father. “But, of course, you never can tell.”

Half an hour later Mrs. Gay drove the two adventurers over to Dark Cedars and let them out at the hedge. Mary Louise, with Silky at her heels, led the way up to the house.

“It is a gloomy-looking place,” observed her father as he followed her through the trees. “Yet it could be made very attractive.”

Mary Louise shuddered.

“Nobody would ever want to live here after all the ghost stories get around. You know how people exaggerate, and the stories are bad enough as they are.”

“The porch certainly needs paint and repairs. It’s a wonder Miss Grant hasn’t fallen down and broken her neck.”

Mary Louise inserted her key in the lock and opened the heavy wooden door. Inside, the shutters were carefully closed, and the dark, somber house seemed almost like a tomb. The stairs creaked ominously as the two ascended them, and Mary Louise was thankful that she was not alone. After that one experience in

Miss Grant's bedroom, she never knew what strange creature might rush at her from the big, dark closet.

"I can hardly see where I'm going," remarked Mr. Gay. "You better take my hand, Mary Lou."

His daughter seized it gladly; she was only too pleased to feel its human, reassuring pressure. She led the way to the rear of the second floor, up the attic steps to Elsie's room.

Here they found one of the windows open, so that a subdued light brightened the attic room. But there was no sunshine, for the boughs of the cedar trees pressed against the window sill.

Silky had been following them at a respectful distance, and Mary Louise lifted him up in her arms as she opened the closet door. A musty smell greeted her, but she had no difficulty in finding the clothing she wanted, and she held it close to Silky's nose.

"This is Elsie's," she said, just as if the dog were human. "Elsie is lost, and you must find her."

Still keeping the dog in her arms and the dress close to his nose, she carefully descended the stairs.

"I'd like to see Miss Grant's bedroom," said Mr. Gay as they reached the second floor. "I want a look at the mattress."

"O.K., Daddy. But you go first. And have your gun ready if you open that closet door. I think that's where the ghosts live."

"Mary Lou!" cried her father in amazement. "You don't believe that stuff, do you?"

"I wish I did," sighed the girl. "Because that would make Elsie innocent."

"You are very fond of Elsie, aren't you, Daughter?"

"She seemed so sweet. And all our crowd liked her."

Mr. Gay went to the window of Miss Grant's room and threw open the shutter to let in the light. Just as Mary Louise had said, the mattress was literally torn to pieces. Piles of straw were heaped on the floor, and the ragged covering was strewn all over the room.

Mr. Gay examined it, and Mary Louise walked over to the side window—the one under which William's ladder had been found.

“Even a piece from the mattress is on this window ledge,” she remarked as she pulled out a long strip of material. She examined it more closely. Suddenly her eyes blinked in excitement.

“This isn't mattress cover, Daddy!” she exclaimed. “It's clothing material! Blue sateen! From—somebody's dress!”

Mr. Gay reached the window in two quick steps.

“What do you make of that, Mary Lou?” he demanded.

“I think it must be a piece from the thief's clothing!” she cried in delight. “And I don't believe it's Elsie's. Unless she was wearing some old dress of her aunt's.”

“I hope you're right,” said Mr. Gay. “Put the strip into your pocket. Crimes have been solved on slimmer evidence than that.” He turned aside. “There are no ghosts in the closet, Mary Lou,” he announced solemnly. “I just looked.”

“Then let's leave, Daddy. I'm 'rarin' to go'—because—well—because I have another reason now besides wanting to find Elsie!”

“You suspect somebody definitely?” he inquired.

“Yes. But don't ask me whom—yet. Just let's go.”

Still holding on to Elsie's calico dress, Mary Louise led the way out of the house and around to the back yard of Dark Cedars. Here they found William complacently working in the garden, as if nothing had ever happened to disturb the peace at Miss Grant's home. He looked up and smiled at Mary Louise.

“Elsie didn't come back, did she, William?” asked the girl.

The old man shook his head. “Nope,” he replied.

“Any more chickens stolen?”

“Nope.”

“Well, we’re off to hunt Elsie—my father and I,” explained Mary Louise. “And, by the way, William, Miss Grant wants you to stop in to see her at the hospital.”

“I’ll do that,” agreed the man. “And good luck to ye!”

“Thanks, William,” returned Mary Louise. “Good-bye.”

She and her father walked on down the hill towards the little shack where the colored family lived, and stopped there to inquire again about Elsie. But Mrs. Jones had not seen her since the previous morning; however, she pointed out just what path the girl had taken. So Mary Louise put Silky on the trail, and the three began their search.

CHAPTER XVIII

Found!

With Silky in the lead, Mr. Gay and Mary Louise followed the path behind Dark Cedars which led directly into Cooper's woods. It was new to them both, for although they had gone to these woods many times, they had always entered from the road that ran past the creek and the swimming hole.

"It's much cooler this way," observed the girl. "So nice and shady."

"Silky seems to know what he's doing," remarked her father. "He's going straight ahead."

"I'm afraid he's making for the swimming hole," returned Mary Louise. "He loves a swim as much as we do."

"Do you want to stop for one?"

"I'd like to, but I don't think we better. It would take too much time, dressing and undressing."

"Maybe we can have one on our way back."

"Yes, maybe," agreed Mary Louise. "I ought to have brought Elsie's suit, so that if we find her she could go with us. She loved it on Saturday."

"I'm afraid you're being a little too optimistic, Daughter," replied Mr. Gay. "Don't get your hopes up too high."

The path grew wide again as they approached the swimming hole, and when they arrived at the stream Mary Louise took off her pack and sat down under a tree. About a dozen children were playing about in the water, and Mary Louise threw a stick into the stream as a signal for Silky to jump in. In another minute

the children were romping with him. Then they came out and crowded around Mary Louise, admiring the spaniel and asking his name.

“You didn’t see a girl about fifteen years old in a green silk dress, did you, children?” she inquired.

They shook their heads.

“Were any of you here yesterday morning?” asked Mr. Gay.

Two of the older boys replied that they had been there.

“Did you see the girl then?” persisted the man.

One boy thought that he did remember seeing a young lady—“all dressed up in a silk dress.” But she hadn’t stopped at the pool; she had crossed the bridge fifty yards below and had taken the path right back into the deepest part of the woods.

Mary Louise jumped to her feet. “Come on, Daddy! Let’s get going!”

“How about eating some of those sandwiches your mother packed for us?” suggested her father.

“Oh, no—not yet!” protested Mary Louise. “It’s only eleven o’clock.” She turned to the boys. “Have you seen any gypsies around?”

“A couple of days ago,” was the answer. “I heard they moved on towards Coopersburg. A fellow I know was over there last night and saw them telling fortunes.”

“What’s the best way to Coopersburg?” inquired Mary Louise.

“Through the woods is shortest, I guess. But I don’t know if there’s any path. We always go around by the road.”

“We were going through the woods anyhow,” said Mary Louise. To her father she added, “I do want to see those gypsies again, almost as much as I want to find Elsie.”

She whistled for Silky, and he came running out of the water, shaking himself

joyously and rolling over and over on the grass.

“He’s forgotten all about the trail he’s supposed to be following,” remarked Mary Louise, producing the purple calico dress. “Come here, Silky, and sniff this again.”

The couple turned their steps to the bridge and soon were out of the open space, back in the cool shade of the woods. Here the path was narrow and deeply shaded, so that they had to walk single file for a long distance, sometimes picking their way carefully among the thick undergrowth. About noon they stopped to eat the sandwiches which Mrs. Gay had packed and to drink the iced-tea from the thermos bottle.

“It’s still a long walk to Coopersburg,” sighed Mary Louise. “I’d forgotten how these woods wound around. I don’t believe I ever walked this way before.”

“Are you tired?” inquired her father.

“A little. But mostly hot. I’ll soon cool off.”

“We won’t try to walk back,” replied Mr. Gay. “If we don’t find Elsie, we can take a bus back from Coopersburg.”

“I don’t think we should do that, Daddy,” argued Mary Louise. “If we don’t find her or the gypsies either, I think we should come back here and camp for the night. That would give us a chance to make a more thorough search of the woods tomorrow. Because we might easily miss Elsie just by keeping on this path, as we are doing now.”

“Why do you want to find the gypsies, Mary Lou?”

“They may have seen Elsie. For fifty cents that fortune teller will give you any information you want.”

Mr. Gay smiled.

“I’m afraid she’d make up anything she didn’t know,” he remarked.

“Well, she was right about Jane’s lost ring—and about the ruby necklace,” Mary Louise reminded him. “John Grant said so.”

“Yes, but she used her common sense in the first case, and in the second, she may have heard a rumor about the necklace—especially if this particular band of gypsies has been coming to this neighborhood for years.... I wouldn’t attach too much faith to these people, Daughter.”

They gathered up the remains of their picnic lunch and started forward again, with Silky in the lead. On and on they walked for several hours, talking very little, and stopping only now and then for a drink of water from a spring or two which they passed. About three o’clock they came to a widening of the path, and through the trees they could see the fields that surrounded the town of Coopersburg.

With a new burst of energy Mary Louise started to run forward.

“I see some tents, Daddy!” she cried. “And that caravan! Oh, I’m sure it’s the gypsies.”

“Don’t run, Mary Lou!” called her father. “With that heavy pack on your back! I’m afraid you’ll hurt yourself.”

“I can’t wait, Daddy.” But she stopped and turned around, removing the pack from her shoulders.

“You keep the packs, Daddy,” she said when he had caught up to her, “and I’ll go ahead. I’d rather see the fortune teller by myself, anyhow. But stay where I can see you—within calling distance. And if I don’t come back in half an hour, come and look for me.”

“Mary Lou, are you expecting any trouble from these gypsies?”

“You never can tell!” she laughingly replied. Blowing him a kiss with her hand, she started to run towards the encampment. When she was about fifty yards away she saw the same children whom she had noticed the day of the picnic, and she looked eagerly for the fortune teller. A few yards farther on she recognized the woman, coming from one of the tents.

It seemed to Mary Louise that an expression of terror crossed the gypsy’s face as the woman caught sight of her. But only for a second; in a moment she was grinning and showing all the gaps in her front teeth.

“Fortune?” she asked immediately, as Mary Louise approached her.

“Yes—that is—not exactly,” replied the girl. However, she held up a silver half dollar in her hand, and the gypsy turned and lifted the flap of the tent.

“Bring the cards out here,” suggested Mary Louise, glancing back towards the woods to make sure that her father was within sight. “It’s too hot to go inside.”

The woman nodded and took the dirty pack of cards out of the pocket of her dress. “Sit down,” she commanded, and Mary Louise did as she was told.

The oddly assorted pair stared at each other for a moment in silence. Mary Louise’s eyes traveled slowly about the gypsy woman, from the top of her black head to the tips of her big old shoes. She examined her dress—of the same deep-blue color which she was wearing the day of the picnic—and she looked at her thin, bony, yet strong hands.... Then, very deliberately, Mary Louise reached into the pocket of her knickers and brought out the strip of blue sateen which she had taken from the window ledge in Miss Mattie Grant’s bedroom at Dark Cedars.

With a triumphant gleam in her eyes, she held the piece of torn material close to the gypsy’s dress. Dirty and spotted as it was, there could be no doubt of its identity. It was a perfect match!

A wild gasp of terror escaped from the gypsy’s lips, and she made a grab at the condemning piece of evidence. But Mary Louise was too quick for her. Springing to her feet, she leaned over and hit the woman right in the mouth with her clenched fist. The gypsy groaned and rolled over in the grass.

Amazed at her own action, Mary Louise stood gazing at the woman in calm triumph. It had been years since she had hit anyone; she was surprised that she had it in her to deal such a blow. But the gypsy was not knocked out—merely stunned.

“Where is Miss Grant’s necklace?” she demanded.

The woman opened her eyes and whimpered.

“It don’t belong to that old witch! It’s mine, I tell you! Was my mother’s, and her mother’s before that. Old woman Grant had no right to it.”

She raised herself to a sitting position, and her black eyes flashed with hatred. “You wait till my man comes back—and see what he’ll do to you!”

Mary Louise smiled confidently.

“I don’t intend to wait,” she replied. “I have a member of the police force right here with me.” She raised her voice and cupped her hands. “Daddy, come!”

A look of awful fright crossed the gypsy’s wrinkled face.

“No! No! Don’t put me in jail! I’ll give you the necklace. But it’s mine—it’s mine by right, I tell you!”

Mary Louise was scarcely listening, so eagerly was she watching her father’s quick approach.

“You can tell that to Detective Gay,” she said finally. “And, by the way, where is the box of gold pieces you stole from Miss Grant?”

“Gold pieces? What? Uh—I never took——” But her tone was not convincing, and seeing that Mary Louise did not believe her, she suddenly changed her story. “I’ll give you the gold pieces if you let me keep my mother’s necklace,” she pleaded.

Mr. Gay reached his daughter’s side in time to overhear this last statement. His eyes were shining at his daughter in speechless admiration.

“Your badge, please, Daddy,” said Mary Louise calmly. “Please show it to this woman.”

Mr. Gay did as he was requested.

“Now go and get the necklace and the gold,” Mary Louise commanded the gypsy.

The woman struggled to her feet.

“First let me tell you about that necklace!” she begged. Her bony hands clutched Mary Louise’s sleeve, and she looked imploringly into the girl’s face. “It was a precious heirloom—has been in our family for years and years. We held it

sacred; it brought us good luck. Oh, I can't bear to give it up now that I've got it again!"

Mary Louise glanced questioningly at her father.

"Sit down again," he said to the gypsy, "and tell us the story."

"Thank you, sir!" exclaimed the woman, dropping down on the grass at his feet. "I'll tell you...."

"It goes back fifty years," she began, talking rapidly, "in my mother's time, when we used to come here to Cooper's woods to camp every summer.... I was a child—and so was my little brother. A little fellow of six—my mother's darling...."

"One day he got suddenly sick. A terrible pain in his side. My mother almost went crazy, for she felt sure he was going to die. We couldn't do a thing for him; the pain got worse and worse and worse. Then, like a burst of sunshine after a storm, Mr. Grant came riding up to us—and stopped and asked what was the matter. I can remember just how he looked—not a bit like his awful daughter Mattie! He promised to help us, to take my little brother to the hospital and get him well.

"My mother agreed, and she went off with Mr. Grant and the boy. They told her there at the hospital that the child had appendicitis, and Mr. Grant ordered the best doctor in the country.... And my brother got well!

"My mother was so happy that we thought she'd dance forever. She wanted to pay Mr. Grant for the expense, but he was such a generous man he wouldn't hear of it. So my mother gave him the ruby necklace to keep for her and said she'd be back every summer to see it. If ever Mr. Grant needed money, he was to borrow on it.

"He promised to keep it safe for her, but he never thought of it as his. Each summer we came back and camped on his place—we were always welcome while he lived—and each year we saw the necklace, and he would ask us whether we wanted to take it back. But we said no, because it was safer there, and he was our friend, and we trusted him.

"And then one summer we came back, and old Mr. Grant was gone. Dead. So we

tried to tell Miss Mattie Grant about the necklace, but she shut the door in our faces and called the police. For years we couldn't even come out of Cooper's woods without meeting a policeman.

"Then my mother died, and my brother died, and I decided I was going to get that necklace back. So this year we came and camped in those woods, and every night I went over to Dark Cedars. Sometimes I'd sneak in while they were eating supper; sometimes I'd climb in a window with a ladder late at night. I began in the attic and went through each room, searching for the necklace.

"The first time I got into Mattie Grant's room—it was one evening last week, while they were eating supper—I opened that safe of hers. I was sure the necklace would be there. But it wasn't. I was so mad that I took that box of gold, although I hadn't stolen anything out of her house before that."

While the woman paused for breath, Mary Louise recalled the evening of the theft of Miss Grant's money. This, then, was the explanation of the open safe, from which Corinne Pearson had taken the bills. And it proved, too, that Harry Grant had been innocent of any part in the actual theft.

The gypsy woman continued her story:

"It was you, miss, who gave me the information I wanted, the day you girls and boys had your fortunes told. You told me old Mattie asked you to sleep in her bed while she was away. So I knew that the necklace must be hidden in the mattress....

"You know the rest. I went to Dark Cedars while you were still at your picnic, and I thought I'd get the necklace before you came home. But you surprised me, and I had to hide in the closet while you got ready for bed.... I—I—didn't want to hurt you! I only wanted what belonged to me!"

Tears were running out of the woman's eyes, and she rubbed her hands together in anguish, as if she were imploring Mary Louise for mercy.

"What do you say, Mary Lou?" asked her father.

Mary Louise hesitated.

"I—I—honestly believe she has more right to that necklace than Miss Grant

has,” she answered finally. “So, if she will turn over the box of gold, I’m for letting her keep the necklace.... But what do you think, Daddy?”

“It’s your case, dear. You are to decide.”

“Suppose you go with her, Daddy, while she gets both things. And be sure to keep your revolver handy, too,” she added shrewdly.

Mr. Gay smiled: he was delighted with his daughter’s keenness.

The gypsy nodded and, stepping inside her tent, produced the box of gold. The identical tin box which Elsie had mentioned. The necklace she took from a pocket in her petticoat. Meekly she handed both treasures to Mr. Gay.

“How beautiful that necklace is!” cried Mary Louise, in admiration of the sparkling jewels. It was the first time in her life that she had ever seen real rubies, and their radiance, their brilliance, was breath-taking.

“I love them dearly,” said the gypsy, in a hoarse tone, filled with emotion.

Mary Louise took the necklace from her father and handed it back to its real owner.

“You may have it,” she said slowly. “I’ll take the gold back to Miss Grant. But first I must count it.”

“It’s all there,” mumbled the woman, her hands fondling the beloved rubies.

Mary Louise found her statement to be correct, and, handing the box back to her father, she turned to go.

“Oh, I almost forgot!” she exclaimed, glancing at the gypsy. “Have you seen a young girl anywhere around here—or in the woods?”

Before the woman could answer, Silky, who had run straight to the motor truck, began to bark loudly and incessantly. Putting his front feet on the step, he peered eagerly into the caravan, and increased his noise until it reached a volume of which a police dog might have been proud. Nor did he stop until a head showed itself from the door and a voice called him by name.

Mary Louise, watching the little drama, suddenly cried out in joy.

The girl coming from the caravan was none other than Elsie Grant!

CHAPTER XIX

Conclusion

Mary Louise threw her arms around Elsie and hugged her tightly. It was so good to know that she was innocent—and safe!

“You’ve found the gold pieces!” exclaimed the girl, staring at the box in Mr. Gay’s hand. “And the necklace!” she added, as the gypsy proudly put on the jewels and went off to show her people.

“Yes, I’ll tell you all about it later,” replied Mary Louise. “But first I want to hear about you, Elsie: why you are here, and how these gypsies have been treating you.”

“They’ve been treating me splendidly! Much better than Aunt Mattie ever did. You see, they liked my father and my grandfather, and they hated Aunt Mattie. So of course they have a lot of sympathy for me.”

“But when did you come to them?”

“Yesterday afternoon. I was perfectly miserable after Saturday night. I knew Jane suspected me of doing that terrible thing to you, and I never slept a wink the whole night. So I decided to run away. I didn’t think of the gypsies at the time: I just wanted to get out of Riverside. I put on the green silk dress you gave me, and tied up my other things in a bundle, and made off through the woods so that I wouldn’t meet anybody.”

“Mrs. Jones saw you go,” said Mary Louise. “It was she who put Daddy and Silky and me on the trail.”

“I took some fruit and some biscuits from the kitchen at Dark Cedars,” Elsie went on to explain. “I thought I’d walk to the nearest town and ask for work. Now that I have some decent clothes, I don’t feel ashamed to be seen.”

“But you came upon the gypsies before you got to any town?” inquired Mr. Gay, who couldn’t keep out of the conversation, although he had not been properly introduced.

“Yes. And I was tired and hungry, so I thought maybe they’d let me stay overnight with them. They were stewing chicken, and it smelled so good.”

“Your aunt Mattie’s chickens,” explained Mary Louise laughingly.

“Really?” asked Elsie in surprise. The idea had not occurred to her.

“Yes. Mrs. Jones saw the gypsies stealing the chickens.... Well, did they give you some supper?”

“They certainly did. Mira—she is the fortune teller—let me sleep in her tent. She said she used to play with my father when he was a little boy, when my grandfather—old Mr. Grant, you recall—let the gypsies camp at Dark Cedars. She told me I could stay with them all my life if I wanted to.”

“You didn’t expect to do it, did you?”

“I wanted to get a job. But there isn’t much I can do, I’m afraid.” The young girl’s voice grew sad; the future looked gray to her.

Mary Louise took her hand.

“You’re coming right back to Riverside with Daddy and me,” she announced. “Your aunt Mattie will have to promise to treat you better, or else she won’t get her gold pieces back!”

“She’ll be furious about the necklace,” said Elsie.

“No, she won’t either. I happen to know that she’ll be thankful to have the matter all cleared up. And she’ll be delighted to get the money, because that is rightfully hers.”

Mr. Gay leaned over and picked up his pack.

“You go get your things together, Elsie,” he said, “and say good-bye to your gypsy friends. We’ll take a bus back to Riverside from Coopersburg.”

“You really want me?” asked the girl.

“Absolutely!” replied Mary Louise. “You’re going to go to high school this fall, I hope, and belong to our crowd of young people. All the boys and girls like you.”

Elsie’s face lighted up with a happy smile.

“And I like them, too—but you and Jane will always come first. Oh, I’m so glad that Jane will believe in me again!”

Ten minutes later the two girls and Mr. Gay were seated in the bus bound for Riverside. Mary Louise held Silky in her arms under her pack when she got in, and the conductor did not even notice him. She was thankful for that, because she was much too tired to walk.

They went straight to the Gays’ home, taking Elsie with them. Mrs. Gay was sitting on the front porch, little thinking that her two adventurers would return so soon. She jumped up in delight when she saw them coming in at the gate.

“And is this Elsie?” she asked as the three tired wanderers ascended the porch steps.

“Yes, Mother, this is Elsie Grant,” replied Mary Louise. “We found her, and we caught the thief too. It was the gypsy fortune teller.”

“Well, of all things!” exclaimed Mrs. Gay. “And had she kidnaped Elsie too?”

“Oh no, Elsie went there voluntarily, because everybody suspected her of the crime, and she was unhappy. But Elsie had no idea the gypsy was the thief, until she heard us accusing her.”

“If I’d only have been a detective like Mary Louise,” the girl remarked admiringly, “I might have guessed. But I’m pretty stupid about things like that. I even ate some of Aunt Mattie’s chicken for my supper last night without ever guessing that the gypsies stole it.”

Mrs. Gay laughed.

“Well, it certainly is nice to have you all back again. We’ll have a fine dinner to

celebrate—I'll send Freckles for ice cream when he comes in." She stooped over and patted the little dog's head. "Silky shall have some too. He loves ice cream."

Mary Louise took Elsie up to her room, and the two girls lay down on the bed to rest after they had removed their dusty clothing and cooled themselves under the shower. At five o'clock Mrs. Gay came in with the news that Jane Patterson was downstairs, asking for her chum.

"Please tell her to come up, Mother," replied Mary Louise. "I can't understand why she is being so formal."

"She knows Elsie is here," explained Mrs. Gay, "and thought you might not like to be disturbed."

"Does she know I didn't steal the money or the necklace?" demanded Elsie eagerly.

"Mary Louise's father is telling her the story now. Freckles just came in, and he had to hear all about it too. He's almost as keen to become a detective as Mary Louise is."

Mrs. Gay returned to the first floor, and in a couple of minutes Jane Patterson dashed into the bedroom. She hugged both Elsie and Mary Louise at once.

"You're a wonder, Mary Lou!" she cried. "Sherlock Holmes, and Philo Vance, and Spencer Dean haven't a thing on you for solving mysteries. Why, I bet your father loses his job and they hire you in his place!"

"Now, Jane, be rational!" begged Mary Louise.

The visitor seated herself upon the edge of the bed.

"All right, I'll try.... What I came over about was to see whether you and Elsie can go with our crowd to that country fair tonight. We're leaving early after supper, and Mother and Dad are both going along. You can take Freckles too—but not Silky. He might get into a fight with the cows or pigs or something."

"Don't insult my dog!" returned Mary Louise solemnly. "Silky never associates with pigs!"

“O.K.... Well, can you go?”

“We’d love to, but don’t you think we ought to take Miss Grant’s money back to her?”

“Not tonight, certainly!” was Jane’s emphatic reply. “Let her worry about it a little longer—it’s good for her.”

“But shouldn’t I go over to see her?” asked Elsie.

“Tomorrow’s time enough for that,” answered Mary Louise. “You can stay all night with me tonight.”

Mrs. Gay heartily approved of the plan, for she felt that both her daughter and Elsie needed a little diversion, and so for the time being the adventure at Dark Cedars was completely forgotten. Early after supper the young people drove off in four cars and enjoyed themselves thoroughly until nearly midnight.

But both Elsie and Mary Louise awakened early the following morning, intent upon tying up the few remaining threads of the mystery at Dark Cedars.

Mary Louise had been hoping, ever since she found Elsie, that the girl would be invited to live at the home of Mrs. Grace Grant—if her aunt Mattie would agree to contribute something towards her support. With this plan in her mind, she turned Elsie over to Jane to entertain for the morning, and she herself went directly to the Grants’ home in Riverside. She was fortunate in catching John Grant before he left for business, for she believed him to be an ally.

He and his mother were seated at the breakfast table when she arrived. The maid brought her right into the dining room.

“Good-morning, Mrs. Grant—and Mr. Grant,” she began brightly. “I must apologize for this early call, but I have great news. We caught the thief!”

John Grant, who had risen at Mary Louise’s entrance, stepped forward excitedly.

“Not really?” he demanded. “Do you mean Elsie?”

“No, Mr. Grant, Elsie is not a thief. It was the gypsy fortune teller.” And Mary Louise went on to explain the story of the necklace as the woman had told it to

her. She concluded with the finding of Elsie.

“The poor child has been perfectly miserable all the time she lived with her aunt Mattie,” she said. “So I wondered—if I can make Miss Grant pay something towards her support—whether she couldn’t live here. She needs someone like you, Mrs. Grant, to be a mother to her.”

The old lady’s kind heart was touched.

“Of course she can live here!” she exclaimed, “whether Mattie contributes towards her support or not. We’ll manage somehow. Don’t you think we can, John?”

“I have thought so all along,” replied her son. “Elsie should go to high school, like other normal young girls.”

Mary Louise seized the hands of both people at once. She was wild with joy at the success of her plan.

“I’m going straight to the hospital now,” she said, picking up the heavy tin box which she had laid on a small table in the dining room, “to see what kind of bargain I can drive with Miss Grant!”

John laughed. “You have the gold?” he asked.

“Yes. But I’m not going to give it to her till she makes me some sort of promise.”

“Let me drive you over,” he suggested. “That box must be heavy.”

“It has five hundred dollars in gold in it,” returned Mary Louise. “I counted it, to make sure. Probably Miss Grant will offer me ten dollars as a reward.”

“I can believe that,” agreed Mrs. Grant. “She certainly is stingy. Poor little Elsie!”

Five minutes later John Grant left Mary Louise at the entrance to the hospital, and the girl carried her heavy box up to the patient’s room. But it was carefully wrapped and tied, so that Miss Grant had no idea what it contained.

The old lady was looking much brighter this morning. She smiled pleasantly as her young friend entered.

“Mary Louise!” she exclaimed. “Any news?”

“Lots of news,” replied the girl, seating herself in the chair beside the bed. “Do you feel equal to hearing it?”

“I certainly do. Have you found my money?”

“I want to tell you the story straight from the beginning. But before I do that, I want to assure you that Elsie is innocent. We found the real thief, and we also found Elsie. She ran away because she was unhappy.”

Miss Grant’s eyes sparkled with eagerness. “Never mind about Elsie now. Tell me who stole my money.”

“One of the gypsies,” replied Mary Louise. “I can give it to you if you’ll promise to donate some of it for Elsie’s support. Mrs. Grace Grant wants her to live with them, but you know how poor she is now.”

“All right, all right, I’ll give you fifty dollars if you get it all back for me! Where is it?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute.” Mary Louise couldn’t help enjoying teasing the miserly woman in retaliation for the way she had treated Elsie. “But it isn’t a case of giving fifty dollars now. It’s rather that you pay Mrs. Grant something—say twenty dollars a month—as your share towards Elsie’s support.”

Miss Grant groaned.

“For how long?” she demanded.

“Till Elsie finishes high school.”

“That’s a lot of money.... Still, I wouldn’t have to have the child around. And she does irritate me.... Yes, I’ll agree. Where is my money?”

Mary Louise unwrapped her box and put it down upon the white bed. Miss Grant reached for it as a child might grab at his Christmas stocking. She opened it and

immediately began to count the gold pieces.

“It’s all here!” she cried exultantly.

Mary Louise nodded. “Shall I tell you the story now—about the necklace?” she inquired.

“Yes, yes. I had forgotten the necklace. Where is it?”

“I’m afraid you won’t get that, Miss Grant, because it never really belonged to your father.” And Mary Louise went on to relate the gypsy’s story.

Still fingering the gold, the old lady listened intently.

“Yes, that sounds right to me,” she agreed, as the story ended. “I am thankful that the necklace is back with its rightful owner. That would please my mother. Maybe now Dark Cedars will be a more peaceful place to live.”

“I believe it will be,” concluded Mary Louise as she rose to go. “Here is your key, Miss Grant—and—good-bye!”

“Wait, Mary Louise! I want to give you forty dollars—in gold. You can give ten to Jane, as I promised her, but I think you deserve thirty. You’re a good, clever girl!”

Mary Louise shook her head.

“No, thank you, Miss Grant. What I did, I did because of my love and sympathy for Elsie. If you will treat her fairly, that is all the reward I want.”

The old lady gazed at the girl in amazement at her refusal. But she saw that she meant what she said; perhaps Mary Louise’s generosity put her to shame.

“I will, Mary Louise,” she promised solemnly. “I will indeed.”

So, well satisfied with the happy solution of the mystery at Dark Cedars, Mary Louise hurried back to tell Elsie Grant the good news about her new home and the four happy years at high school which were in store for her.



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