

THE MYSTERY
OF THE FIRES

EDITH LAVELL

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The canoe rounded a bend in the river and came within full view of the burning resort.

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The MARY LOU Series

The Mystery of the Fires

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 Friend
SUZANNE SIMONIN

Map of Shady Nook

MAP OF SHADY NOOK

Contents

CHAPTER

	PAGE
I The Burnt Bungalow	13
II Clifford's Story	29
III The Ditmars	42
IV Another Fire	54
V Freckles' Story	68
VI More Suspects	79
VII The Crazy Woman	97
VIII Danger	103
IX The Arrest	114
X The Visit with Rebecca	128
XI Adelaide Ditmar's Plan	139
XII Getting Business	151
XIII The Threat	163
XIV The Search	177
XV Captive	190
XVI Weary Waiting	205
XVII Release	218
XVIII Return	233
XIX Conclusion	244

Characters

MARY LOUISE GAY a girl detective.
JANE PATTERSON her chum.
MR. GAY, MRS. GAY her parents.
JOSEPH (FRECKLES) GAY her brother.
SILKY her dog.
DAVID McCALL a young insurance agent, visiting Shady Nook.
boy-friends.
 MAX MILLER
 NORMAN WILDER

Residents of Shady Nook

REEDS two adults and five young people.
HUNTERS mother and son.
PARTRIDGES four adults.
MR. AND MRS. FLICK owners of the inn.
ROBINSONS two adults and two boys.
SMITHS two adults and three children.
MR. AND MRS. DITMAR a young married couple.
ADAMS a farmer with three grown-up children.
MR. AND MRS. FRAZIER owners of the Royal Hotel.
EBERHARDT a village storekeeper.

CHAPTER I

The Burnt Bungalow

“For the whole month?”

Jane Patterson’s eyes sparkled with anticipation as she repeated the invitation her chum had just extended.

“Yes,” replied Mary Louise Gay. “You see, we never could invite you before, because the bungalow is so small, and there’s just room enough for our own family. But Dad will be out West all of August. He doesn’t expect to be back until Labor Day.”

“On a case?” inquired Jane, for Mr. Gay was a detective on the police force.

Mary Louise nodded.

“Yes. An important one. I almost wish I could go with him—it sounds so thrilling.”

“Didn’t you have enough excitement and mystery at Dark Cedars?” demanded Jane.

“I never have enough,” returned the other girl.

“Well, please don’t dig up anything to spoil our vacation at Shady Nook. Still, I don’t really suppose you could if you tried. The very name implies peace.”

“It is a peaceful spot,” agreed Mary Louise. “Not a bit like a big summer resort. Just the mountains and the woods and the lovely Hudson River. Only half a dozen bungalows, so that everybody knows everybody else. It’s all so friendly and nice.”

“Then I shan’t need any fancy clothes—like dance dresses?” Jane’s tone held a faint note of disappointment. She loved outdoor sports, but she was equally fond of parties.

“You better take a couple along,” replied the other girl. “Across the river from Shady Nook there’s a big modern hotel where we often go for dinners and dances. Everybody wears their best clothes there. But most of the time we eat at Flicks’ Inn. It’s just a bigger bungalow, where they have a dining room for the Shady Nook people and a few boarders. Very nice and informal.”

Jane jumped up and started down the steps, across the lawn that separated the Gays’ house from the Pattersons’.

“I must go tell Mother all about it,” she explained, “and begin to get my clothing ready. What time do we start?”

“Seven o’clock tomorrow morning. Rain or shine.”

Left alone, Mary Louise opened the screen door and went into her own house. Her father, with his suitcase on the floor beside him, was saying good-bye to her mother and to his young son Joseph, whom everybody called “Freckles.”

Mr. Gay put his hand upon his daughter’s shoulder and said to his wife:

“I am counting on Mary Louise to take care of you, dear. After the way she mastered that situation at Dark Cedars, I feel that she is capable of almost anything. Far above and beyond most girls of sixteen!”

“She is!” agreed Mrs. Gay proudly. “But I am not expecting any trouble at Shady Nook. I’m more worried about what may happen to you before you catch those criminals!”

“I’ll be all right,” her husband assured her. “Wire for me if you need me—and I’ll come back by airplane.”

Mrs. Gay nodded, little thinking that she would have to follow his advice before the month was over.

As soon as he was gone, the other three members of the family returned to the business of packing. Silky, Mary Louise’s little brown spaniel, trotted around

after them, sniffing at everything and looking serious and important, as if he were doing most of the work.

“I’m thankful your father left us the car,” remarked Mrs. Gay, as the suitcases and packages were piled up near the back door. “We’ll need it.”

“Shady Nook is so far from the Junction,” added Mary Louise. “Yes, we’re lucky. And isn’t it nice I have my license, so you won’t have to drive all the way?”

“It certainly is,” agreed her mother. “You’ve always been a big help to me, Mary Louise. And so have you, Freckles,” she added to the boy.

At last everything was finished, in time to allow them all a good sleep before their trip. Shady Nook was almost a day’s journey from Riverside, if they took it in a leisurely manner, driving slowly enough to enjoy the beautiful Hudson River, and stopping at noon at some pleasant inn to eat lunch and rest.

Jane was on hand early, helping the Gays to stack the luggage in the back seat and on the rack provided at the rear of the car.

“Don’t forget to leave a corner for Silky!” Freckles reminded the girls, “He can’t be left behind!”

“As if I could forget him!” returned his sister, picking up the little spaniel and giving him a hug. “Didn’t he save our lives that night we rode in Harry Grant’s car?”

Jane shuddered; she could never forget the horror of that dark night or the terror she had experienced when the tramp commanded, “Hands up!” Good old Silky, biting a piece out of the thug’s leg while the girls made their escape!

“Who’s driving first?” she asked, as the last bundle was stored away.

“I am,” answered Mary Louise. “You and Silky in front with me, and Mother and Freckles in back. We’ll shift places after lunch.”

It was a lovely clear day, not so hot as it often is in August, and the whole party was in the gayest of spirits. Mary Louise loved to drive, and she did it well. She would not have minded if she had been kept at the wheel all day.

Nevertheless, after their pleasant lunch at a quaint little tea room on the roadside, she was perfectly willing to exchange places with her mother and enjoy the better opportunity to look at the scenery.

Jane, however, was more interested in Shady Nook than in the country through which they were passing. She asked innumerable questions.

“How many bungalows did you say there are, Mary Lou?” she inquired.

“There were six last year, counting Flicks’ Inn. But I understand that there were two new ones put up this spring.”

“And are there plenty of young people?”

“Not so many at the cottages, but it doesn’t matter, because we have just as much fun with the middle-aged people. Everybody swims and paddles and dances and plays tennis. Besides, there are always extra young people boarding at Flicks’ for shorter vacations. And sometimes we meet the people at the Royal Hotel.”

“Is that where they hold the dances?” inquired Jane. “When we wear our flossy dresses?”

“Yes. That’s the place. Across the river from Shady Nook.”

“Tell me some of the people’s names,” urged Jane.

“Well, next door to us—only it really isn’t next door, because there’s quite a little woods between—is the loveliest cottage at Shady Nook. It was built by a man named Hunter, who was very rich. He bought all the land around there on our side of the river and sold it to people he knew and liked. But he died last year, so only his wife and son came back this summer.”

“A son?” repeated Jane, rolling her eyes. “Not a babe in arms, I hope!”

“A sophomore at Yale,” replied Mary Louise. “Rather homely, but awfully nice—and piles of fun.”

“What’s the youth’s name?”

“There you go! Putting him down in your notebook already! His name’s Clifford. We all call him Cliff.”

“Naturally. But if he’s your property, Mary Lou, just say the word, and I’ll keep off.”

Mary Louise laughed.

“Nobody’s my special property,” she said. “Not even Max Miller,” she added, mentioning her particular boy-friend in their home town of Riverside. “Though he sometimes acts as if he believed I were his! I like Cliff Hunter a lot—everybody does. But we don’t pair off much at Shady Nook, except sometimes to go canoeing. Most of the time we’re just one big family.”

“Who else are there besides the Hunters?” inquired the other girl. “I mean, what other families with young people?”

“The Reeds are about the jolliest family at Shady Nook,” answered Mary Louise. “There are five children, and the father and mother are just as much fun as the kids. The two oldest girls—Sue and Mabel—are twins about our age. Seventeen, I believe, to be exact. Then there are two younger boys that Freckles chums up with, and a little girl.”

“I’m afraid I’ll never be able to keep all those names straight,” sighed Jane.

“Wait till we get there and you meet them one at a time,” advised the other. “It’s so much easier to remember people after you’ve seen them.”

This advice sounded sensible, and Jane settled back in her corner to enjoy the remainder of the ride. The time passed quickly; at five o’clock they crossed the railroad junction and turned into the private road that led to Shady Nook.

The trees were thick on one side of the road, but on the other they could see the lovely Hudson River, gleaming blue in the August sunlight. Jane went into ecstasies over the beauty of the spot.

“Here we are!” announced Mrs. Gay as she turned off to a dirt driveway and brought the car to a stop at a tin garage. “Our back door!”

“Why, we’re right in the woods!” cried Jane, still unable to see the Gays’

cottage.

“Wait till you see the bungalow!” returned Mary Louise. “It’s like a little dream house. You can borrow it for your honeymoon, if you like—provided you don’t get married in the summer time.”

“Thanks a lot! But I think I’ll wait a few years before I accept your kind offer.”

In another moment they were all out of the car, following Mrs. Gay around to the front of the cottage, up to the screened porch, from which they had a good view of the river.

As Mary Louise had said, the bungalow was charming. Built entirely of logs, it combined the picturesqueness of olden times with the conveniences of the modern day. A huge fireplace covered one entire wall of the living room, and the chairs were big and soft and comfortable. A drop-leaf table at one end of the room was sometimes used for meals, because there was no dining room. But the spotless kitchen contained a breakfast nook where the Gays always ate their first meal of each day. Two bedrooms branched off from the living room, with a white bathroom between them.

“A little bit too civilized for me,” said Freckles, in a most superior manner. “I sleep out back in a tent.”

“In good weather,” amended Mrs. Gay. “Now, girls, suppose we just unpack one suitcase apiece and get ready for dinner. We’re going over to Flicks’, of course.”

“I got to have a swim!” announced Freckles.

“All right, if you’ll be quick about it. And don’t go in all by yourself.”

The group gathered together again at half-past six and started down the private road to Flicks’ Inn, where they would have their supper. Mary Louise and Jane had both put on light summer dresses and looked as rested and refreshed as if they had been at Shady Nook all summer.

“And where is our next-door neighbor’s cottage?” inquired Jane, peering through the trees on the road. “Or do the Hunters live on the other side of you?”

“No, the Reeds live on the other side. Theirs is the last bungalow. The Hunters’

is right in here.” She paused at a path between two big oak trees.

Jane stepped to her side and looked in among the foliage.

“I don’t see it,” she said.

“It’s been burnt down!” cried Freckles, dashing up behind the girls. “I didn’t have a chance to tell you. About a week ago, Larry Reed said. Awful mysterious. In the night.”

“Burned down!” repeated Mary Louise, rushing in through the trees beside the path. “Honestly?”

“See for yourself!” replied her brother.

A few steps more, and they saw for themselves that it was only too true. The blackened trunks, the dry, scarred grass, and the faint smoky odor confirmed his statement. The beautiful cottage was gone forever. Nothing remained but the charred stones of its foundation.

“Boy, don’t I wish I’d been here!” exclaimed Freckles regretfully. “It must have been some fire. But they say nobody saw it. It was practically out when they discovered it.”

“Lucky that it was!” said Mrs. Gay. “Suppose ours had caught too!”

Mary Louise shuddered; such an idea was too dreadful to contemplate.

“Do you know any of the details, Freckles?” asked his mother, as the party turned back to the road again.

“No, I don’t. Nobody does. It just happened, at night, while everybody was over at a dance at the Royal Hotel across the river.”

“Maybe we’ll hear more about it at Flicks’. Come on, let’s hurry.”

They passed one bungalow on the way to the inn, which Mary Louise pointed out to Jane as belonging to the Partridges—all middle-aged people, she explained—so that her chum was not interested. Nobody over twenty-five was any use to Jane Patterson.

The inn, a large square frame building, was completely surrounded by porches on which tables were placed where people were already eating their dinners. Of the eight families at Shady Nook, all except one took their lunches and suppers at Flicks'. Besides them, there were at least half a dozen boarders. Roughly, Mary Louise estimated there were about thirty-five people at the inn.

They all seemed to know the Gays, for everybody was bowing and smiling as the little party opened the screen door of the front porch.

Mrs. Flick, a fat, good-natured woman of about fifty, came forward to welcome them.

"My, it's good to see you all back again!" she exclaimed, with genuine pleasure. "But where is Mr. Gay?"

"He had to go to California on business," explained Mrs. Gay. "So we brought Mary Louise's friend, Jane Patterson, in his place. Mrs. Flick, this is Jane."

"Happy to meet you, Miss Jane," returned the landlady as she led the Gays to their accustomed table. When they were seated, she pulled up a chair beside them to talk for a few minutes with Mrs. Gay.

"Tell us about the Hunters' bungalow!" begged Mary Louise immediately.

"There isn't much to tell. Nobody knows much.... Oh, here's Hattie to take your order." And the newcomers had to exchange greetings with the waitress, the daughter of a farmer named Adams who lived a couple of miles from Shady Nook.

When the order had been given, Mary Louise repeated her question.

"It happened a week ago—on a Saturday," explained Mrs. Flick. "Mr. Clifford had four college boys visiting him, and they all went across the river that evening to a dance at the Royal Hotel. Mrs. Hunter went along with 'em. When they came back, the place was burned to the ground."

"Didn't anybody see the flames—or smell the smoke?"

"No. The wind was the other way from the hotel, and there wasn't anybody at Shady Nook to notice. Everybody, except Pa and me, went to the dance. And we

were sound asleep.”

Hattie came back with the soup, and Mrs. Flick rose from her chair. “I’ll see you later,” she said as she hurried into the house.

“It sounds very mysterious,” muttered Mary Louise.

“Oh, there’s probably some simple explanation,” replied Jane lightly. “We’ll have to ask Clifford Hunter. Where is he, Mary Lou? Do you see him?”

The other girl glanced hastily about the big porch and shook her head.

“Not here,” she answered. “But he may be inside. There’s another dining room in the bungalow.”

“This isn’t Clifford?” asked Jane, watching a tall, good-looking, dark-eyed young man coming out of the door.

Mary Louise turned around and smiled.

“No. That’s David McCall. He usually comes up just for two weeks’ vacation and stays here at Flicks’.”

A moment later the young man reached the Gays’ table and was introduced to Jane. But he merely nodded to her briefly: his eyes seemed to devour Mary Louise.

“I thought you’d never come, Mary Lou!” he exclaimed. “A whole week of my vacation is gone!”

“But you have another week, don’t you, David?”

“Yes. A measly seven days! And then another year to wait till I see you again!” His tone was not bantering, like the boys at home. David McCall was serious—too terribly serious, Mary Louise sometimes thought—about everything.

“May I come over to see you after supper?” he pleaded.

“Of course,” agreed Mary Louise lightly. “And then you can tell us about the fire. You were here when it happened?”

“No. I didn’t get here till Sunday. But I can tell you something about it, all right!”

Mary Louise’s eyes opened wide with interest.

“Somebody set it on fire—on purpose, you mean, David?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

The young man leaned over and whispered in her ear:

“Clifford Hunter himself!”

Mary Louise gasped in amazement. “But why?” she demanded.

“To collect the insurance!” was the surprising reply.

And, turning about, David McCall went back into the boarding house.

CHAPTER II

Clifford's Story

“What did he say?” demanded both Jane and Freckles the moment David McCall was out of hearing distance.

Mary Louise leaned forward and lowered her voice.

“He said Cliff Hunter set the place on fire himself—to get the insurance. Now that his father is dead, the bungalow belongs to him.”

“How awful!” exclaimed Jane. “Do you believe that, Mary Lou?”

“No, I don’t—knowing Cliff as I do. Do you, Mother?”

“Certainly not,” replied Mrs. Gay emphatically. “It’s just David’s jealousy. He’s poor himself, and he has a sort of grudge against all rich people.”

“Maybe,” admitted Mary Louise. “David never did like Cliff, all the summers they’ve both been coming up here to Shady Nook.”

“I wish I could meet this young Hunter,” lamented Jane. “I’m keen to get a look at him.”

“Maybe he isn’t here any more,” remarked Mary Louise. “Since the bungalow is gone, where would he stay?”

“The Hunters are living over at the Royal Hotel, I think,” Freckles informed them. “Seems to me that’s what Larry Reed said.”

“Then Cliff will be over to see you,” observed Mrs. Gay confidently.

Her supposition proved correct: no sooner had the Gays returned to their own

bungalow after supper than a motorboat chugged its way across the river and anchored at their dock. A moment later Clifford Hunter stepped out.

As Mary Louise had said, he was not a good-looking young man. His height was only medium, and he was so thin that even expensive tailoring could not make his clothes look well. But his big nose and his sandy complexion were offset by a pleasant smile and attractive gray eyes, which somehow made you feel as if you had known Cliff Hunter all your life.

“Hello, Mary Lou!” he called as he came towards the porch. “Heard you were here!”

He whistled a gay tune as he ascended the steps, and smiled.

“Not so homely after all,” Jane thought as she looked into his pleasant face. And his white flannels and dark blue coat were certainly becoming. They evidently did not wear sweaters at the Royal Hotel.

“Hurry up!” returned Mary Louise. “We’re dying to hear the news!”

“Yes, of course.” He shook hands with Mary Louise and her mother and was introduced to Jane.

“Sit down, Clifford,” urged Mrs. Gay.

The young man fumbled in his pocket and produced a pack of cards.

“In a minute, thank you, Mrs. Gay,” he replied. “But first—take a card, Mary Lou. I know some bully new tricks.”

Mary Louise burst out laughing.

“Haven’t you gotten over that fad yet, Cliff?” she asked.

He regarded her reprovingly.

“Don’t talk so lightly about my profession!” he said. “I’m going to be a magician. Now—I’ll explain the trick. You can look at the pack——”

“Oh, but we want to hear about the fire,” interrupted Mary Louise.

“Take a card!” was his only reply.

There was nothing to do but humor him. Jane was delighted: she loved card tricks and listened eagerly. But Mary Louise was more interested in the burning of the bungalow.

At last, however, Clifford sat down beside Jane on the couch-hammock and began to talk.

“You saw the ruins?” he inquired.

“Yes. But nobody over at Flicks’ seemed to know how it happened.”

“Most amazing thing you ever heard of! It was last Saturday night. I had four fellows from the fraternity here for the week-end, and about nine o’clock we all piled into the boat and went over to the Royal Hotel to dance. There happened to be a bunch of girls staying there that we knew, so we were sure of a swell time. The whole gang from Shady Nook went across too—the Reed family, the Partridges, the Robinsons—practically everybody except the Flicks. So you see Shady Nook was deserted.

“We danced till around twelve o’clock and had something to eat. Then the fellows suggested we all get into the launch and go for a ride. Mother was game: she went along too, and so did a couple of the girls. By the time we took them back to the hotel and came home, it must have been two o’clock.”

“Hadn’t you seen any flames?” interrupted Jane. “From the river, I mean?”

“Not a flicker! But we had been motoring in the other direction, and you know the hotel isn’t right across from our bungalow, so we shouldn’t have been likely to notice when we were dancing. What wind there was blew the other way.”

“Even when you reached your own dock, didn’t you smell smoke?” demanded Mary Louise.

“Yes, we did then. But the flames were all out. The bungalow was gone—but the trees hadn’t caught fire.”

“That was queer,” remarked Mrs. Gay. “Unless somebody put out the fire.”

“Nobody did, as far as we know,” replied Clifford. “But it was out all right. And the bungalow gone, all but the foundation stones!”

“What in the world did you do?” asked Jane.

“Went over to the Partridges’—they’re the people who live next to us on the other side,” he explained to Jane. “Fortunately they were still up, but they hadn’t noticed the smoke for the trees; they had been at the dance themselves till about one o’clock. Well, they gave Mother their one extra bedroom, and we fellows slept in the living room. That was O.K., but it was pretty ghastly, losing everything at once. Especially the clothes and things that belonged to our guests. If it was going to happen, I don’t see why it couldn’t have burned down when we didn’t have any company.”

“Yes, that must have been embarrassing,” agreed Mary Louise. She was thinking of David McCall’s accusation—that Clifford set the bungalow on fire himself to get the insurance—and it seemed absurd to her. He certainly would have chosen a more convenient time.

“What did you do the next day?” she inquired.

“Mother and I went to our New York apartment, and the fellows went home. I put in a claim for the insurance, and after we had bought new summer outfits, we came back here and took a suite at the Royal. We expect to stay there all summer.”

“Why not Flicks’?” was Mary Louise’s next question. “Everybody goes there.”

“That’s just why we didn’t. They’re so overcrowded, and Mother likes plenty of room. We sure get that at the Royal. The hotel’s practically empty; I don’t see how poor Frazier can pay his taxes.”

“He charges too much,” said Mary Louise. “If he’d be content to make a small profit, the way Mr. Flick does, he’d probably fill his hotel.”

“Well, it’s an expensive place to keep up. Mother feels sorry for him, so she’s entertaining a lot to bring him some business.”

“I don’t feel sorry for him! I don’t like him. Remember that time we wanted to give an entertainment for the Red Cross and he tried to charge us fifty dollars for

using his dining room? So we held it outdoors instead!”

Clifford nodded. “Yes. But he says he’s poor.”

“So poor he can’t pay his waitresses a living wage! Hattie Adams—you remember, Jane, the girl who waited on our table at Flicks’?—said he tried to pay her two dollars a week and excused himself by telling her she’d make a lot on tips! She gets ten at Flicks’!”

“A man like that deserves to fail,” agreed Jane.

“To get back to the subject of the fire,” said Mary Louise, in her usual practical way whenever there was a mystery to be solved, “what is your idea of the way it started, Cliff?”

“I believe it was just an accident,” replied the young man. “Maybe it was some tramp or those kids. You know the Smith boys and a few others. Not the Reeds, for they were at the Royal. But they’re all full of mischief. Maybe they were smoking corn silk in our garage.”

“Oh, I hope not!” exclaimed Mrs. Gay, for her son played a great deal with the Smith boys.

“Tell Freckles to snoop around a bit and keep his eyes and ears open,” suggested Clifford. “Maybe he’ll learn something. He’ll enjoy being a detective.”

Mary Louise smiled; the young man did not know that she had proved herself a very good detective earlier in the summer.

“What does your mother think?” she inquired.

Clifford frowned.

“Mother’s suspicious. She believes there’s been dirty work. Actually thinks the place was set on fire—on purpose! By Ditmar.”

“Ditmar! Who is he? I never heard of him.”

“Probably not. But you soon will. He’s a young architect who used to plan a lot of houses for my father before he died. You know the two new bungalows that

were put up here this year—beyond Flicks’?”

“I heard there were two. But we haven’t seen them yet.”

“Well, Ditmar drew plans for them both. And he and his young wife live in one of them.”

“I see. But why would your mother suspect Mr. Ditmar of setting fire to her cottage?” asked Jane.

“That’s easy,” replied Mary Louise. “So Ditmar would get the job of designing a new one! But that seems dreadful. Is this man the criminal type, Cliff?”

The latter shrugged his shoulders.

“How can anybody tell who is the criminal type nowadays, when every day we read in the newspapers about senators and bankers stooping to all sorts of despicable tricks?”

“True,” agreed Jane. “And is your mother going to rebuild?”

“It wouldn’t be Mother—it would be I who would do it,” explained Clifford. “Because Dad left the place to me, and all this land up here at Shady Nook that hasn’t been sold yet. But I don’t expect to do anything for a while. Mother’s comfortable at the Royal, and I don’t mind. Though I do like the people at Shady Nook a lot better.”

“Oh, well, you can come over as much as you like,” said Mary Louise.

“Which is just what I intend to do! And that reminds me, one of the things I came to talk to you about: a swell shindig for Monday night!”

“Oh, what?” gasped Jane in delight.

“A party down on the island. Everybody goes in some kind of boat—naturally—all dressed up. I mean, the boats are to be all dressed up, you understand. With a prize for the best decorated of each kind. Then we’ll have a feed and play games.”

“That’s great!” cried Jane enthusiastically. “What’ll we go in, Mary Lou? The

canoe?”

“I thought maybe you girls would come in my motorboat——”

“And lose the chance of winning a prize?” interrupted Mary Louise. “Thanks just the same, Cliff, but I’ve got an idea already.”

David McCall was coming up the porch steps just in time to hear the refusal, and he grinned broadly. This was just as it should be, he thought, looking possessively at Mary Louise.

Tall and dark and handsome, David McCall was indeed a contrast to Clifford Hunter in appearance. But Jane had already decided that she did not like him. Nobody twenty-two years old had any right to be so serious, even if he had been supporting himself for five years!

Mary Louise was a trifle embarrassed as she greeted him, wondering how he and Cliff would get along together. But Cliff spoke to him cordially.

“Hello, Dave,” he said. “Sit down. I’ve got a brand-new trick. You take a card _____”

Jane giggled. How could anybody help liking a boy like Cliff?

“Don’t let’s waste our time on card tricks,” was David’s reply. “The light’s fading. We ought to be out on the river. Or in it, if you prefer,” he added, addressing Mary Louise.

Clifford, disappointed, put his cards away.

“You can show me all your tricks tomorrow,” whispered Jane sympathetically. “I love them!”

“It’s a date!” exclaimed Cliff eagerly.

Mary Louise stood up, to conceal her nervousness at the sharp way in which David had spoken.

“O.K.,” she said. “Let’s go somewhere. Where?”

“In my motorboat?” suggested Cliff.

Everybody agreed, and the arrangement proved satisfactory, for the boat was large enough for Jane and Cliff to be together at the wheel, and David and Mary Louise off in another corner. Silky sat upright in the middle of the boat, as if he believed he were the chaperon and it was his sacred duty to keep his eye on everybody.

The evening passed pleasantly, for the stars were out, and the breeze over the river delightfully cool, and the boat itself in perfect condition. Even David forgot his grudge against rich young Hunter and under the magic spell of the night joined happily in the singing. Mary Louise, however, insisted that they come home early, for though they hardly realized it, both girls were tired from their long trip.

“It’s been a glorious day!” exclaimed Jane, after the boys had gone home, and the girls were preparing for bed. “I’m crazy about Shady Nook.”

“I think it’s pretty nice myself,” returned the other, with a yawn. “If only poor Cliff’s bungalow hadn’t burned down.”

“Tell me,” urged Jane, “which boy you really like best—Cliff Hunter or David McCall or Max Miller?”

Mary Louise laughed.

“I don’t know. Max, I guess. Now you answer a question for me: Who do you think set the Hunters’ bungalow on fire—Cliff himself, or that Mr. Ditmar, the architect, or the kids?”

“There you go!” cried Jane. “Being a detective instead of a normal girl on her vacation. Who cares, anyhow? It doesn’t hurt anybody but the insurance company, and I guess they can afford it.”

“Oh, but I’d like terribly to know!”

“Well, don’t let’s waste our wonderful month being detectives,” pleaded Jane.

“But it may be important,” Mary Louise pointed out. “If it was done intentionally, there will probably be more fires. Don’t forget—our cottage is next

door to Hunters’!”

Jane opened her eyes wide in alarm.

“I never thought of that,” she admitted.

“I’ve got to think of it,” said Mary Louise. “Daddy is trusting me to look after things, and I can’t fall down on my job. Nothing like that must happen.”

“What can you possibly do about it?”

“Investigate, of course.”

“How?”

“I’ll begin by talking to Freckles tomorrow and see whether he’s found out anything from the boys. Then I’ll make it a point to meet Mr. Ditmar—and follow up every clue I can get hold of.”

“You would!” yawned Jane as she crept sleepily into her cot.

CHAPTER III

The Ditmars

“Freckles!” exclaimed Mary Louise as she entered the kitchenette of the bungalow the following morning. “Where are you going?”

The boy grinned mysteriously.

“Can’t tell you that, Sis,” he replied. “It’s a secret.”

“But I wanted to talk to you. And it’s only a little after eight o’clock.”

“I know, but I’m a busy guy. Important affairs!”

“With whom?”

Freckles hesitated; then he decided to tell part of his secret.

“The fellows up here have a secret band. It’s called the ‘Wild Guys of the Road.’ I was initiated last night.”

Mary Louise burst out laughing. She couldn’t help it. “The ‘Wild Guys of the Road’!” she repeated. “Regular hold-up men?”

“Well, not exactly,” replied her brother. “But we’ve got some exciting adventures on.”

“Who is the leader?”

“Robby Smith. He’s got some swell ideas.”

Mary Louise’s eyes narrowed.

“Does burning people’s houses come into his plan?”

“Gosh, no! We’re not really bad, Sis. We wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“Do you make fires at all?”

“Sure we make fires. We’ve got to cook our camp meals, haven’t we? And have our ceremonies.”

“I see.” She was thinking. “And sometimes those fires spread farther than you want them to?”

“No, course not! Now, don’t you go blaming us guys for Hunters’ bungalow burning down!”

“I’m not blaming *you*, Freckles—you weren’t even here. But I’m not so sure about those Smith boys. They are pretty wild, once they get started. Remember the time they locked that little boy in the boathouse and almost left him there all night?”

“Gee whiz, Sis! They wouldn’t have left him there. They just wanted to scare him.”

“I’m not so sure. They’re spoiled kids. I wish you wouldn’t play with them.”

“Now, Sis, don’t be silly! Everybody’s in the gang together. I’ve got to play with the Smith boys or else stay home by myself.”

With a yell of good-bye for his mother, the boy was off.

Mary Louise and Jane sat down to their breakfast. Mrs. Gay, who had eaten hers with Freckles, came in to talk to them.

“What have you on the program for today?” she inquired.

“Oh, the usual things,” answered her daughter. “Tennis with the bunch this morning, and I suppose everybody will go in swimming about eleven o’clock. David is coming over to talk about fixing up our canoe for the contest tomorrow night.”

Jane coughed nervously.

“I—uh—sort of promised Cliff I’d go in his motorboat, Mary Lou,” she said. “Would that be all right?”

“Sure it’s all right,” agreed her chum. “It’ll be even better, because the less weight we have in our canoe, the more decoration we can put on. And there’s a prize for each type of boat, you know.”

“Then I shan’t be competing against you if I go in Cliff’s launch?”

“Oh no, we are in separate classes.”

After the girls had finished washing the dishes for Mrs. Gay, they started off for a little walk, with Silky at their heels.

“Why not stop for the Reed girls?” suggested Jane, mentioning the twins who lived in the cottage on the far side of the Gays. “I’m crazy to meet them.”

“You’ll meet them when we go swimming later on,” replied Mary Louise. “But just now I want to go in the other direction. To call on the Ditmars.”

“The Ditmars?” For the moment Jane had forgotten who these people were, for she had heard so many new names the night before.

“Yes. Don’t you remember? The young architect that Cliff told us about. The man Mrs. Hunter thinks set her bungalow on fire.”

“Oh, yes, of course! In other words—a suspect.”

“That’s right,” agreed Mary Louise.

“But how can we call on him if we don’t know him?” asked Jane.

“We’ll find a way!”

“Oh, sure we will!” teased Jane. “Trust the girl detective for that!”

“Sh! Please don’t call me that in front of anybody, Jane. If people think I am snooping, they’ll shut up like clams and won’t tell me anything.”

Although there were only eight cottages at Shady Nook, the distance from the Reeds' on one end to the Ditmars' on the other was over a mile. Cliff's father, Mr. Hunter, who had planned the little resort, knew that even in a small friendly community like this, people still liked privacy, so he had left a small strip of woods between every two cottages.

The girls walked along slowly, Mary Louise pointing out the bungalows as they passed by.

"That's where the Hunters' was, of course," she said to her chum. "And now we're coming to the Partridges'. Next is Flicks' Inn."

"Yes, I remember this much from last night," nodded Jane. "But that's as far as we got. Are there many cottages on the other side of Flicks'?"

"Only the Smiths' and the two new ones. The Smiths don't actually live on the river road, and you can't call their place a cottage. It's really the grandest house around here. Much bigger than the Hunters' was. They have three children and a lot of servants. Mr. and Mrs. Smith are usually off traveling somewhere, and even when they're here, they don't eat at Flicks'."

"So we can't count on them for any fun?"

"No. Freckles plays with the boys, but except for that, we never see them."

A little farther on, the girls came to the two new bungalows, set right in the heart of the woods. They were both perfectly charming; it was evident that young Mr. Ditmar was an architect with both taste and ideas.

"Don't you love it?" whispered Jane, as the two girls approached the Ditmars' rose-trellised bungalow. "It looks like 'Honeymoon Cottage' in a jig-saw puzzle!"

"I understand the Ditmars are practically a bride and groom," returned Mary Louise.... "Oh, there she is, in the garden! Pretty, isn't she?"

An attractive young woman in a pink dress looked up as the girls came nearer. She smiled pleasantly.

"Good-morning," said Mary Louise. "You are Mrs. Ditmar, aren't you?"

Everybody knows everybody else here at Shady Nook, so we'll introduce ourselves. This is my chum, Jane Patterson, and I'm Mary Louise Gay."

The young woman nodded cordially.

"I'm awfully glad to meet you both," she said. "This is a friendly place—I like it a lot. If only my husband did——"

"Doesn't Mr. Ditmar like Shady Nook?" asked Mary Louise in surprise.

"No, he doesn't. But I guess it's just because he hasn't enough to do. You know how men are when they haven't any work: full of gloom."

"Well, things will be better this fall," remarked Jane optimistically.

"I don't know," replied Mrs. Ditmar. "At least—for architects. Their work comes slowly. It was fine all spring, while Horace had this bungalow to build, and the Robinsons' next door. But now he can't get a thing."

"Maybe the Hunters will rebuild," suggested Jane openly.

Mrs. Ditmar shook her head.

"We did hope so. We went over to see them at the Royal Hotel soon after their house burned down, but Mrs. Hunter wasn't very nice to us. She almost acted as if it were our fault!"

Jane suppressed a giggle and muttered under her breath, "The plot thickens."

"Oh, I guess she was just all upset," remarked Mary Louise nervously. "She'll get over that." She smiled. "Anyway, you don't have to be gloomy, Mrs. Ditmar. Can't you get your tennis things on and play with us this morning?"

"Thanks awfully, but I don't think I had better leave Horace here alone."

"Bring him along!"

"He wouldn't come. No, I better not. But perhaps I'll see you in swimming later on in the morning. It's awfully nice of you girls to be so friendly."

"We'll look for you in the water, then.... And, by the way, you'll come to the

party on the island tomorrow night, won't you?"

Again the young woman refused.

"No, we really can't afford that. It's two dollars for the supper, you know, and besides that; we'd have to hire one of Mr. Frazier's canoes."

"Couldn't you borrow one?" suggested Jane.

"No—I'm sorry—Horace refused to go."

Mary Louise sighed, as if to say how thankful she was that she wasn't married to a grouch like that. So the girls said good-bye and walked slowly back to their cottage.

"She can't be over twenty, if she's that," surmised Mary Louise. "I certainly feel sorry for her."

"So do I," agreed Jane. "Do you really think her husband is guilty, Mary Lou?"

"I don't know. He sounds queer." She lowered her voice: there did not appear to be anybody around, but you never could tell, with all those thick trees to conceal possible eavesdroppers. "And if he believes it's his right to have work, he may try burning other cottages. That's what worries me."

"Well, he surely wouldn't pick on yours, Mary Lou," was Jane's comforting assurance. "He'd select somebody's who was rich—like the Smiths', or some place that was absolutely necessary, like the Flicks'."

The girls were passing the inn at this moment, and as they looked up they saw David McCall in his tennis clothes coming out of the door.

"I was over at the bungalow looking for you girls," he said. "The Reed girls are on the court, but they wouldn't let me play until I found a partner. So please hurry up!"

"O.K.," agreed Mary Louise. "Walk back with us, Dave. I want you to tell me why you think Cliff Hunter set his own bungalow on fire—at such an inconvenient time. When they had company, I mean."

David smiled knowingly.

“That’s his alibi, of course. What did he care about those four fellows? It didn’t hurt them. You see, Mary Lou, I’m an insurance agent, and I’m up to all these tricks. The Hunters’ place was insured for ten thousand dollars, and if it had been offered for sale, Cliff couldn’t have gotten more than a couple thousand at a time like this.”

“But the Hunters are rich,” objected Mary Louise. “They don’t need the money.”

“Everybody needs money. And I happen to know that Cliff wants to go around the world this fall.”

“He wouldn’t give up college?”

“No. There’s a college course in the bargain. They study and travel at the same time. It costs a small fortune.”

“I don’t believe he set that bungalow on fire,” announced Jane. “He’s too honest. He just couldn’t do a thing like that!”

“Besides,” added Mary Louise, “we have another suspect.” And she told David what she had just learned about Horace Ditmar.

“I’m just as sure that Ditmar didn’t do it as you are that Cliff Hunter didn’t,” replied David when she had finished.

“Probably nobody set it on fire,” concluded Jane. “Just an accident. Let’s forget it. Come on in, Mary Lou, and we’ll put on our sneaks. We’ll be ready in a minute, Dave.”

True to their promise, the girls returned a moment later, with Silky at their heels, and all three young people made their way to the tennis court. There was only one court at Shady Nook—which the boys themselves had made—but there was another across the river on the hotel grounds. However, nobody ever seemed to mind waiting or taking turns, so the crowd usually stayed together.

Jane was introduced to the Reed twins, who looked and dressed so exactly alike that she had not the faintest idea which was Mabel and which was Sue after a couple of minutes had elapsed. Then there were three other young people who

were staying at the inn for a short time, besides David McCall and themselves. To her dismay, Cliff Hunter did not come across the river to join the party.

The whole crowd went in swimming about eleven o'clock, and here their elders joined them, with some of the younger children. Not Freckles, however, or the Reed boys or the Smiths: they had gone off hiking for the day. Again Jane did not see Cliff Hunter, and she was giving all her attention to a young man named Stuart Robinson, who lived in the new bungalow next to the Ditmars', when she heard her name shouted from the shore.

“Jane! Oh, Jane!”

Raising her head from her swimming position and treading water, she peered towards the shore. It was Cliff Hunter—but not attired in a bathing suit.

“Come on out!” he called.

Jane swung into the crawl, and reached the young man in a couple of minutes. He was grinning broadly.

“Take a card,” he said.

Jane burst out laughing. “How can I?” she asked. “I’m soaked.”

“Oh, that’s all right. I’ve got plenty of packs. This is a swell trick. I’ve been studying it all morning.”

Jane dropped down on the grass and listened to his trick. The young man was enchanted. She stayed with him until Mary Louise literally dragged her back into the water.

“How anybody could believe Cliff Hunter guilty of a despicable crime,” she said later to her chum, “is beyond me. He’s as innocent as a child.”

“I hope so,” returned Mary Louise. “Time will tell.”

CHAPTER IV

Another Fire

Everybody at Shady Nook worked all day Monday on the decorations for the boats. Everybody, that is, except Mr. and Mrs. Flick and a few of the older people, who were preparing the food for the supper on the little island that night. Jane was helping Clifford Hunter paint pieces of wood which were intended to transform his launch into an auto-giro, and David McCall and Mary Louise picked flowers and leaves all afternoon to make festoons for her canoe.

“I do think Freckles and those other kids might have helped us,” she remarked as she tied on the last cluster of sunflowers.

“Oh, we didn’t need them,” returned David, smiling. He had enjoyed having Mary Louise to himself all afternoon.

“It’s five o’clock now. We’ll have to hurry and wash and dress. Don’t forget supper at Flicks’ is half-past tonight.”

The young man nodded. “I’ll be ready, Mary Lou.”

Mrs. Gay’s voice interrupted them from the inside of the bungalow.

“Has anybody seen Freckles?” she called.

“Not since this morning,” replied her daughter. “I tried to get him to help us, but he said he was off for the day with his gang.”

“Yes, I know that. I gave him some lunch. But he ought to be home by now.”

“He’ll probably be along in a minute.”

But he did not come. David went back to the inn, and Mrs. Gay and the two girls

dressed for the picnic, but still Freckles did not appear.

“We can’t go off and leave him without any supper,” said Mrs. Gay. “Because Mrs. Flick is going to close the dining room and lock up at six-thirty.”

“If we could only phone the Smiths,” sighed Mary Louise. “He’s probably over there with the boys.... Suppose Jane and I run over?”

“It’s too far. It will make you late for supper.”

“Not very late. We’ll hurry. Come on, Jane. We’ll be back in ten minutes. But you go on down to the inn, Mother, and order the dinner.”

Mrs. Gay nodded, immensely relieved. What a comfort Mary Louise was! You never had to ask her to do anything for you.

The two girls hurried away along the private road beside the river, past the Flicks’ and the Robinsons’, then turned up the hill to the Smiths’ house beyond. It was Jane’s first sight of the imposing-looking place at close range. She exclaimed in admiration.

“What a marvelous house! They must be awfully rich!”

“They are,” replied Mary Louise. “But they don’t appreciate this place a bit. Mr. and Mrs. Smith are hardly ever here at all in the summer. Those two boys just run wild. There’s a nurse to look after the little girl—she’s only four years old—but the boys do pretty much as they please and boss the servants around. That’s why Mother and I feel worried about Freckles when he’s with them.”

A sedate-looking butler answered the girls’ ring at the door.

“No, miss,” was his reply to Mary Louise’s question, “the boys haven’t been here all day.”

“Did they expect to go to the picnic tonight on the island?”

“Yes, miss. Steve, the chauffeur, was to take them.”

Mary Louise sighed. There was nothing she could do.

“Well, if my brother comes back here, will you please send him right over to the inn?” she asked. “And tell him to hurry.”

The girls turned away and started back. “It’s going to spoil Mother’s evening,” remarked Mary Louise disconsolately.

“Oh, he’ll be sure to turn up soon,” returned Jane reassuringly.

“I know, but even if he does, he won’t be able to get to the island. All the boats at Shady Nook are being used. Even the rowboats. Everybody’s going except the Ditmars.”

“Poor Adelaide Ditmar!” sighed Jane. “Imagine missing all that fun just because of a grouchy husband! I’m glad I’m single.”

Mary Louise laughed.

“All men aren’t alike, Jane. You know Cliff Hunter would never miss any fun. Or Max or Norman,” she added, mentioning their two best friends in Riverside.

Mrs. Gay looked up hopefully as the girls entered the inn, but her expression changed immediately. She could tell from their faces that they had not been successful.

After supper was over, all was bustle and excitement as the people got into the boats and pushed them out into the river. There were six canoes, four rowboats, and three motorboats, all decorated beautifully or fantastically, according to the taste of the owners. Three prizes were to be awarded for the cleverest boat of each type, and everybody was to vote on the style in which he or she was not competing. Mary Louise and David McCall stepped into their flower-covered canoe; Mrs. Gay joined the Partridges in a rowboat, and Jane waited for Cliff Hunter’s motorboat to come puffing across the river. It arrived at the same time as the Fraziers’ rather seedy launch, and Jane was introduced to them and to Mrs. Hunter.

“You’ll walk away with the motorboat prize, Cliff,” called Mary Louise to the young man at the wheel. She lowered her voice. “Poor old Frazier’s launch is pathetic, and Stuart Robinson’s is just funny!”

“I hope the prize is a deck of cards,” returned Cliff. “Mine are wearing out.”

Mary Louise laughed and dipped her paddle into the water. Her canoe did look pretty, and it was a heavenly night. If only Freckles were there!

The boats began to move off, the launches puffing ahead, the canoes gliding gently behind them, and the rowboats progressing more ponderously. Somebody began to play a ukulele, and gay voices took up the tune.

The island, a small oblong strip of land, was situated about two miles down the river from Shady Nook. Several years ago someone at the resort had discovered it, and everybody had taken a hand at fixing it up for picnic purposes. There was a glorious stone fireplace, and a large spot had been cleared for dancing and games. Seats had been scattered about, and a couple of board tables had been erected near the fireplace. Tonight the whole island was alight with Japanese lanterns, giving it a gay and festive air.

When the last rowboat had finally reached its destination, the crowd all gathered together on the grass near the shore to record their votes. The two Robinson boys went about collecting them.

Mary Louise was sitting close to her mother, watching her intently.

“The Reed boys aren’t here either,” whispered Mrs. Gay. “I was just talking to Mrs. Reed, and she said she hasn’t seen Larry or George since morning. But she doesn’t seem much worried.”

“Freckles must be all right if he’s with the whole bunch,” Mary Louise assured her. “Nothing much could happen to five boys together.”

Mrs. Gay forced herself to smile.

“I’ll try not to worry, dear.... Oh, listen! Mr. Robinson is going to announce the winners!”

The jovial-faced man, Stuart’s father, stepped forward.

“First prize for rowboats goes to Sue and Mabel Reed,” he said. “Come forward, girls, and get your prize. It’s a box of tennis balls.”

The twins, dressed exactly alike in blue dimity, came up together, bowing and expressing their thanks.

“The prize for canoes—to Mary Louise Gay,” continued Mr. Robinson. “More tennis balls!”

David McCall clapped loudly, and everybody else joined in the applause. Mary Louise was a general favorite at Shady Nook.

“The prize for motorboats goes to my son Stuart for his funny-looking contraption!”

Everybody clapped but Jane; she was terribly disappointed. She didn’t see why Cliff’s clever idea hadn’t taken the honors. But glancing at the young man she could detect no resentment in his face. He was a wonderful sport.

After the prizes had been disposed of, the games began, and continued until dark. Almost everyone joined in the fun—even the middle-aged people. All except a few who were helping Mrs. Flick prepare the refreshments, and Mrs. Hunter and the Fraziers, who were too stiff and dignified.

“How do you like Mrs. Hunter?” whispered Mary Louise once when the two chums found themselves hiding side by side in a game.

“Kind of stuck up,” replied Jane. “But she’s better than those Fraziers. He’s positively oily!”

“Didn’t I tell you? I wouldn’t stay in his hotel if our bungalow burned down—no matter how much money we had.”

“Mrs. Hunter seems to like him. But I think it’s Frazier who put the idea into her head that Ditmar set her cottage on fire. Because I heard him say to her, ‘I wonder whose place will burn down tonight. Ditmar stayed home!’”

“Oh, how awful!”

“Sh! Oh, gosh, we’re caught! Why must girls always talk?” lamented Jane.

The moon came up in the sky, making the night more enchanting, more wonderful than before. The games broke up, and Mrs. Flick called the people to refreshments.

“Sit with me, Mary Lou,” urged David, jealously touching her arm.

“We must find Mother,” returned the girl.

“She’s over there with Mrs. Hunter and the hotel bunch. You don’t want to be with them, do you?”

“Not particularly. But I do want to be with Mother and Jane and Cliff. So come on!”

David closed his lips tightly, but he followed Mary Louise just the same. Mrs. Gay made a place for them, and the young couple sat down.

“You’re not still worried, are you, Mother?” asked Mary Louise as she passed the chicken salad.

“I’m afraid I am, dear. If we could only see Shady Nook from here, perhaps the boys would flash their lights.”

“They’re surely all right,” put in Mrs. Hunter consolingly. “They’re big enough to take care of themselves.”

“I’ll say they are,” remarked Mr. Frazier. “I caught them cutting my yew tree to make bows. There’s nothing they can’t do!”

Mary Louise regarded the hotelkeeper with contempt, thinking again how stingy he was. Anybody else would be glad to give the boys a branch of a tree!

“So long as they don’t set anything on fire,” observed Cliff lightly.

“Oh, Cliff!” exclaimed Mary Louise in horror.

David McCall nudged her meaningly.

“Criminals always try to cover up their crimes by laying the suspicion on somebody else,” he whispered. “But only a cad would blame innocent children.”

Mary Louise cast him a withering look. She was beginning to despise David McCall.

When the whole party had eaten all they possibly could, somebody started to play a ukulele, and the young people danced on the smooth grass that had been

worn down by so many picnics. Nobody apparently wanted to go home, except Mrs. Gay. Finally Mrs. Reed, beginning to be anxious about her own two boys, seconded the motion for departure.

“Let’s give the rowboats twenty minutes start,” suggested Cliff Hunter. “And the canoes ten. We’ll beat you all at that!”

“If our engines don’t give out,” put in Stuart Robinson doubtfully. He never felt confident about his ancient motorboat.

“Suits me fine!” cried Jane, realizing that the arrangement gave her twenty extra minutes to dance.

The rowboats pushed off, and ten minutes later Mary Louise and her mother and David stepped into their canoe. It was a light craft, built for speed, and both she and David were excellent paddlers. In no time at all they were leading the procession.

It was David’s sharp eyes which first detected signs of a disaster.

“There’s a fire at Shady Nook!” he cried breathlessly.

“Oh!” gasped Mrs. Gay in horror, and turning about swiftly, Mary Louise thought that her mother was going to faint. But she didn’t; she pulled herself together quickly and sat up very straight.

“It’s true,” agreed Mary Louise, her voice trembling with fear. Suppose it were their own cottage—and—and—Freckles!

[The canoe rounded the bend in the river and came within full view of the little resort.](#) The Reeds’ house was visible now—yes—and the Gays’! Thank heaven it was unharmed!

“It’s either the Partridges’ or Flicks’,” announced David. “And my bet is that it’s Flicks’. I was expecting it.”

“You were expecting it, David?” repeated Mrs. Gay in consternation. “What do you mean by that?”

“Because Cliff Hunter holds a big mortgage on Flicks’ Inn,” replied the young

man. "It means ready cash for him."

"Don't be absurd!" commanded Mary Louise. "How could Cliff have anything to do with it when he was with us all evening?"

"Haven't you ever heard of a bribe, Mary Lou?" he asked.

The girl did not answer. The increasing noise of the engines behind them told them that the motorboats had caught up with them. Everybody knew about the disaster now; Mrs. Flick was crying, and Mr. Flick was yelling and waving his arms wildly, calling upon everybody to help him.

He was out of his boat first—he happened to be riding in the Robinsons' launch—and he dashed madly through the trees that stood between his inn and the river. In his excitement, he almost knocked over a small boy carrying a pail of water from the river.

"Freckles!" cried Mrs. Gay, in a tone of both relief and fear: relief that her child was safe, fear that he had had something to do with the fire. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to save the trees," explained the boy. "The inn was gone when we got here, but us guys kept the fire from spreading." He looked up proudly, as if he expected a medal for his bravery.

"I don't believe a word of it!" thundered Mr. Flick. "I believe you boys set the place on fire. And now you're trying to lie out of it!"

"I wouldn't put it past 'em," muttered Mr. Frazier, at his side. The Fraziers had landed at Shady Nook instead of crossing to the hotel's shore.

"Tell the truth, boys!" urged Mrs. Gay, for by this time both the Smiths and the two young Reeds had joined Freckles.

"We came along here about dark," said Larry Reed, who was the oldest of the group, "and smelled smoke. Course, we investigated. The inn was gone. But the ashes were still smoldering, and there was smoke coming out from the bushes. So we ran over to Gays' and to our house and got buckets and carried water from the river. It's about out now."

“You’re sure that’s the truth?” demanded Mr. Reed.

“On my honor, Dad!” replied the boy solemnly.

“Did you see anybody in the woods or around Shady Nook?” inquired Mrs. Flick.

“Yeah. A big guy who looked like a tramp from the woods—it was too dark to see his face—and a funny-looking woman in a gray dress with a big pitcher under her arm.”

“Together?” asked Mary Louise.

“No. The big guy was in the woods. And the woman was running along the road that leads to Four Corners.”

“Nothing but a made-up yarn!” denounced Mr. Flick.

But the fire was really out; there was nothing anybody could do. Frazier suggested that the Flicks and their guests come over to his hotel, and the latter accepted. But the Flicks, realizing that this was not a real invitation, that the hotelkeeper would present them with a bill later on, chose to stay with the Partridges. So at last the group dispersed for the night.

Mary Louise, however, was so exasperated with David McCall that she never even answered his pleasant “Good-night!”

CHAPTER V

Freckles' Story

“What in the world are you doing?” asked Jane when she came out on the porch the following morning to find her chum studiously poring over a notebook. “You must think school has begun!”

Mary Louise looked up.

“It’s harder than school—but it’s more fun,” she replied. “I’m working on the mystery of the fires.”

“Mystery? You really don’t think the Flicks’ Inn was just an accident?”

“No, I don’t. If it were the first fire, I might believe that. But with the Hunters’ a week or so ago, the whole thing looks sinister to me. I’m frightened, Jane. Ours may be the next. We haven’t any insurance to speak of. Besides, something dreadful might happen to Mother. People are burned to death sometimes, you know.”

“Yes, that’s true,” replied Jane seriously. “But what are you going to do?”

“Treat it just like a case, as I did Dark Cedars. List all the possible suspects and search the neighborhood for desperate characters.”

“Such as gypsies?”

“No, not gypsies. They wouldn’t have any motive this time. But somebody must have a motive—unless it’s a crazy person who is responsible.”

Jane’s eyes opened wide.

“That’s an idea, Mary Lou! There are people like that—crazy along just one

particular line. They feel they simply have to light fires. Firebugs, you know.”

“Incendiary is the correct term, I believe,” said Mary Louise.

“Oh, so you’ve already thought of it and looked up the word!”

“Yes, I’ve thought of it. Who wouldn’t have? It’s the first explanation that jumps into your head when you hear of a fire. They say lighted cigarettes start them too, and small children.”

“Small children? But not boys as big as Freckles and the Smiths?”

An expression of pain passed over Mary Louise’s face.

“I’m afraid everybody suspects the boys. Especially Mr. Flick.... I’m going to call Freckles now and ask him just exactly what he did yesterday. Then, if you’re interested, Jane, I’ll read you all my list of suspects.”

“Sure I’m interested. I love to play the part of Watson to the great Sherlock Holmes Gay!” Mary Louise stuck out her tongue.

“Don’t be so fresh!” she said, but she was pleased and flattered to be called Sherlock Holmes.

Freckles, eating a bun and followed by Silky, came leisurely through the screen door. Mary Louise asked him to sit down and talk to her.

“Can’t long,” was the reply. “Have to go see old man Flick.”

“Don’t speak of Mr. Flick in that disrespectful way!” said Mary Louise disapprovingly.

“I will, though. I hate him. He thinks us guys set his old inn on fire, and we really saved his trees. Sweatin’ like horses, carryin’ water from the river, and that’s all the thanks we get!”

“Freckles,” said his sister seriously, “you must tell me all about what you did yesterday. Everything! No secrets. Because this is important. It may save somebody innocent from imprisonment—and help spot the real criminal.”

“O.K., I will, Sis.” He sat down on the hammock, and Silky jumped up beside him. He gave the little dog a piece of his bun, and then he began.

“Up in the woods beyond Shady Nook—past the Ditmars’, you know, and all the cottages—we’re building a shack. A clubhouse for the ‘Wild Guys of the Road.’ So yesterday we took our lunch—the two Smiths, the two Reeds, and I—to set to work.”

“Did you make a fire?” demanded Mary Louise.

“Sure we made a fire. We got to have a fire. But don’t you go thinking that fire spread to Flicks’. If it had, why wouldn’t Ditmars’ and Robinsons’ cottages have been burned? They’re in between.”

“Yes, that’s true. Did you stay there in the woods all day?”

“Yeah. Cooked some hot dogs for our supper, and Larry Reed had a can of baked beans. Boy, we had a swell feed! And never thought a thing about the picnic on the island till it started to get dark. Then we put out the fire, packed our stuff away, and made tracks for home.”

“About what time was that?” asked Mary Louise. “I mean, when you finally left your camp?”

“Nine-thirty or ten, maybe. I don’t know.”

“And you saw two people on your way back, you said?”

“Four people, really, because the Ditmars were taking a walk in the woods. They were quarreling, I’m sure. She was mad at him. Said she thought he was positively cruel!”

“What!” exclaimed Jane. “Looks as if Horace Ditmar might have set the place on fire himself—just as Mr. Frazier was expecting!”

Mary Louise wrote something in her notebook, and Freckles continued:

“Then, a little farther on, we met a tramp. At least, we think he was a tramp, though it was too dark to see his face. He was a big man in shabby old clothes. Overalls, I think. He was coming towards us—away from Shady Nook. We think

he's the man you want!"

"Had you ever seen him before?"

"I don't think so, but I wouldn't want to be sure. After we passed him, we saw the funny-looking woman with the big pitcher under her arm. The moon was out then, and we got a good look at her. We all think she was crazy—kind of talking to herself as she went along.

"Then, as we came nearer to Shady Nook, we smelled smoke and found out it was Flicks'. The inn was burned down by then—it was all wood, you know—but there was plenty of fire smoldering around. So we got some buckets at our own houses and began carrying water from the river. We must have worked a couple of hours.... Till you came along.... That's all."

"You're going to tell this story to Mr. Flick?"

"It's not a story!" cried the boy indignantly. "It's the truth!"

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way," Mary Louise hastened to assure him. "I believe you, Freckles. But I do wish you had someone to swear to the truth of it—for the people who may not believe you. Some witness, I mean. Did the Ditmars see you boys in the woods?"

"No. When we heard their voices—and I told you she was good and mad—we beat it around another path. Women murder their husbands sometimes, you know!" he added solemnly.

"I don't believe Mrs. Ditmar would commit murder," replied his sister. "We met her yesterday morning, and she seemed awfully nice."

Freckles stood up.

"Guess I better be on my way. Old man Flick's got an awful temper."

"Well, be sure to keep yours," Mary Louise warned him as he walked down the steps.

She turned to Jane. "What do you think about it?" she asked.

“I think it’s a mess. But I don’t believe anybody’s guilty. Probably just some careless servant girl.”

“I don’t know. I’m going over to see Mr. Flick this morning. I’ll have a good reason now that Freckles is sort of involved.

“Now I’ll read you my list of suspects and their motives, and you tell me what you think and whether you can add any names:

““Horace Ditmar—motive, to make work for himself.

““Mr. Flick and Cliff Hunter—owners, to collect insurance.

““Tramp and queer-looking woman—firebugs.

““Careless servants—and

““The boys.’... Now, can you think of anybody else?”

“It looks like Mr. Ditmar to me—or else the careless servants,” replied Jane. “I’d never believe it was Cliff Hunter. Or Mr. Flick. Why, Mr. Flick was making money this summer—he’d be a fool to set his place on fire. Besides, he was at the picnic. How could he?”

“Things like that can be arranged,” replied Mary Louise, thinking of David McCall’s accusation. “That tramp, for instance, might have been bribed.”

“Well, I’m sure he wouldn’t want to. Now, if it were that man Frazier’s place, the Royal Hotel, I mean, it would be possible. You know what Cliff said about the way he’s losing money. The hotel is practically empty, except for the Hunters and their friends.”

“Maybe it will give Mr. Frazier an idea,” remarked Mary Louise, “and his hotel be the next to burn!”

“You seem to feel sure that something is coming next!”

“I’m afraid so. And I only hope it won’t be our bungalow!”

Mary Louise sighed and closed her notebook.

“It’s much more difficult than that mystery at Dark Cedars,” she said. “Because there you had only one place to watch. If I knew which cottage would be the next to burn, I could hide there and spy. But Shady Nook’s a mile long, and I can’t be everywhere.”

“No,” agreed Jane. “And you don’t like to stay home from all the parties just on a chance that there will be a fire. Has it occurred to you, Mary Lou, that both fires started when everybody from Shady Nook was off on a party?”

“Yes, it has. That’s why it seems like a planned crime to me—not just an accident. As if the criminal picked his time carefully.”

The familiar “chug-chug” of a motorboat interrupted the girls’ discussion. Clifford Hunter shut off his engine and threw the rope around the Gays’ dock.

“Hello, girls!” he called, with his usual grin. “I haven’t had time to work up any new card tricks, but I hope I’ll be welcome just the same.”

“Oh, we have more serious things to think about than tricks,” responded Mary Louise.

“You mean that now you have to turn in and do the cooking since Flicks’ Inn is gone?”

“I really hadn’t thought of that,” answered Mary Louise. “Though of course we shall have to do that very thing. We aren’t rich enough to eat at the Royal Hotel.”

“It’s not so steep, considering the service you get. Maybe Frazier will lower his prices, for he sure needs the business. But, of course, you have a large family. It would be kind of expensive.”

“Where can we buy food?” inquired Jane. So far, the Gays’ breakfasts had consisted of supplies they brought along with them, with the addition of milk, butter, and eggs from a farmer who stopped daily at Flicks’.

“There’s a store over at Four Corners,” replied her chum, naming the nearest village—about five miles away. “We usually drive over once a week for supplies. I suppose I better go in now and ask Mother how soon she wants me to go.”

“Be my guests tonight at the Royal for dinner,” suggested Cliff. “Then you won’t have to bother about buying stuff.”

“Thanks, Cliff, but there are too many of us. Besides, I’d have to go to the store anyway. We’ll need things for lunch. You know how hungry we are when we come out from swimming.”

“By the way,” asked Jane, “where is David McCall staying? And the other people who were boarding at Flicks’?”

“They’re all over at the hotel,” answered Cliff. “Makes the place seem quite lively. Frazier’s stepping around at a great rate, looking pleased as Punch.”

“Oh!” exclaimed Mary Louise significantly, and she wrote another name into her notebook.

She ran inside the cottage and five minutes later returned with her mother’s list of groceries and the keys to the car.

“I’m going over to Four Corners now, Jane,” she announced. “Will you come with me or play around with Cliff?”

Her chum stood up.

“I’ll go with you,” she said. “If you’ll excuse me, Cliff.”

The young man made a face.

“Jane only likes me for my card tricks,” he whined. “If I can’t amuse her, I’m no use.”

Both girls burst out laughing.

“Work up a new one while we’re gone,” advised Jane. “And we’ll see you in swimming.”

CHAPTER VI

More Suspects

“I told Mother we girls would take every other day at the housekeeping,” said Mary Louise as she backed the car out of the garage and onto the road behind the cottages. “That will give her a chance to get some rest from cooking—some vacation. You don’t mind, do you, Jane?”

“Course I don’t mind!” replied her chum. “Maybe the family will, though!”

“Don’t you believe it! We’re swell cooks, if I do say it myself.”

She drove the car along past the backs of the cottages, turning at the road beyond Ditmars in the direction of the little village of Four Corners—a place not much bigger than its name implied. It was a still, hot day; all the vegetation looked parched and dried, and the road was thick with dust.

“I wish it would rain,” remarked Mary Louise. “If we should have another fire, it might spread so that it would wipe out all of Shady Nook.”

“Oh, let’s forget fires for a while,” urged Jane. “You’re getting positively morbid on the subject!... Is this the grocery?” she asked as her companion stopped in front of a big wooden house. “It looks more like a dry-goods store to me. All those aprons and overalls hanging around.”

“It’s a country store,” explained the other girl. “Wait till you see the inside! They have everything—even shoes. And the storekeeper looks over his glasses just the way they always do in plays.”

The girls jumped out of the car and ran inside. Jane found the place just as Mary Louise had described it: a typical country store of the old-fashioned variety.

“Hello, Mr. Eberhardt! How are you this summer?” asked Mary Louise.

“Fine, Miss Gay—fine. You’re lookin’ well, too. But I hear you had some excitement over to Shady Nook. A bad fire, they tell me. Can you figure out how it happened?”

“No, we can’t,” replied the girl. “You see, everybody was away at the time—at a picnic on the little island down the river.”

“Looks like spite to me,” observed the storekeeper. “Bet Lemuel Adams or his good-fer-nuthin’ son done it!”

“Lemuel Adams?” repeated Mary Louise. “Who is he? Any relation to Hattie Adams, who always waited on the table at Flicks’ Inn?”

“Yep—he’s her father. You ought to know him. He’s a farmer who lives up that hill, ’bout a couple of miles from Shady Nook. Well, he used to own all this ground around here, but he sold it cheap to a man named Hunter. The one who started the settlement at Shady Nook.”

“Yes, I knew him,” said Mary Louise. “He was Clifford Hunter’s father. But he died not long ago.”

“So I heard. Anyhow, this man Hunter got fancy prices for his building lots, and naterally old Lem Adams got sore. Always complainin’ how poor he is and how rich old Hunter got on his land. Reckon it got under his skin, and mebbe he decided to take revenge.”

“Oh!”

Mary Louise wanted to write the name of Lemuel Adams into her notebook then and there, but she didn’t like to. Should she add Hattie’s name too? Had the girl taken any part in the plot?

“What sort of looking man is Mr. Adams?” she inquired, thinking of the “tramp” whom the boys had mentioned seeing in the woods.

“Old man—with white hair. Has a bad leg—rheumatism, I reckon. He walks with a limp,” explained the storekeeper.

Mary Louise sighed: this couldn’t be the same person, then, for the boys would surely have noticed a limp.

“Here’s my list,” she said, handing her mother’s paper to Mr. Eberhardt. “Do you think you have all those things?”

“If I ain’t, I can get ’em fer you,” was the cheerful reply.

The girls wandered idly about the store while they waited for their order to be filled. Jane had a wonderful time examining the queer articles on display and laughing at the ready-made dresses. At last, however, a boy carried their supplies to the car, and Mary Louise asked for the bill.

“Nine dollars and sixty-two cents,” announced Mr. Eberhardt, with a grin. “You folks sure must like to eat!”

“We do,” agreed Mary Louise. “I suppose this will mean more business for you. Or did the Flicks buy groceries from you anyhow?”

“No, they didn’t. They got most of their stuff from the city.... Yes, in a way it’s a streak of luck fer me. The old sayin’, you know—that it’s an ill wind that brings nobody luck!... Yes, I’ll have to be stockin’ up.”

Mary Louise and Jane followed the boy to the car and drove away. As soon as they were safely out of hearing, Mary Louise said significantly, “Two more suspects for my notebook!”

“Two?” repeated Jane. “You mean Lemuel Adams and his son?”

“I wasn’t thinking of the son,” replied Mary Louise, “Though, of course, he’s a possibility. No, I was thinking of Mr. Eberhardt, the storekeeper.”

“The storekeeper! Now, Mary Lou, your ideas are running wild. Next thing you’ll be suspecting me!”

“Maybe I do,” laughed her chum. “No, but seriously—if Dad is working on a murder case, he always finds out immediately who profited by the victim’s death. That supplies a motive for the crime. Well, it’s the same with a fire. Didn’t this storekeeper profit—by getting extra business—because Flicks’ burned down?”

“Yes, he did,” admitted the other girl. “But, on the other hand, it didn’t do him a bit of good for the Hunters’ bungalow to be destroyed.”

“No, of course not. But, then, that may have been an accident.”

“Yet this Lemuel Adams might have been responsible for both fires. He seems a lot guiltier to me. If he hated Mr. Hunter particularly, he’d naturally burn his cottage first. Then he’d go about destroying all the rest of Shady Nook.”

“Your reasoning sounds good to me, Jane,” approved Mary Louise, her brown eyes sparkling with excitement. “And we’ve got to make a call on Mr. Adams right away. This very afternoon!”

“Not me,” said Jane. “I’m going canoeing with Cliff Hunter.”

Mary Louise looked disappointed.

“Suppose Watson had told Sherlock Holmes that he had a date with a girl and couldn’t go on an investigation with him when he was needed?”

“Watson was only a man in a book who didn’t make dates. I’m a real girl who’s full of life. I came up here for some fun, not just to be an old character in a detective story! And besides, Mary Lou, you have a date too. I heard you promise David McCall you’d go canoeing with him today.”

“I’m mad at David,” objected Mary Louise. “He certainly made me furious last night.”

“What did he do?”

Mary Louise frowned, but she did not tell Jane what the young man had said about Cliff Hunter. No use getting her chum all excited, so she merely shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, just some remarks he made,” she replied. “But I really had forgotten all about the date. When did I promise him?”

“Yesterday afternoon, before I went off with Cliff. Oh, come on, Mary Lou! Go along with us. Let’s pack a supper—it’ll be easy with all that food we brought back from the store. Maybe your mother and Freckles will go along.”

“No, I really can’t, Jane. I don’t want to be rude to you—you are my guest, I know—but honest, this is important. That I go see old Mr. Adams, I mean. If he

has made up his mind to burn down the entire settlement at Shady Nook, our cottage will be included. I've just got to do something to save it—and everybody else's. You know—Dad's counting on me!"

"Yes, I understand how you feel, Mary Lou. But you may be all wrong—these two fires may just have been accidents—and then you'll be wasting your perfectly good vacation for nothing."

"Oh, but I'm having fun! There's nothing I love better than a mystery. Only this one does scare me a little, because we may actually be involved in it."

"Well, you do whatever you want," Jane told her. "Just regard me as one of the family, and I'll go my own way. I know everybody here now, and I'm having a grand time. Only don't forget you have David McCall to reckon with about breaking that date!"

They drove up to the back door of the cottage, and Freckles, who had returned home by this time, helped carry in the boxes. Mary Louise asked him how he had made out with the Flicks.

"Not so good," was the reply. "He's sore as anything. Still believes we had something to do with starting the fire, though he admits he doesn't think we did it on purpose. They're going away today."

"Oh, that's too bad!" exclaimed Mary Louise. "I was hoping they would build some kind of shack and continue to serve meals."

"Nope, they're not going to. They've decided to go right back to Albany, where they live in the winter."

"Where are they now?" demanded Mary Louise. She realized that she must hurry if she meant to interview them before they left Shady Nook.

"Mr. Flick's on his lot, and Mrs. Flick is over at the Partridges'. They stayed there all night, you know, Sis."

As soon as the supplies from the store were carefully stored away, the two girls walked over to the spot where the Flicks' Inn had stood. The charred remains were pitiful to see; the fire had been much harder on the Flicks than the Hunters' disaster had been for them, because the innkeeper and his wife were poor. And

what they made in the summer went a long way toward supporting them all the year round. Mary Louise felt sorry for them, but nevertheless she resented their laying the blame upon her brother.

The girls found Mr. Flick standing under a tree talking to some men in overalls—working men, whom Mary Lou remembered seeing from time to time around the hotel across the river.

“May I talk with you for a moment, Mr. Flick?” inquired Mary Louise, as the former turned around and spoke to her.

“Yes, of course, Mary Louise,” he replied. “I’ll be with you in a minute.”

“You really don’t think the boys are responsible, do you, Mr. Flick?” she asked directly, when he joined the girls.

“I don’t know what to think,” replied the man. “It may have been an accident. That one servant girl we have is awfully careless.”

“Which one?”

“Hattie Adams. The one who waits on your table and washes the dishes.”

“Hattie Adams!” repeated Mary Louise. “Lemuel Adams’ daughter!”

“Yes. And Tom Adams’ sister.” He lowered his voice. “That’s Tom over there—remember him?—he does odd jobs for both me and Frazier sometimes.”

Mary Louise nodded and glanced at the young man. He was a big fellow with a somewhat sullen expression. He looked something like Hattie.

“How do you know Lem Adams?” inquired Mr. Flick.

“I don’t,” replied Mary Louise quietly. “But the storekeeper over at Four Corners told me about him. How he used to own all this land and sold it cheap to Mr. Hunter. So he thinks maybe Mr. Adams is burning the cottages to spite the Hunters.”

“But Hunter is dead!” objected Mr. Flick. “And it doesn’t spite the Hunters one bit, because they are fully insured. That’s the worst of it for me. My insurance

only covers my mortgage—which Cliff Hunter happens to hold. I’m as good as wiped out.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said Mary Louise sympathetically.

“Not half as sorry as I am.” He scowled. “And when I get to Albany I’m going to hunt up a lawyer. If those Smith kids did it, their parents can pay for the damage!”

“Oh, but they didn’t!” protested Mary Louise.

“It’s too bad if your brother was in it too. But if he was, he ought to be punished—though I blame that Robby Smith as the ringleader. Boys like those aren’t safe to have around. They don’t have anybody to control them. They ought to be locked behind the walls of a reform school.”

There was nothing Mary Louise could say: the man was far too wrought up to listen to reason. So she and Jane merely nodded goodbye and turned away.

They stopped at the Partridges’ cottage to see Mrs. Flick and found her much calmer.

“I blame the Adams girl,” she said. “Hattie’s so careless! And she was the last one at the inn. I never should have left her alone. But my other waitresses wanted to get back to their hometown, and they left early—before we did. So I can’t lay the blame on them.”

“You really don’t think the boys did it, do you, Mrs. Flick?” inquired Mary Louise anxiously.

“No, I don’t,” was the reassuring reply, “even if my husband does!”

“Thank goodness for that!” exclaimed the girl in relief. “Well, I’m going to call on the Adams family this afternoon and find out all I can. I’ll pump Hattie, and old Mr. Adams too.”

“Good luck to you, my dear!” concluded Mrs. Flick.

CHAPTER VII

The Crazy Woman

Jane went off early after lunch in Cliff Hunter's canoe, and Mary Louise sat on the porch waiting for David McCall. She was still angry at him for the way he had accused Cliff to her the night before, but a promise is a promise, and she meant to see him. If she had had a chance to go swimming that morning, she might have tried to break the date.

He came along about half-past two, smiling shyly, as if he were not quite sure how he stood with Mary Louise.

"You're not still mad at me, Mary Lou, are you?" he asked, looking straight into her eyes.

"Yes, I am," replied the girl. "I'm disappointed that a boy with your brains can't reason more intelligently. The finest detective in the world wouldn't be sure that one certain person was guilty of a crime until he had made some investigations."

"But it's so obvious, Mary Lou! Hunter holds a big mortgage on one place and big fire insurance on another. He can't sell either of them, and he needs the money. So he sets them both on fire and collects that way! What could be simpler?"

"There are lots of other people, besides Cliff, who profited from those two fires. In fact," concluded Mary Louise, "the thing that worries me is that there are so many suspects. It's terribly confusing."

David opened his eyes wide in amazement.

"I don't see who——" he began.

"Oh, don't you!" snapped the girl. "Then just listen to this bunch of names!" She

opened her notebook and read him the list:

“‘Horace Ditmar, Lemuel Adams, Eberhardt’—the storekeeper—‘Frazier, a tramp the boys saw in the woods, and a queer-looking woman.’ Not to mention the boys, because I really don’t think they did it.”

David shook his head. “All possible, of course, but not any of them probable. Of course, I understand you have reasons for suspecting Ditmar, and I admit he is a queer cuss. Still, I don’t think he’d do a thing like that. But tell me why you suspect men like Adams—I suppose he’s the farmer, isn’t he?—and Frazier and Eberhardt. Sounds silly to me.”

“Frazier and Eberhardt both gained something by the fires: more business. And Dad always tells me to hunt for motives.”

“They didn’t get enough business to go to all that trouble,” remarked David.

“I’m not so sure. Then, the storekeeper told me that Lemuel Adams felt spiteful towards the Hunters because they made so much money out of his land. So Adams may be doing it for revenge.”

“Hardly likely, when the fires actually put money into the Hunters’ pockets.”

“Well, I don’t know. Anyway, I’m going to do my best to find out who did it—to clear Freckles, for one reason, and to prevent our own bungalow from burning down, for another.”

“You needn’t worry about your bungalow,” said David stubbornly. “Cliff Hunter hasn’t any mortgage on it.”

Mary Louise gave him a scornful look. She stood up.

“I can’t go canoeing with you, David,” she announced. “I’m driving over to Adams’ farm. You can come along with me if you want to,” she added grudgingly.

The young man looked disappointed.

“You are mean, Mary Lou,” he said. “My vacation’s nearly over.”

“I’m being a lot nicer to you than you deserve,” she replied. “Letting you in on all the thrills of solving a real mystery.... Well, are you coming or not?”

“Sure I’m coming,” he muttered disconsolately. But he gazed longingly at the river and wished it were a canoe, and not a car, in which they were to spend the afternoon.

Remembering the farmhouse where Hattie Adams had said she lived, Mary Louise turned off the drive beyond Shady Nook into a dirt road which wound around to the top of a hill. She was going slowly—in second gear—when a strange-looking creature in a gray dress darted out from the bushes into the direct path of the car. With a gasp of horror, Mary Louise ground down her brakes, missing the woman by only a couple of inches.

“What did you do that for?” shouted David.

The woman looked up and smiled innocently at the two young people in the car. Her eyes were vacant and expressionless; her gray hair hung about her face in tangled curls, tied with a faded blue ribbon, in a childish fashion. And under her arm she lugged an immense china pitcher—the kind that is used in the country for carrying water to the bedrooms. She was indeed a strange-looking person—probably the same woman the boys had noticed on the road the night before.

“You better move out of the way!” called David.

The woman wagged her head confidently: evidently she had no idea of the danger she had just escaped.

“I’m looking for well water,” she said. “Well water to put out the dreadful fires.”

“Fires?” repeated Mary Louise sharply.

“Yes, fires. The Lord said in His holy Book that He would burn down the cities of pleasure because of the sins of the people. But I am sorry for the little children. I must help put out the fires with pure water from a well. I am Rebecca—at the well!”

Mary Louise was horror-stricken. This woman might indeed be the “firebug” whom she and Jane had considered as a possibility. Although she seemed to want to put fires out, perhaps she lighted them first for that very purpose.

“I’m sorry, but we don’t know where there is a well,” she replied. “But tell us where you live, Rebecca. We’ll take you home.”

The woman shook her head.

“No, no, I can’t go home. I must find water. There will be a fire tonight, and I must be ready to put it out. I must go.”

“Where will the fire be tonight?” demanded Mary Louise apprehensively.

“I don’t know. One of those wicked cottages, where the people go about half clad, and where they dance and feast until past midnight. I can’t tell you upon which the Lord’s anger will descend, but I know it will come. I know it. I must get water—pure water. I can’t have innocent children burned to death.”

“But who are you?” repeated Mary Louise.

“I am Rebecca. And I am going to meet my bridegroom at the well. My Isaac!” Her eyes gleamed with happiness as she trotted off down the hill, carrying that ridiculous pitcher in her hand.

David and Mary Louise sat still, looking at each other in speechless wonder, not knowing whether to laugh or to cry at the poor deluded woman.

“But she seems happy,” remarked David. “So I guess we needn’t pity her.”

“She’s like that bride in the Dickens book,” said Mary Louise. “The woman who was deserted on her wedding day and wore her wedding dress all the rest of her life, expecting her bridegroom to come back. Remember? That always gave me the creeps.”

“But this woman is happier. She’s sure she’s going to meet her Isaac at a well.” He laughed. “No, I think we’re more to be pitied than she is. For if she goes around setting fire to people’s places——”

“She ought to be locked up! Yet that seems a shame, if she does happen to be harmless.” Mary Louise stepped on the starter. “Well, let’s go on up to the Adams’. Maybe they can tell us who she is.”

They continued on up the hill to the farm and left the car at the entrance to the

front yard, just outside the picket fence. The Adams place was a neat-looking frame house, painted white, and pleasant to look at. A big porch surrounded it on all sides, and here they saw Hattie Adams, seated in a rocking chair, sewing. She waved to Mary Louise.

“Hello, folks!” she called genially. “Come on up! Any news?”

“No, we haven’t,” replied Mary Louise as she sat down. “But I did want to ask you what you knew about the fire, Hattie, because Mr. Flick is sort of blaming my brother and the other small boys, and I know they didn’t start it. So will you tell us when you left Flicks’—and all you know about it?”

Hattie nodded solemnly.

“Well, let me see,” she began. “We had supper at half-past five last night, didn’t we? And everybody was through eatin’ about quarter to seven. Even Mis’ Flick. The other two hired girls helped me wash some of the dishes, and then Mr. Flick drove ’em over to the Junction. He come back for Mis’ Flick about half-past seven, I reckon. They put the car away and went to the picnic in a boat. I was just finishin’ washin’ dishes.”

“Did you see the boys or anybody around at all?” questioned Mary Louise.

“Nary a soul. Everybody went to the picnic, as far as I know. I expected to go home, get fixed up, and get my brother Tom to row me over. But he wasn’t anywhere around when I got back, and I didn’t feel like gettin’ the boat and goin’ all by myself, so I just stayed home with Dad. I never knew a thing about the fire till I went over this mornin’ as usual to work at Flicks’.”

“Your brother—or your father—didn’t know anything about it, either?”

“Dad didn’t. I don’t know about Tom. I didn’t see him. He was off milkin’ the cows when I got up, and I left before he come in for his breakfast. I usually get it and set it on the table and then run down to Flicks’ quick as I can. But Mis’ Flick never cares if I don’t get there early, because we haven’t many people for breakfast.”

“And that’s all you know?”

“Yes. Except what I heard this mornin’ at Shady Nook—same as you heard.”

Mary Louise sighed. She didn't feel as if she were making any progress. She wanted to ask more about Hattie's father—Lemuel Adams—but she didn't know how. And about this brother Tom, too. If he had been away from the farm last night, maybe he was responsible for setting the inn on fire.

Instead, however, she inquired about the strange creature who wandered about the countryside with her big pitcher under her arm.

“Do you know a woman with gray hair who calls herself Rebecca, Hattie?” she asked. “We almost ran over her half a mile down the road. She stepped right in front of our car.”

The other girl laughed.

“Rather!” she said. “Rebecca's my sister. She's never been right. But she's perfectly harmless, so we let her wander about as she wants. She wouldn't hurt a kitten.”

“But do you think she could be setting the places on fire?”

“No,” replied Hattie positively. “Rebecca's afraid of fires. She always wants to put 'em out. No, I wouldn't blame her.”

Mary Louise sighed and stood up.

“I certainly wish we could find out what is the cause before anything else happens,” she said.

“I wouldn't worry about it if I was you,” returned Hattie. “They can't do anything to your brother without proof.... It's lots worse for me. I've lost my job. And so has my brother Tom. He used to pick up a lot of work at odd times for Mr. Flick.”

Mary Louise stared in surprise; she had never thought of this angle of it. Here were two people who actually lost out by the fire! Surely this fact proclaimed the innocence of the entire Adams family, with the possible exception of Rebecca.

“Did you need the work, Hattie?” she asked, gazing around at the big farm land that stretched out on all sides of the house.

“Oh, we won’t starve without it! But it meant spendin’ money for Tom and me. And extra clothes. Besides, I liked it. It’s awful dull livin’ on a farm with only the chores to do. I’d go to the city and get a job if there was any. But I know there ain’t.”

“Maybe Mr. Frazier will give you a job at the Royal Hotel,” suggested Mary Louise. “Now that he has more business. Because I understand that most of the Shady Nook people are going to eat there.”

Hattie wrinkled her nose.

“I hate that guy. But I suppose I will ask him—it’s better than nuthin’. Tom goes every other day with butter and eggs and milk, so it would be easy to get there.”

“Well, good luck to you!” was Mary Louise’s parting hope. “We’ll be getting on. I’d like a swim this afternoon.”

David McCall’s eyes brightened. They were going to have some fun, after all!

“We’ll get into our suits and go out in the canoe,” said Mary Louise as she directed the car towards Shady Nook. “Maybe we can find Jane and Cliff and all go in together.”

The young man sighed: always this Clifford Hunter had to share his good times!

But it was better than nothing, and later on, when the couple found not only Jane and Cliff, but the Robinson boys and the Reed twins, he had to admit that his afternoon had turned out pleasantly after all.

CHAPTER VIII

Danger

“Freckles,” said Mary Louise at supper that evening, “will you lend us your tent tonight? Jane and I want to sleep outside.”

Jane raised her eyebrows. She couldn’t remember expressing any such desire. But she said nothing: she wanted to see what Mary Louise was up to now. For her chum must have some purpose in the request: something to do with the mystery of the fires. It couldn’t be just a desire for fresh air!

“I suppose so,” agreed her brother. “But you know my cot isn’t very wide.”

“Oh, we’ll manage all right,” returned Mary Louise. “And thank you very much.”

It was not until after supper, while the girls were waiting for their boy-friends to come, that Jane had a chance to ask Mary Louise why she wanted to sleep outdoors tonight.

“I want to sleep in my clothing, Jane,” was the surprising reply. “Remember the scout motto, ‘Be prepared’? That’s ours for tonight.”

“Prepared for what?”

“For a fire. I think there’s going to be one. I’m only hoping that it won’t be our cottage. But you never can tell.”

“What makes you think there will be one tonight?” demanded Jane.

“From something I learned this afternoon from that Adams family. You remember hearing Freckles describing a queer creature he saw last night on his way home from the woods? Well, we almost ran over her this afternoon! With

her pitcher, looking for well water! ‘To put out the fires which the Lord sends upon the wicked’ were her words.”

Jane giggled.

“You think we’re as wicked as that, Mary Lou?” she asked.

“You know I don’t believe that, Jane.”

“Then what do you believe? Why do you think that there will be another fire?”

“I think that either this crazy woman sets the cottages on fire herself, believing that she is appointed by the Lord, or else that somebody she knows is doing it, and she has inside information somehow.”

“More likely she’s just prattling,” remarked Jane.

“I hope so. But, anyhow, I want to be prepared to jump up at the first sign of smoke. I’m going to rig up a hose with the river, so that I can put it out if it does happen around our cottage.”

“You sound almost as crazy as the old lady, Mary Lou! Next thing you’ll be taking your pitcher out for river water!”

“Now, Jane, be yourself! You’ll sleep out with me, won’t you?”

“I suppose so. But let’s keep Silky with us, in case one of those gypsies comes along and grabs you, the way she did at Dark Cedars.”

“There aren’t any gypsies anywhere around here,” Mary Louise assured her.

“No, but there’s a tramp. Freckles saw him. And a crazy woman. And from the way Mr. Flick was carrying on this morning, he’ll soon be crazy.”

“He’s gone to Albany. And the crazy woman is harmless. But you’re wise about Silky: he will protect us from any tramps that might show up.”

To Mary Louise’s delight, Mrs. Gay raised no objection to the plan. After all, her daughter had often slept outdoors before. So, after a pleasant evening of games and dancing at the Reeds’ cottage, the two girls went out to the tent.

“You forgot your pajamas, Mary Louise!” called Mrs. Gay as she fixed up the girls’ room for Freckles.

“Oh, of course,” replied her daughter. No need to alarm her mother by telling her that they intended to sleep in their clothing.

They took off their shoes, changed into sweaters and skirts, and climbed into the cot. Silky lay down on the rug beside it.

“It is close quarters,” whispered Jane. “But nothing like that could keep me awake.”

“Me either,” returned Mary Louise, with a yawn.

Five minutes later they were both sound asleep, entirely forgetful of fires or danger. But their rest was short. About one o’clock Mary Louise was awakened by a soft growl from Silky. Instantly she sat up and peered out into the darkness. It was utterly black at the opening of the tent, for the night was starless, and the trees closed out all view of the sky. Yet she perceived something light—something white—coming towards her. For one wild moment a terrible thought took possession of her imagination: Was this indeed the angel of wrath, coming to destroy their house—as that queer woman had predicted?

But, no: common sense came to her rescue and assured Mary Louise things like that didn’t happen nowadays. There must be some other explanation. It must be

A horrible inane laugh burst upon the silence of the night, wakening Jane with a cry of terror on her lips. A long arm reached through the opening of the tent, touching the girls’ cot, snatching at their feet. Then another laugh, followed by hysterical sobbing.

Mary Louise reached for the flashlight underneath her pillow. But she was calm now; she was sure of the identity of the intruder. It must be the crazy woman.

She flashed the light into the creature’s face, and the woman gasped in fear.

“Don’t harm me! Please!” she begged. “I’m the Lord’s messenger. To tell you that the Smith’s house is on fire. There are little children to be rescued. Go! Run! I’ll follow as soon as I can fill my pitcher.”

Jane and Mary Louise looked at each other in wonder. Was what she said the truth, or only a figment of her crazy brain?

But they did not dare take a chance. As the poor woman said, there were children at Smiths' big house on the hill: three children, two boys and a little girl, with only servants to look after them. And servants, unlike parents, too often think of their own safety first.

"We'll go right away, Rebecca," Mary Louise assured her as she stepped into her pumps. "We're all ready."

Taking only their flashlight for protection, she and Jane ran off as fast as they could go, with Silky faithfully following them.

As soon as they had passed the ruins of Flicks' Inn, they could see the smoke rising from the hill beyond. There could be no doubt about it. Rebecca was right: the Smiths' house was on fire.

The girls redoubled their pace and tore up the hill. As they came nearer they saw the flames and heard wild shouts of excitement. Then they met the Smith boys and several of the servants racing madly about.

"How did it start?" demanded Mary Louise breathlessly as she almost bumped into Robby Smith.

"Don't know. In the back, somehow. That's all wood, you know."

"Can they save it?"

"Doin' our best. All us men are working!" He stuck out his chest proudly, evidently enjoying the adventure immensely. Money was never a thing to the Smith boys.

"Where's your sister?" demanded Mary Louise.

"Around somewhere. Everybody got out safe."

"With her nurse?" inquired Jane.

"No. Nurse took the canoe across to the Royal—to phone to Four Corners for the

fire engine.”

“Then we better hunt up little Ethel and take care of her,” asserted Mary Louise. The child was only four—anything might happen to her.

Flames were rising upward from behind the house, lighting up the scene vividly, showing the chauffeur, the gardener, and two maids desperately pouring water from buckets and pails. But Mary Louise did not see little Ethel.

“Ethel! Ethel!” she cried wildly, raising her voice above the shouts of the men. “Where are you?”

“Here me is!” came a plaintive reply, and a tiny head leaned out of a second-story window. “I comed up for my dolly!”

A cold chill of horror crept over Mary Louise as she realized the dreadful peril of the child. But without a thought for her own danger she dashed through the front door and up the wide, smoke-filled staircase.

“Come to the steps, Ethel!” she shrieked, her throat choking with smoke. “Come here—I’ll get you.”

“Tan’t. Too smoky,” replied the little girl, beginning to sob.

Mary Louise took one desperate leap and dashed through the upstairs hall to the nursery. Grabbing the child in her arms she groped her way back to the head of the stairs.

She never knew how she reached the bottom of those steps. With her hand on the railing and her eyes tightly closed, she somehow made her slow progress. All she could remember was Jane’s voice at the door as she lifted the child from her arms. Then darkness—choking for breath—silence, and blessed unconsciousness!

When Mary Louise finally came to, Rebecca was giving her water out of her huge pitcher and patting her shoulder gently.

“Speak, Mary Lou!” cried Jane frantically. “Oh, say you’re still alive!”

“I’m all right,” replied her chum, managing a smile. “And little Ethel?”

“She’s fine. With her nurse. She’s back from across the river now.”

Mary Louise turned her head and saw the woman at her side, clutching the child in her arms and sobbing hysterically.

Other people had arrived by this time. Mr. Frazier had come over from the Royal Hotel, accompanied by Cliff Hunter, David McCall, and several other young people who were staying there, and Mr. Reed and all the Robinsons had gathered from Shady Nook. In another minute the fire engine from Four Corners came, and the volunteers got the flames under control. The front of the house was saved; only the wooden structure at the back was completely destroyed.

“How did it happen?” Frazier was asking the Smiths’ chauffeur, half an hour later, when the crowd had finally gathered about Mary Louise.

“Nobody knows,” replied the man. “Everybody here was in bed and asleep. No signs of any prowler, either. The fire just started with the back shed—and spread. I was the first to wake up.”

David McCall looked knowingly at Mary Louise.

“No signs of anybody?” he asked the chauffeur. “No clues at all?”

“Maybe this is a clue,” interrupted one of the volunteer firemen, coming forward with a small box in his hand. “I found this pack of cards right where the fire must have started. But it had dropped into a pail of water—that’s why it wasn’t burned.”

“Maybe the boys were playing cards and smoking corn silk,” suggested Cliff Hunter lightly.

The chauffeur took the box from the fireman.

“No, they ain’t our cards,” he said as he examined them. “I know ours, because I’ve bought them for the kids.”

David McCall stepped nearer and uttered a sudden exclamation of surprise.

“Gosh!” he said solemnly.

“Recognize them, McCall?” inquired Frazier.

“I sure do. They’re Cliff Hunter’s. Nobody else around here can afford to pay a dollar a pack. Look—they’re monogrammed!”

Mary Louise glanced apprehensively at Cliff. He was holding the cards in his hand, nodding his assent.

“Sure they’re mine. The kids must have swiped them—or maybe I lost them and they found ’em. I myself haven’t been up here to Smiths’ once this summer before tonight.”

“Sez—you!” muttered David McCall under his breath. But not too low for Mary Louise to hear him and be genuinely frightened!

CHAPTER IX

The Arrest

When the girls came home from the fire that night they found Mrs. Gay and Freckles both awake and dressed. The boy was pleading with his mother to be allowed to go to the Smiths'.

"The fire's out," announced Jane, sinking wearily into the swing on the porch. "Mary Lou passed out for a few minutes, too."

Mrs. Gay uttered an exclamation of alarm.

"Oh, but I'm all right now, Mother," her daughter hastened to assure her. "Only I would like something hot to drink. And my own bed to sleep in, if Freckles doesn't mind changing again."

"A hot drink?" repeated her brother, in amazement. "Why hot?"

Briefly Jane told the story of Mary Louise's daring act of heroism, and Mrs. Gay hurried off to make her daughter comfortable for the night.

In their own soft bed again, the girls slept soundly until nearly noon the following day. Mary Louise was vexed with herself for wasting so much time when she saw the lateness of the hour. For if she was to do anything about solving the mystery of the fires she hadn't a single minute to lose.

"Have you heard any news this morning?" she demanded of her brother as the family all ate their breakfast-lunch together.

"Not much," replied the boy. "We went over to see the place, of course, as soon as we were up this morning. It must have been some fire! What's left of the house isn't fit to live in.... Gee, Sis, you and Jane were lucky to be in on it!"

“Lucky for the Smiths!” amended Mrs. Gay. “I shudder every time I think of what might have happened to little Ethel.”

“Where are the Smiths now?” inquired Jane.

“Moved over to the hotel. The chauffeur telegraphed Mr. Smith, and he and Mrs. Smith are coming this afternoon, with clothes and stuff.”

“Did you see the boys this morning?” questioned Mary Louise.

“Yeah,” replied the boy. “I took the canoe across the river, where they were in swimming early, with the chauffeur.”

“And couldn’t they tell you anything more about the fire?”

“Nope. Robby said he never wakened up till he heard the chauffeur yelling at them. Then they all grabbed their clothes and ran. The nurse was sleeping in the same room with little Ethel, and she saw to it that the kid got out safely.”

“And she went back for her dolly!” whispered Mrs. Gay, with a catch in her voice.

“Mother, please stop thinking about that!” begged Mary Louise. “Everything came out all right—so do try to forget it.”

“I will, dear. But I think I’ve had enough of Shady Nook for one summer. I’ve about decided to pack up and go home tomorrow.”

“Oh, no!” protested Mary Louise, aghast. “We can’t—run away!”

“If only your father were here, he’d find out what’s the cause of all these disasters. But I feel so unsafe—so helpless without him!”

“I’m going to find out!” announced Mary Louise, with determination in her voice. “Just stay a little while, till we have a chance to see what develops!”

“I won’t promise. By the way, I’ve decided that we’ll all go over to the Royal Hotel for dinner tonight. It will be a nice change—and you girls can dance afterwards, because practically everybody from Shady Nook eats there now.”

“Everybody except the Ditmars,” said Mary Louise, with a significant look at Jane.

She said nothing further about the young couple now, but an hour later, when the two girls were getting into their bathing suits, she mentioned the Ditmars again.

“I’ve come to the conclusion that the criminal, the person responsible for the fires, is one of two people,” she said, “with the possible chance of a third.”

“You suspect Horace Ditmar, of course?” asked Jane.

“Yes. I think everything points to him. First, he has the *motive*. To get work for himself—to plan new houses to take the place of those that have been destroyed. If you’ve noticed, Jane, the three places that have been burned have all been big, expensive ones. The finest at Shady Nook! The Smiths and the Hunters are rich people, well able to afford to rebuild. And Flicks’ was such a flourishing business that anybody would naturally expect them to want to start it up again.

“Next, Horace Ditmar had the *opportunity*. He was absent from the two parties which were going on when the Hunters’ and Flicks’ places burned, and he could easily have slipped out last night and set Smiths’ on fire.

“And last—and most important of all, Dad often says—Ditmar’s the kind of man who could do it. Quiet, almost sullen, I think, and deceitful. I’ve never spoken two words with him, but that’s my opinion.”

Jane nodded solemnly: her chum’s logic appeared sound.

“But still,” she remarked, “Horace Ditmar isn’t profiting any by these fires. Nobody seems a bit inclined to rebuild.”

“No. Not yet. But wait till the Smiths come, and see whether Horace Ditmar tries to chum up with them. You know Adelaide Ditmar admitted that they went over to call on Mrs. Hunter after their fire and the woman almost snubbed her.”

“True.... Who’s your other suspect, Mary Lou? Is it—Cliff?”

“No. Positively not Cliff! In spite of that pack of cards they found over there last night. Imagine Cliff Hunter setting fire to a house that had three children asleep in it! It’s unthinkable.”

Jane breathed a sigh of relief. "I'm glad to hear you say that," she said.

"The other person I suspect strongly is Rebecca Adams," continued the young detective. "I hate to, for she seems harmless, but you just never can tell about a half-witted person like that. She wanders around at such queer times, and then her coming here last night, after predicting a fire in the afternoon, looks bad. She's got to be watched."

"Right again," agreed the other girl admiringly. "But go on, 'Spencer Dean'! Who's your third suspect—the one you called a possible chance?"

"The hotelkeeper, Frazier. It's meant a lot to his business. He has the motive all right, but I just can't see how he could have actually accomplished setting the places on fire. He was with us all evening the night Flicks' burned down, and Cliff says he was at the hotel when the Hunters' cottage burned. Still, Frazier's sly. He might have managed it."

"I'll have to take a good look at him tonight when we go over to dinner," observed Jane, "and try to size up his character."

Mary Louise reached for her beach robe and stepped into her slippers.

"Come on, Jane," she said. "We've got to hurry, or the crowd will go home before we get there."

They ran out to the canoe and jumped in, paddling down the river half a mile to the spot which was generally accepted as the best swimming place near Shady Nook. Here they found about twenty-five people gathered on the shore, all talking in the wildest excitement. And not a single person was in the water!

"What's happened?" demanded Jane. "Anybody drowned?"

"Another fire?" asked Mary Louise.

"Neither," explained Sue Reed, turning to the newcomers. "But something almost as bad. A detective arrived from Albany and arrested Cliff Hunter! As an incendiary, I believe he said. A person who sets things on fire."

"No!" gasped Jane in horror.

“But how could he?” cried Mary Louise incredulously. “I mean, how could a detective from Albany know about the fires here at Shady Nook—let alone suspect Cliff?”

“Somebody wired,” said Sue.

“Who?” demanded both girls in the same breath.

Nobody seemed to be able to answer that question. All anyone knew was that Cliff had gone off in the detective’s car and that his mother had insisted upon going with him. Mrs. Hunter was positive that it was all a put-up job, a plot of some kind to kidnap her son.

The talking died down at last, and the crowd dispersed into the water. But nobody seemed to enjoy the swim that day. Discouraged and worried, Mary Louise and Jane decided to paddle back home in their canoe.

“All your detective work gone for nothing!” lamented Jane miserably. “I’d just like to know, who’s responsible for that arrest! It was such a dirty trick. I wonder if it was one of the Smiths’ servants.”

“I don’t know, but I’m going to find out tonight,” returned Mary Louise. “Thank goodness we’re going to the Royal to dinner, where we’ll see everybody! Keep your eyes and ears open, Jane.”

As soon as the girls reached their cottage they told Mrs. Gay the startling news about Cliff Hunter. She was as much distressed as they were over the announcement, for she had known the young man so long that he seemed almost like a son. And, like the girls, she was positive of his innocence.

“Let’s get dressed early and go over to the hotel. Maybe we can find out something there,” she suggested.

“That’s just what we’re hoping,” replied Jane. “And believe me, if we find that the Smith chauffeur is responsible—or that sneaky Frazier——”

“It wasn’t Mr. Frazier, I can assure you,” interrupted Mary Louise. “He’ll be losing money without the Hunters and their friends. No—but maybe——”

“Maybe what?”

“Nothing. No use of making guesses in the dark. We’ll wait and see.”

The girls went into their room to dress. Mary Louise was surprised to see Jane take a simple white voile out of the closet.

“Why, Jane, we’re going to the Royal Hotel! To dine and dance. Don’t you want to wear your pink georgette?”

Her chum shook her head.

“No. White’s more appropriate for the way I feel tonight. I’m not in a party mood. Maybe I’d wear black, if I had it!”

Mary Louise lowered her voice.

“Do you care that much about Cliff, Jane?” she asked seriously.

“I don’t know about that part of it, Mary Lou—but I do feel dreadfully. Cliff was always so care-free and happy—just like a child with his card tricks. And then for somebody to pounce down on him like that and carry him off without any chance to defend himself——”

“Don’t worry about that, Jane,” interrupted Mary Louise. “Don’t forget that the Hunters are rich, and Mrs. Hunter will hire the best lawyer in the whole state of New York to defend him.”

“Well, that’s comforting! But, just the same, it was a mean trick. And I’m going to miss Cliff dreadfully.... By the way, where was David McCall today? I didn’t see him in swimming.”

Mary Louise frowned. “Neither did I,” she muttered.

Jane swung about sharply.

“Mary Lou, you think David sent that wire, don’t you?” she demanded.

“I’m trying not to think so!” responded her chum. “But we’ll find out tonight.”

The girls were ready in a few minutes, but they waited for Mrs. Gay and Freckles. They had expected to go across the river in the canoes, but Stuart

Robinson stopped in to invite them to join their family in the motorboat, so that there was further delay. Instead of getting off early, the party did not leave until after six.

Naturally, everybody talked of the arrest on the way over, but none of the Robinsons knew who was responsible for it. Stuart blamed it upon the Smiths' servants.

When they reached the porch of the hotel, they found it deserted. Everybody ate early at the resort.

The large dining room, with its pale yellow walls, its long screened windows, and its snow-white tables, was certainly a pleasant-looking place. The floors were of polished hardwood, so that when these same tables were removed the room was fine for dancing. The space was ample, too, for it was intended to accommodate a couple of hundred people at a meal. Tonight it looked fairly well filled, with all the guests from Shady Nook in addition to the regular diners.

Mr. Frazier himself came up and found two tables for the Gays and the Robinsons. The little man looked happy and confident tonight, pleased, no doubt, that business was more flourishing.

"Is David McCall here, Mr. Frazier?" asked Jane abruptly.

"Yes," was the reply. "He's sitting with the Smiths this evening. Mr. and Mrs. Smith arrived this afternoon."

"Thank you," answered Jane, without going into any explanation.

Mary Louise smiled. "Nothing like going right to the point, Jane," she remarked when the hotelkeeper had turned away.

"I mean to ask David point-blank! I hope I can make him ashamed of himself, if he did cause Cliff's arrest!"

"I'm afraid you can't do that," put in Mrs. Gay wisely. "These self-righteous people who feel that it is their duty to tell on others——" She stopped, wondering whether she was hurting Mary Louise's feelings by speaking thus about David McCall, but her daughter was scarcely listening. "I think he'll come over to see us," Mrs. Gay concluded as she gave her order to the waitress, "with

the Smiths.”

Mrs. Gay was correct in her surmise: when the Smiths had finished their dinner, they came straight to the Gays’ table.

Mrs. Smith, a well-dressed woman of perhaps thirty-five—though she looked much younger—put her hand on Mary Louise’s arm.

“I can never thank you enough for saving my baby, Mary Louise,” she said. “All my life I’ll be grateful to you!”

Mary Louise smiled.

“I’m thankful I was there in time, Mrs. Smith,” she said. “Ethel is such a darling.”

“I wish we could do something for you, Mary Lou,” put in her husband. “Can’t you think of something you want?” He was too well bred to offer her a reward in money, the way old Miss Mattie Grant at Dark Cedars had done.

“All I want is to find out who really did start that fire at your house,” replied the girl. “Because I’m sure Cliff Hunter didn’t!”

She was staring past Mrs. Smith right at David McCall as she said this, with scorn in her eyes.

Jane couldn’t keep quiet any longer. She turned angrily to the young man.

“Are you responsible for Cliff’s arrest, David McCall?” she demanded.

“I am,” he stated calmly. “I did it to protect our insurance company. It just happens that our company holds most of the insurance up here at Shady Nook. And they’ve paid enough already—or will pay. So I don’t want any more fires. It’s my duty to protect their interests.”

“Oh, yeah?” retorted Jane, hot with fury. “Well, you’re not doing it! Cliff Hunter never started those fires, and you’ll find out soon he’s innocent!”

“How?” demanded David.

“There will be another fire, just the same. We haven’t got the guilty person yet. I know it!”

Mrs. Gay shuddered. “Oh, I hope not!” she exclaimed. “But I believe we’ll go home tomorrow.”

“We’re planning to stay on here at the Royal while we see about repairing the damage,” said Mrs. Smith. “But if it isn’t safe——”

“I guess the hotel’s safe enough,” put in her husband. “It’s practically fireproof.”

David turned nonchalantly to Mary Louise. “Will you dance with me after supper, Mary Lou?” he asked. “It’s my last night here. I’m going to Albany tomorrow.”

“I don’t believe I care to dance,” replied the girl icily—to Jane’s infinite delight. “Jane and I are going to stay with Mother this evening.”

The party moved on, and Jane reached for her chum’s hand under the table.

“That’s telling him!” she murmured in deep satisfaction.

CHAPTER X

The Visit with Rebecca

The following morning Mrs. Gay relented from her decision to pack up the family's things and go home immediately. It was such a perfect day; the river sparkled beautifully in the sunlight, the birds sang sweetly in the trees beside the cottage, and her children seemed happy. Yes, it would be absurd to run away from all this beauty.

Mary Louise was overjoyed at her mother's decision. Immediately she began to make important plans for the day. She would go over to Adams' farm and find out where Rebecca was. If necessary, she could have the boys trail her during the day, in case the crazy woman might be planning another fire for tonight. Then she would call on the Ditmars and make it a point to talk to the man himself. Maybe she'd run over to Eberhardt's store at Four Corners, later in the afternoon, just to check up on his business. Oh, it promised to be an interesting day for Mary Louise!

"Where will the 'Wild Guys of the Road' be today?" she asked her brother at breakfast.

"Over at our cabin, I guess," replied Freckles. "Why?"

"I may want to call on you for some sleuthing," explained Mary Louise. "I am a little suspicious about Rebecca Adams—that queer-looking woman you boys saw the night Flicks' Inn burned down. Remember her?"

"Sure I do! Nobody'd forget a scarecrow like that!"

"Well, you stay around here, where I can get hold of you, while I drive over to Adams' farm right after breakfast. If I can locate her, I'd like you boys to keep your eyes on her all day."

Freckles' face lighted up with excitement.

"You can count on us, Sis!" he assured her.

"Thanks a lot. Now, you help Mother with the dishes, and I'll run along. Want to come with me, Jane?"

"Yes, I do," replied her chum. "I'm really interested in the mystery of the fires. I admit now that they couldn't all be accidents."

"And you'd kind of like to prove Cliff Hunter is innocent, wouldn't you, Jane?" teased Freckles.

"Naturally! Who wouldn't?" was the retort.

Mary Louise backed the car out of the garage and followed the same road she and David McCall had taken on their first visit to Adams' farm. She drove very cautiously now, almost as if she expected Rebecca Adams to dart out again from the bushes into the path of her car.

But nothing happened, and the girls reached the top of the hill in safety. An old man was sitting out on the porch with one leg propped up on a chair. A young man was standing on the steps talking to him. He was a big fellow in overalls; Mary Louise remembered seeing him at Flicks' the day after the fire. He must be Hattie's brother Tom.

The girls left the car at the fence and approached timidly, not quite sure how they would be received.

"Good-morning," began Jane briskly, to hide her nervousness. "Is Hattie home today?"

The old man looked questioningly at his son.

"Have you seen her since breakfast, Tom?" he inquired.

"Yeah," replied the young man. "She's still in the kitchen, or else upstairs with Rebecca.... Well, I'll be movin' on, Dad. I'll be away all afternoon—the hired man'll have to look after things."

“Where you goin’?”

“Four Corners.”

“What for?”

Tom shrugged his shoulders: he wasn’t going to tell his business in front of strangers, Mary Louise decided. Then he shuffled off.

“See that you get back in time for the milkin’,” was his father’s command. “And stop around at the back now and call to Hattie. Tell her she’s got visitors.”

Mary Louise and Jane sat down on the step and waited.

“Too bad about that fire night before last,” remarked the old man. “Lucky thing they saved the little girl.”

“It was Mary Louise who did that,” announced Jane proudly, nodding towards her chum.

“Hm! You don’t say!” returned Mr. Adams. “Well, I reckon girls are braver’n boys nowadays. My Hattie’s a good girl, too. Can’t say anything ag’in’ her.”

“Oh yes, everybody likes Hattie,” agreed Mary Louise instantly. She wished that she could ask Mr. Adams about his other daughter—Rebecca—but she didn’t know just how to begin.

Jane, however, came bluntly to the point, as usual.

“Mr. Adams,” she said, “may I ask a question? You wouldn’t mind—if it was something about your family?”

The old man grinned.

“I know what it is, miss. It’s about my daughter Rebecca, ain’t it? Yes, go ahead. I ain’t sensitive about her—we ought to be used to her by now!”

“That’s right,” agreed Jane. “Do you think she could be starting the fires? Do you know, she warned Mary Louise day before yesterday there would be another fire? And of course there was. And then she came to our tent that night and

wakened us up to tell us that Smiths' house was on fire.”

Mr. Adams nodded.

“I can believe it. But I don't think Rebecca would ever set anything on fire. She's afraid of 'em. She won't even light the stove or do any cookin' for that very reason. Many's the time she's come in with her pitcher of water and poured it right on the coals in the stove. It's aggravatin' if you're ready to get dinner. Hattie and me have both slapped her for doin' it, but she keeps right on.... No, I don't see how we could lay the blame on poor old Rebecca.”

“I'm glad to hear you say that,” said Mary Louise. “She seems like such a happy, harmless creature that it would be a shame to shut her up somewhere or accuse her of a crime.”

“Didn't you say she is home now?” inquired Jane.

“She's upstairs in bed with a sore throat,” replied Mr. Adams. “That's why Hattie's stayin' around—and because my rheumatism is bad ag'in. Otherwise I reckon she'd be over to the Royal trying to get work. She was sorry to lose her job at Flicks'.”

“Yes, she told us.”

The girl herself appeared in the doorway.

“Oh, hello, girls!” she exclaimed. “Glad to see you. Come on into the kitchen. I'm fixin' some broth for Rebecca. She's upstairs sick.”

The two girls entered the old farmhouse and followed Hattie through the hall, back into the old-fashioned kitchen. It was a large room, with several chairs near the windows, and Mary Louise and Jane sat down.

“I am going to be frank with you, Hattie,” began Mary Louise, “and tell you why we've come. You've heard, I suppose, that they arrested Cliff Hunter on the charge of burning three houses, and Jane and I believe he's innocent. So we want to find out who really is responsible. We thought there might just be a chance that it was Rebecca.”

“I don't blame you for thinking that,” agreed the girl. “But I'm sure she couldn't

be guilty of that particular thing. She's crazy enough to do it—only she's scared of fires.”

“Yes, so your father said. But she must know something, or how could she predict when they are going to occur?”

“She's always predicting them,” laughed Hattie. “Even when there aren't any. And sometimes when it's just a fire to toast marshmallows she gets all excited and swears it's the wrath of heaven descending on Shady Nook.”

“She came and warned us about the Smiths',” put in Jane.

“She probably saw the flames. Sometimes she gets up in the middle of the night and goes out with her pitcher. She was probably wandering around that night. I guess that's how she caught her sore throat.”

Mary Louise nodded. “Could we go upstairs and see her when you take up her broth?” she inquired.

“Sure. But I'm afraid you won't get much sense out of her today. She has a slight fever, and her mind's wandering a lot.”

Nevertheless, the girls followed Hattie up the carpeted staircase to a room on the second floor. The blinds at the windows were pulled down, but they could see Rebecca's face, surrounded by its tangled gray curls, on the pillow. She was muttering to herself when they entered the door.

“Here's some chicken broth for you, Rebecca,” said Hattie cheerfully. “And a couple of visitors.”

The woman stared at the girls blankly, and then shook her head.

“Don't know them,” she remarked.

“Of course you do!” insisted Hattie, pulling up the window shade. “These are the girls who saved the little child at the Smith fire the other night.”

Rebecca sat up and peered at them. Suddenly a smile broke over her face.

“Yes, oh, yes!” she exclaimed. “I do remember. Mr. and Mrs. Smith are wicked

people, traveling off and leaving their children alone, and the Lord sent a fire to punish them. But I put the fire out with my well water, and these girls saved the baby. Yes, yes, I remember.”

Hattie straightened her sister’s pillow and handed her the tray.

“Get me my well water,” commanded the woman, indicating the familiar pitcher which she always carried with her about the countryside.

“Can’t you tell us where you were when that fire started?” asked Mary Louise. “Didn’t you go to bed that night?”

The woman sipped her broth slowly.

“No, I didn’t,” she said finally. “I was sittin’ on the porch till Tom come home. About midnight, I guess you call it. And then it seemed as if I could see smoke over at Shady Nook. We’re high up here on the hill; we can look down on the wickedness of you people in the valley.”

Jane repressed a giggle. Without noticing it, Rebecca continued:

“So I picked up my pitcher and ran down the hill to Shady Nook to warn the people. I saw Smiths’ house burnin’ then, and I heard folks shoutin’. So I run along and tried all the doors at Shady Nook. All of ’em was locked. Then I looked in that tent and found you girls sleepin’ and give you the warnin’.”

Apparently exhausted with the effort of eating and talking, she dropped over on her pillow asleep. Hattie picked up the tray, and the girls followed her out of the room.

“I wish we could talk to your brother,” remarked Mary Louise as they reentered the kitchen. “If he was out late that night, maybe he saw the fire start. Maybe he knows something——”

“Maybe he wasn’t out at all,” laughed Hattie. “You can’t depend on what Rebecca says. For the most part she’s sensible, but sometimes she gets sadly muddled. Especially about fires. That’s the one subject in particular that she’s hipped about.”

“Well, I guess we better be going, Hattie,” concluded Mary Louise, “if we want

a swim this morning. Why don't you come over and go in with the crowd, now that you haven't any job? We'd like to have you."

"Thanks awfully," returned the girl, "but I've got to stay here. Tom's gone off in the Ford, and I have to look after things. Dad can't even cook his lunch, on account of his rheumatism."

"Where did your brother go?" inquired Mary Louise.

"Four Corners, I think. He likes to play cards over there. I'm afraid he gambles. Dad doesn't know about it."

No sooner were the girls out of the gate than Jane asked her chum why she had shown any interest in Tom Adams' whereabouts. "You don't suspect him, do you?" she questioned.

"I suspect everybody," returned the other girl laughingly. "No, I really don't," she corrected, "because Tom Adams lost a job by Flicks' burning down. That won't be so nice for him, especially if he likes to gamble and needs the money to pay his debts. But I just thought he might know something, if he really was out till after midnight the night before last. He might even be protecting somebody!"

"So I suppose we have to go to Four Corners this afternoon?" sighed Jane.

"Not till after we call on the Ditmars," replied Mary Louise. "And a swim and a lunch come before that!"

CHAPTER XI

Adelaide Ditmar's Plan

“There are four new young men at the Royal,” announced Jane as she set the table for lunch after their swim that morning.

“Who? How do you know?” demanded Mary Louise.

“Sue Reed told me. She says they used to come to Flicks’ every summer for two weeks’ vacation. So instead they are staying one week at the Royal Hotel. I don’t know their names.”

Her chum nodded.

“I know now. I can’t think of their names either, but they’ll probably come to me. They’re Harrisburg people.... But, Jane, how can you take an interest in men when your own boy-friend is in such trouble? Last night you seemed so sad!”

“You can’t be sad all the time,” replied the other girl. “It doesn’t help Cliff any. Besides, I wasn’t engaged to him, so I can get a kick out of meeting new men. Can’t you, Mary Lou?”

“I don’t believe I can at the present moment. I’ve too much else to think about. But what do you want me to do about them, Jane? Have a party and invite them over?”

“Oh no, nothing like that. Sue asked me to come to her cottage this afternoon to meet them. She said to tell you to come along, in case she didn’t see you to invite you herself.”

“You go by yourself.”

Mary Louise set a plate of chicken salad on the table. “It does look good, doesn’t

it?” she remarked—“if I do say it myself!”

“Yum! Yum!” agreed Jane. “But what makes you think you don’t want to go over to the Reeds’ with me?”

“Because—I have other plans for this afternoon.”

“The mystery of the fires!” cried Jane, rolling her eyes. “Oh, Mary Lou, forget it for a while and have some fun!”

“No, I can’t. I’ve got to have a talk with the Ditmars.”

“You better stay away from them!” warned Jane. “You never can tell what that man might do if he got desperate!”

Nevertheless, Mary Louise was firm in her resolution not to join the young people, and she was thankful that she had stayed home, for no sooner had Jane gone to the Reeds’ and her mother to the Partridges’ than Mrs. Ditmar herself came to the Gays’ bungalow!

“Oh, Mary Louise, I’m so glad to find you alone!” exclaimed the young woman. “Have you any engagement, or can I talk to you for a while?”

“I haven’t a thing to do but knit,” replied Mary Louise, smiling to herself. “Jane has gone over to the Reeds’ to dance, but I was sort of tired, so I thought I’d just take it easy. And I’ll be delighted to have you, Adelaide.” She addressed Mrs. Ditmar by her first name, for though she had a prefix of “Mrs.,” she was, after all, hardly more than a girl. And Mary Louise wanted to make her feel at home.

“Oh, thank you!” replied the visitor, sinking into a chair with a sigh of content.

“You see, I haven’t any friends up here at Shady Nook,” she explained. “Nothing’s turned out right. I thought Horace and I would have a lovely time with the young people—belong to the crowd and have lots of fun. But everybody avoids us. It’s all Horace’s fault, of course, for people were friendly at first. But when you repeatedly turn down invitations and are grouchy when you do go anywhere, naturally nobody invites you again.”

“It’s a wicked shame—for you, I mean!” exclaimed Mary Louise.

“And yet I can’t blame Horace entirely. It’s circumstances. Nothing turned out right,” she repeated.

“Tell me how you happened to come here, Adelaide,” urged Mary Louise. She wanted to hear the story from the girl’s own lips, to see whether it coincided with Cliff Hunter’s.

“Well, Horace is an architect, you know,” began Adelaide. “And he did some work for Mr. Hunter last fall, just before we were married and before Mr. Hunter died. Mr. Hunter was so pleased with it that he gave Horace a little piece of land up here as an extra bonus, to build a cottage for ourselves, and he got Mr. Robinson to let him design his too.

“We got married, and everything went finely until Mr. Hunter died. Then Horace didn’t have much work. But Mr. Hunter had indicated that it would be good business for us to live up here during the summer and meet wealthy people.”

“Some of us are far from wealthy!” put in Mary Louise.

“We didn’t know that. We judged everybody to be like the Hunters. Besides, Mr. Hunter said that he owned a lot more land around Shady Nook, and as he sold it off in lots, he’d see that Horace got the contracts to design the new cottages.

“We came up early in the spring, and Horace enjoyed designing our bungalow and the Robinsons’. We had enough money left to see us through the summer, but no prospects for the fall, unless something unexpected turned up.... Then Horace began to worry....

“Naturally, we thought Mrs. Hunter would be nice to us, but she was horrible. Just icy. I really think she believes Horace started that fire just to get the contract to build her a new cottage!”

Mary Louise flushed. It was amazing to have Adelaide Ditmar calmly state the suspicion which was being whispered behind her back. It almost proved her husband’s innocence, she thought. Evidently Adelaide did not notice Mary Louise’s embarrassment, for she continued her recital in the same tone of voice.

“I hate to tell you so much of my troubles, Mary Louise,” she said, “but there’s a reason for it. I have a plan, and I thought maybe you’d help me carry it out. You’re so popular that anything you took a hand in would be sure to be a

success.”

“Popular?” repeated Mary Louise in amazement. Even if she were, she wondered how popularity could help solve Adelaide Ditmar’s worries.

“I want to make some money to help Horace, and I think I see a way. Before I was married, I took a course in home economics, and I was assistant director of a Y.W.C.A. dining room. So you see I really do know something about food.”

Still Mary Louise did not see what on earth she was driving at.

“So I’d like to start a dining room here at Shady Nook, now that the inn has been destroyed. No boarders, like Flicks’, but just lunch and dinner service. I believe we could do it by using our living room and dining room and porch. That young Adams man—Tom, I believe his name is—could knock together some benches and tables for us, and we could gather up enough dishes, I think. Would you—go into it with me, Mary Louise?”

Mary Louise was startled by the suggestion. What an idea! Yet she could not help admiring Adelaide’s courage.

“You really are serious?” she asked. “It would mean an awful lot of work.”

“Oh, I know that! But I don’t have enough to do now.... Yes, I’ve thought it all out. We could hire Hattie Adams to wash dishes, and I could cook, and you and Jane could wait on the tables.... Would you, Mary Louise?”

“I don’t know,” replied the other hesitatingly. “Maybe—if Mother is willing.... Does your husband approve, Adelaide?”

“Oh, yes, he’s keen about it! He has promised to do anything he can to help me. Buy all our supplies for us, and keep accounts, and even take turn in washing dishes, if we need him.... Oh, Mary Louise, please!”

Adelaide seized her hand excitedly, and Mary Louise could not bear to refuse point-blank.

“Mr. Frazier won’t like it,” she said.

“Who cares about that old stiff?” returned the other girl. “He has no business to

charge such terrible prices. I'll bet the people of Shady Nook will be glad to get out of paying them!"

Still Mary Louise hesitated. Was this plan just another proof of the Ditmars' guilt in the burning of the cottages? No; that didn't seem possible. Whatever crime Horace Ditmar might commit, Mary Louise felt sure that his charming wife could have no part in it. And she longed dreadfully to help her out.

"I'll talk it over with Mother and Jane," she finally agreed, "and let you know tonight after supper. Will you be home then?"

"Yes, indeed! Horace and I will be waiting for you on the porch of our bungalow.... And now I must go, Mary Louise, and talk over the plans with him. I'm really thrilled about it—it'll give us a new interest in life. Oh, I do hope you'll decide to help me!"

And, pressing Mary Louise's hand affectionately, she darted off down the steps.

For a long time Mary Louise sat still, her knitting lying forgotten in her lap, while she thought over Adelaide's startling proposition. Maybe it was the best thing in the world that could have happened; perhaps fate was playing right into her hands. The opportunity to know and to watch Horace Ditmar would be perfect; if he really were guilty, she surely ought to be able to find it out upon such close association.

But, on the other hand, the work would take a great deal of time. Time from recreation, time from following up other clues that might transpire concerning other suspects. Her mother would probably disapprove, and no doubt Jane would object. Well, she wouldn't insist upon Jane's helping her; no doubt Mabel Reed would jump at the chance of making some extra money, for she expected to earn her own way through college.

She'd give it a try, she finally decided as she folded up her knitting and put it back into her bag. Now she must turn her attention to other matters. She wanted to drive over to Four Corners and ask the storekeeper some questions about Tom Adams. And possibly have a talk with the young man himself.

She wished she had kept Freckles with her, even though she didn't need him to trail Rebecca Adams. With Jane over at the Reeds', she would have to drive to Four Corners alone. But, after all, it wasn't much of a trip—only four or five

miles at the most.

She found a list of needed groceries on a pad in the kitchen which her mother kept for that very purpose, and took her own pocketbook.

Twenty minutes later she drew up at the entrance to the store. As Jane had remarked, Eberhardt's looked like anything but a grocery store. It was an old-fashioned country house with a wide front porch, and although Mary Louise had never noticed it before, there was a screened-in porch around at the side, partially hidden by a huge elm tree.

As she locked her car she heard voices from this porch: men's voices; and the remark which one of them made caused her to listen in astonishment.

"I'm sick of your card tricks, Tom Adams!" he sneered. "Think you'll make me fergit them hundred berries you owe me? Well, I ain't a-goin' a fergit it! You pay me by tonight, or I'll——"

"You'll what?" drawled Tom Adams in a voice which Mary Louise instantly recognized from having heard it that morning. "Beat me up?" His laugh was contemptuous. Evidently the other fellow was a little man, Mary Louise decided.

"I'll see that nobody ever plays another game with you, Tom Adams, that's what I'll do! A liar and a cheat——"

"Hold on there!" interrupted the other. "I'm a-goin' a pay you, Bill! Don't I always square up my debts?"

"You always win," returned his accuser. "This is my first streak of luck in a year!"

"I'm payin' you tomorrow, after I collect a little bill a guy owes me!"

"A little bill? Who around here could owe you a hundred smackers?"

"None of your business——"

A voice from the store interrupted this argument. "Boys, boys! Not so much noise!" called the storekeeper.

Mary Louise, realizing that she had been sitting in her car for several minutes, got out and went into the store.

“Quite a card party you have out there, Mr. Eberhardt,” she remarked.

The man’s face flushed.

“Yeah. Those boys are gettin’ too old fer that sort of thing. I let ’em play games there when they was nuthin’ but kids, but now they’re growed up, and it gives my store a bad look. Harmless, of course, but I reckon I better put a stop to it.”

“Not so harmless if they gamble to the extent of owing each other a hundred dollars,” remarked Mary Louise shrewdly.

“Oh, you must be mistaken about that, Miss Gay. That was only their little joke. Nobody round here has a hundred dollars to throw away.”

Mary Louise smiled and pretended not to have any further interest in the matter. Nor did she ask Mr. Eberhardt any questions about Tom Adams—for it wasn’t necessary. She had learned plenty about the young man for herself! So she merely handed the storekeeper her list, paid her bill, and departed.

“So Tom Adams does card tricks!” she muttered to herself as she started the car. “With Cliff Hunter’s cards, no doubt!” She smiled with satisfaction: she’d write that fact to Cliff tonight.... “But who,” she asked herself, “could be paying Tom Adams a hundred dollars—and for what? Surely not for the odd jobs he did for the people of Shady Nook, or for Frazier at the Royal Hotel!”

At last, she believed, she was on the right trail in solving the mystery of the fires!

CHAPTER XII

Getting Business

No one was at home when Mary Louise returned from her visit to the store at Four Corners. What a splendid chance it was to write to Clifford Hunter to tell him about Tom Adams' card tricks! With this piece of evidence, a clever lawyer ought to be able to clear Cliff of all suspicion.

"Tom Adams probably left that pack of cards at the Smiths' deliberately," she wrote. "I feel almost positive now that he is the person who is starting the fires. He had the *opportunity*; each time one occurred, he was nowhere to be found. I think he is doing it at somebody else's orders—for a sum of money. But I can't find out who is paying him, and I feel rather certain it isn't his father.

"I intend to watch Tom Adams like a hawk for the next twenty-four hours, and as soon as I can find out who is responsible, I'll wire the police. But in the meantime, Cliff, I think you ought to be freed, and I wish you and your lawyer would come back to Shady Nook."

She signed and sealed the letter and took it immediately to the box at the entrance to Shady Nook, where the rural postman collected mail each day. Then, feeling that a fine piece of work had been accomplished, she put away the groceries and started the evening meal.

But Mary Louise made no mention of her suspicions to the family that evening, nor did she say anything about her letter to Cliff. She'd tell Jane later, when they were alone, for there was no need of bringing up the subject of the fires again in front of her mother. If Cliff did return, it would be a pleasant surprise for Mrs. Gay—and the other inhabitants of Shady Nook. Mary Louise's only regret would be David McCall's absence: she would love to have the pleasure of saying, "I told you so!" to that cocksure youth.

There was plenty to talk about at the supper table that evening, without bringing up the mystery of the fires. Jane had to tell all about the new young men she had met and the fun they had had over at the Reeds'. She thought it was a crime for Mary Louise to have missed it all.

"But I had a caller," announced her chum. "In a different way, my afternoon was just as thrilling as yours!"

"You don't mean David McCall, do you?" snapped Jane.

"Oh no. He's gone home. No—not a man. A girl. Adelaide Ditmar."

"Adelaide Ditmar! What in the world did she want?"

"I'll tell you," replied Mary Louise. "And you must listen, too, Mother, for I want your advice." And she proceeded to outline the proposition which the young woman had made to her.

"I want to go into it," she concluded. "I think it means everything to Adelaide. Lots of people have been poorer than the Ditmars at one time or another, but I don't believe anybody has ever been much more desperate."

Jane frowned.

"I don't see why we have to give up our vacation and work hard just because a married couple can't get on!" she objected.

"You don't have to," replied Mary Louise. "But it happens I want to. And I think Mabel Reed will be keen to help—if you don't want the job, Jane. So, if you don't mind, I'll run right over there after supper."

"Of course I don't mind," laughed Jane. "Anybody that's ambitious has a right to work! But you better wait a while, Mary Lou. The Reeds may be over at the hotel, eating their dinner."

"No, they're not," put in Mrs. Gay. "Mrs. Reed told me herself that they couldn't afford to go over there oftener than once a week—with all that family."

"You don't mind my doing it, Mother?" inquired Mary Louise.

“No, dear—provided you don’t get too tired. But if you do, you can easily stop. Will you promise me that?”

“Of course I will, Mother,” agreed the girl as she started to gather up the dishes.

“Stop that!” protested Jane. “I may not be ambitious, but I’m not going to let you get the supper and wash the dishes both. Freckles and I are clearing up tonight. You run along, Mary Lou!”

“Suits me!” agreed her chum as she hurried off to the Reeds’ cottage.

Mabel Reed listened to the proposition with delight and immediately consented to help.

“Let’s go right around Shady Nook now,” she suggested, “and get the people to sign up for the meals. Then we’ll have something definite to take to Adelaide.”

“You are a business woman, Mabel!” exclaimed Mary Louise admiringly. “But we’d have to quote prices, wouldn’t we?”

“Make it the same as Flicks’ used to be—forty cents for lunch and sixty for dinner. The Royal charges a dollar for lunch and a dollar and a half for dinner. So everybody would save a dollar and a half a day by eating with us!”

“Frazier is going to hate us,” remarked Mary Louise.

“Of course he is. But who cares?”

“He’ll huff and he’ll puff——” muttered Mary Louise, half to herself. “Well, come on—let’s go. I’ve got a pencil and paper.”

“You always have a pencil and paper with you,” observed Mabel. “Is that because you expect to become a writer?”

“No, I don’t believe I’ll ever be a writer, Mabel. I’d rather *do* things than write about them.” She wished she might tell the other girl what she had accomplished earlier in the summer at Dark Cedars with the help of her notebook and pencil, but that would seem too much like bragging. Besides, the only way to succeed in life is to forget about the past and keep looking forward.

“Write down seven Reeds and four Gays,” said Mabel. “And two Ditmars. That makes thirteen already.”

“But four of those won’t eat till the others are served, so we’ll need only nine chairs so far.... Now, let’s see. Where shall we go first?”

“Let’s go right up the line of the cottages. Hunters’ is gone, of course, so we’ll try the Partridges. They have four in their family.”

“Mrs. Partridge is a great friend of mother’s,” observed Mary Louise. “I think they will sign up.”

The two girls walked a quarter of a mile up the private road that wound along beside the river, past the Hunters’ grounds, on to the pleasant five-room cottage that belonged to the Partridges. As there were no young people in this family, Mary Louise did not know them so well, but she felt sure that they would like the idea of having their meals on this side of the river.

Mr. and Mrs. Partridge, and the two sisters who spent the summer with them, were just coming across the river in Mr. Frazier’s launch when the girls reached the scene. The hotelkeeper himself was running the motorboat.

Mary Louise smiled at them and waited until the launch had puffed off before she explained her plan.

Mrs. Partridge was delighted.

“Of course we’ll come—for our dinners,” she agreed immediately. “My husband is going back to the city, except for week-ends, and we three women would just as soon have a bite of lunch at home. But I hate this bothering with a boat every night for dinner, although Mr. Frazier has been most kind.”

“Then we can count on you three?” asked Mary Louise in delight.

“Yes—and Mr. Partridge too on Saturdays and Sundays,” added the woman.

Mary Louise marked down the names, and the two girls continued on their way, pleased with their success.

“That’s three more paying guests,” she said, “totaling twelve!”

“It’s thrilling!” exclaimed Mabel.

It was even more thrilling to find the Robinsons just as enthusiastic about the plan, adding four more names to their list.

“That’s all!” sighed Mabel. “Unless we go over to the Royal and try to get the Smiths.”

“They wouldn’t come,” returned Mary Louise, “because they’d have nowhere to sleep. And besides, they don’t care about economy. They have piles of money.”

“True. But I’ll tell you whom we can get, Mary Lou: those four Harrisburg boys. They can put up tents in the woods and eat at Ditmars’. They’ll love it, and besides, it will make it possible for them to stay at Shady Nook a lot longer. Their money will go so much farther than it would at the Royal.”

“That is an idea, Mabel!” cried Mary Louise. “And maybe they’d be willing to eat at a second table, so we shouldn’t have to get extra chairs.”

“The very thing. Sixteen chairs isn’t so bad. I guess the Ditmars have four, and we each have a card-table set. I suppose the Robinson boys can knock together a bench and some chairs for a porch table.”

“Adelaide Ditmar suggested getting Tom Adams to do it.”

“Then we’d have to pay him! No, I think we better ask the Robinson boys or Horace Ditmar.”

The girls reached the bungalow and found the young couple waiting for them on the porch. Horace Ditmar was a good-looking man of perhaps twenty-five—not much older than David McCall, Mary Louise thought—and Adelaide was scarcely twenty. They were a handsome pair: it was too bad if they weren’t happy.

Adelaide’s eager blue eyes were gazing into Mary Louise’s as if she could not wait for her answer.

“Mabel and I have decided to help you, Adelaide,” announced Mary Louise immediately. “We just stopped at all the bungalows to find out how many people we can get to promise to come to the meals. We have sixteen for dinners and thirteen for lunches—besides all of us who will be working.”

“Sixteen!” repeated the young woman in delight. “Oh, Mary Lou, I knew everybody adored you! If I’d asked them myself they would all have refused.”

“Now, dear!” remonstrated her husband, with such an affectionate look at his wife that Mary Louise was surprised. Maybe Horace Ditmar was all right after all!

The girls sat down on the porch and plunged right into the discussion of all the

details of carrying out the plan. The young man was surprisingly helpful and resourceful. As Adelaide had said, he was keenly interested. He not only promised to provide the needed tables and chairs, but he drew plans for placing them and for arranging the kitchen to utilize every bit of its space. He knew how to make home-made ice cream, he said, and he would drive over for all the supplies twice a week. In fact, he took so much of the work upon his own shoulders that the girls felt as if there was little for them to do in advance. They were to open for business the day after tomorrow.

“And all we have to do is borrow some silverware and dishes,” remarked Mabel as the girls rose to go.

“And engage Hattie Adams to wash them,” added Adelaide. “But I wish you wouldn’t go home yet, girls. I was hoping we might play a little bridge.” Her tone was wistful. Mary Louise knew how eager she was to make friends.

“We’ll be over tomorrow,” replied Mabel, “but I think we ought to go now, because those Harrisburg boys are over at our bungalow, and I want to see whether I can’t get them to camp over here in the woods and take their meals with us. There are four of them.”

“Good girl!” approved Horace. “Go right after the business!”

So the girls said good-night and hurried off, full of excitement over their new adventure. All the young people who had gathered at the Reeds’ were enthusiastic too: they were tired of dressing up and going to the Royal Hotel, and enjoyed the informal intimacy of a small boarding house like Flicks’. The four young men from Harrisburg were only too glad to adopt Mabel’s suggestion, and planned to borrow the tents and start camping out the same day that the dining room was to open.

During the entire evening the mystery of the fires was not mentioned. Indeed, nobody thought of them until Jane and Mary Louise were alone again, getting ready for bed. Then the former referred to them casually.

“I guess you won’t have time for solving any more mysteries now, Mary Lou,” she remarked, “with this dining room on your hands.”

“On the contrary,” returned her companion, “that is just one reason why I wanted to go into the thing. I was anxious to get to know Horace Ditmar better. And I’m

practically convinced that he had nothing to do with the fires!”

“Then who?” inquired Jane. “Rebecca Adams?”

“No, not Rebecca. But I did get a new clue this afternoon, Jane. I learned something that made me suspicious about her brother Tom!”

“Tom Adams? Why, Mary Lou, I thought you dismissed him long ago. When we learned that the Adams family are losing jobs by these fires.”

“Yes, I know. But there’s something we don’t understand yet. Anyhow, Tom Adams does card tricks.”

“Card tricks?”

“Yes. He probably learned them from Cliff, and maybe swiped his cards to do them!”

Jane’s eyes opened wide with understanding. “That pack of cards at the Smith fire!” she cried.

Mary Louise nodded. “Exactly! That’s just what I’ve been thinking. So I wrote to Cliff this afternoon and told him about it.”

Jane threw her arms around her friend and hugged her.

“You are a wonder, Mary Lou!... But—but—can you prove anything?”

“Not yet. But I mean to watch Tom Adams and see whether I can’t learn some more.”

“If he really is guilty and finds out that you suspect him,” observed Jane, “he’ll take out his spite by setting fire to this bungalow. You better be careful, Mary Lou!”

“I expect to be,” was the reply. “I’m looking for trouble!”

But she hardly expected it in the form in which it came the following day.

CHAPTER XIII

The Threat

“Is there anything I can do to help you people?” inquired Jane of Mary Louise the following morning at the breakfast table. “Pare potatoes—or something?”

“No, thanks, Jane,” returned her chum. “We’re getting along fine. I would like to have you pull a load of dishes over to the Ditmars’ for me, Freckles,” she added, turning to her brother, “in your wagon.”

“O.K., Sis,” was the cheerful reply.

They left soon after breakfast, promising to be back again in time for lunch. It was a beautiful day, and Mary Louise was in high spirits, anxious to get everything arranged for the opening of the dining room the following morning. Naturally, she expected Adelaide Ditmar to feel the same way; she was therefore taken aback when the young woman came to the door with a distressed expression on her face and actual tears in her eyes!

“That husband of hers has done something,” Mary Louise thought resentfully. “Oh, why can’t he behave himself?”

“Come in, Mary Lou,” invited Adelaide, repressing a sob. “You too, Freckles, if you can keep a secret.”

“Of course I can!” replied the boy proudly.

They entered the charming little house, and their hostess closed the door behind them. Then she reached into the pocket of her apron and took out a coarse piece of paper which she handed to Mary Louise.

“Read that,” she said.

Mary Louise held the paper in front of her so that her brother could see it at the same time. The message was printed in pencil, and the words were misspelled, but there could be no mistaking its meaning:

“Clos up your place rite away, or expeck FIRE!”

Mary Louise read it twice before she handed it back to Adelaide Ditmar.

“How did this come?” she demanded.

“I found it under the back door,” replied the young woman in a hoarse whisper.

“But you didn’t see anybody?”

“No.”

“When did you find it?”

“Early this morning. About half-past seven.”

“Did you show it to your husband?” asked Freckles.

“Not yet,” replied Adelaide. “He’s been so nervous, you know, and this work has just been wonderful for him. Oh, I can’t bear to give it up! It means more than money to us—it means an occupation for Horace, saving him from melancholia, perhaps. Mary Lou, what can we do? Isn’t there some policeman we can get to watch our house?”

“Shady Nook never had one,” replied the other girl. “I certainly do wish my Dad were here!”

“Your father? What could he do?”

“He’s a detective,” explained Mary Louise.

“The best detective in the world!” added Freckles.

“Oh, where is he?” sobbed Adelaide. “Can’t we send for him?”

“I’m afraid not. He’s out West somewhere, on a case. No, I don’t see what we can do except watch. Never leave the house.” She turned to her brother. “You boys scan the woods for suspects, Freckles—and keep a hidden guard around the cottage.... I’m going to look for Tom Adams—something made me suspicious of him yesterday. Don’t let him into the place, Adelaide.... And you’ll have to tell Horace, because he will need to be on guard too—especially at night.”

“It’s the work of a maniac, I’m sure,” said Adelaide. “Nobody else would want to burn down all these cottages.”

“Of course, it may be,” agreed Mary Louise. “But I don’t believe it’s Rebecca Adams who’s doing it. She’s sick in bed.... Of course, she might be up and around by this time—but I don’t think so. Anyway, I’m going over there this afternoon to engage Hattie for the job here, and I’ll make it a point to find out about Rebecca then. In the meantime, let’s get on with our work.”

Adelaide dried her eyes, and Freckles rushed off to round up his gang. Mary Louise settled down to work; when Mabel Reed came over an hour later, and Horace Ditmar returned in the car with his purchase of supplies, they were both amazed at the progress which had been made. The little house had been transformed into a tea room!

With trembling hands Adelaide showed the threatening message to her husband. She chose a time when Mabel Reed was out of the room, for Mary Louise had urged secrecy. No use frightening people away from the dining room!

Horace Ditmar did not appear to be alarmed.

“I think it’s just a practical joke on the part of those Smith kids,” he said, “or maybe those Harrisburg boys. The best thing we can do is ignore it. I don’t think we need to worry.” And he smiled so confidently that Mary Louise wondered for a moment whether Horace Ditmar could have set those other cottages on fire himself and because of this fact feel perfectly safe about his own?

But, no, that wasn’t possible, she felt sure. She had a new clue now: someone was objecting to the serving of meals to Shady Nook people. The same person who had destroyed Flicks’ Inn by fire—the only person who could possibly resent the project. It was Frazier, she thought, Frazier who was guilty. The hotelkeeper could not bear to lose his business, and he was bribing Tom Adams to start the fires.... But how could Mary Louise possibly prove this fact?

However, she said nothing of her suspicions to the Ditmars or to Freckles, but she warned the boy not to mention the threat at home, for fear of alarming her mother. So the Gay family had a pleasant lunch that day, little thinking of the danger that was lurking so terribly near. They talked happily of the opening of the dining room on the morrow and of their plans for that afternoon.

“We’re all going to play tennis on the hotel court after lunch,” announced Jane. “The boys said they wanted to use it while they have the chance, because they’re going to put up their tents over here tomorrow morning. And Frazier will probably be so mad about losing them that he’ll refuse us all the use of the court.”

“We’ve got a court of our own,” observed Mary Louise.

“Yes, but it’s not so good as the Royal’s. Still, it will do,” agreed Jane. “I don’t suppose you’d have time to play with us this afternoon, would you, Mary Lou?”

“I don’t know,” replied her chum. “I have to hunt up Hattie Adams—or we’ll have to do all the dish-washing ourselves tomorrow at the dining room. I’ll paddle across the river with you—she may be working at the Royal Hotel. If she isn’t, I’ll have to come back and go see her at the farm.”

“You certainly do like to work on a hot day,” yawned Jane.

“After all, it’s not nearly such hot work as tennis—with those strenuous boys,” returned Mary Louise.

“Well, if you do go to Adams’ farm, be sure to get back in time for a swim,” urged Jane.

About an hour later the two girls put their tennis rackets into the canoe and paddled across the river. The tennis court was around behind the hotel, away from the shore. Here they found half a dozen young people, four of whom were playing doubles.

The two extra boys on the bench moved over and made room for Jane and Mary Louise.

“They’ll be through in a minute—the score’s five-two now,” announced one of the young men. “Then we four will have a set.”

“I don’t believe I had better play now,” replied Mary Louise, “because I have to go hunt up Hattie Adams.”

“Who’s she?”

“A girl we want to get to wash dishes at our dining room. She may be working here now. Or perhaps I can find her brother. Do you happen to know Tom Adams? A fellow who does odd jobs around the hotel sometimes?”

The boy nodded.

“Yes, I know the guy you mean. Big brute with light hair? I think he’s back in the garage now, fixing up Frazier’s truck.”

Mary Louise jumped to her feet: this was just the information she wanted. She would rather see Tom Adams than his sister, although she didn’t actually want to talk to him. Just to check up on his movements!

“Be back in a few minutes!” she called as she disappeared through the clump of bushes behind the tennis court.

In her sneakers she skipped along noiselessly, unconscious of the fact that an outsider might regard her actions as “snooping.” Yet when she stopped just outside of the garage door because she heard men’s voices inside, she realized then that she was really eavesdropping.

Immediately she identified the voices as belonging to Mr. Frazier and Tom Adams. The latter was evidently changing a tire on the truck.

“I tell you I’ve got to have that money tonight!” snarled Tom Adams. “I owe a guy a hundred bucks, and I need the rest myself.”

“I can’t pay it all now,” whined Frazier. “I just haven’t got it. I can let you have three hundred and the rest when the job is finished.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, the job ain’t a-goin’ a be finished till you cough up! All the dough.”

Frazier’s tone became more whining. “Business isn’t any too good——”

“What would it have been without me to help?” retorted the younger man. “Did I—or did I not put money in your pocket?”

“Oh, sure you did. And I’m willing to pay you for it.”

There was silence for a moment, while Mary Louise waited breathlessly. She could not see the men’s faces, but she had no difficulty in following their conversation. She heard the rattling of paper money and knew that Frazier must be paying Tom something.

“Want a receipt?” demanded Tom presently.

“Good Lord, no!” cried the other. “Nothing in writing, Tom. It might be used against us. Guess I can trust you.”

“We’ve got to trust each other,” sneered the younger man. “That’s why I say you have no right to hold out on me. I’m doin’ the dirty work.”

Mary Louise felt that she had heard enough. Everything was perfectly clear to her. The only thing required was to wire the Albany police. Forgetful of her own danger and her need for secrecy until her discovery could be announced, she ran across the front of the garage to the kitchen door of the hotel. But not lightly enough: both Frazier and Tom heard her and stepped out of the garage to see who she was.

“What do you want, Mary Louise?” demanded Frazier, wondering whether or not she could have overheard their conversation. “Lost a tennis ball?”

“No—no—I’m—looking for Hattie. Hattie Adams.” Her voice was trembling; she did her best to make it sound unconcerned.

“Hattie doesn’t work here,” replied Mr. Frazier. “Hasn’t for a long time. What gave you that idea?”

“I thought maybe she would, after she lost her job with Flicks’.”

“Well, she doesn’t. And I’d thank you to keep out of my kitchen and other places where you don’t belong, Miss Mary Louise Gay!” returned Frazier. Like all guilty people, he was angry at the innocent, and he glared at the girl with hate in his eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mr. Frazier,” replied Mary Louise. Turning to Tom she asked, “Is Hattie over at the farm?”

“Reckon so,” muttered the young man.

Mary Louise turned about and went back to the tennis court. Another set was in progress. Jane was playing now, and Mary Louise did not like to interrupt the game. So she merely picked up her tennis racket and told the young people on the bench that she was going home.

“I’ll have to take the canoe,” she said. “But I guess some of you people can see that Jane gets across the river in case I don’t return in time.”

“O.K.,” agreed the boys.

Mary Louise walked rapidly toward the river, trying to formulate a plan as she went. But it was very difficult. Since there were no police at Shady Nook, and the only telephone anywhere near was at the Royal Hotel, she didn’t know how to proceed. There could be no doubt that Frazier and Tom Adams were guilty of starting the fires at Shady Nook, but what were the first steps she should take in having them arrested? Whom should she inform first? Oh, if her father were only here to help her!

“They’ll burn the Ditmars’ down if I’m not quick,” she thought. “And they may do something to me, because I think both men suspect that I overheard that conversation. Oh, what shall I do?”

She paddled across the river and tied the canoe to the dock. Then she went inside the bungalow, debating whether or not to take her mother into her confidence.

But that question was answered for her. Mrs. Gay was not at home, so there was no opportunity to tell her.

Mary Louise sat down at the little desk in her bedroom and took out her notebook. While the conversation between the two men was fresh in her mind she’d write it down, to show to the police when they arrived. Word for word, just as Frazier and Tom Adams had spoken.

After she had finished that, she sat still for a while, thinking. At last she decided upon a plan.

“I’ll go to Adams first and make sure Hattie will be over tomorrow,” she thought. “Because I mustn’t let Adelaide down. Then I’ll drive on to the railroad station and wire the police in Albany. Maybe I’ll send Mrs. Hunter a telegram too, so that she can help me out on the other end.”

She glanced at her costume—a red-and-white sports dress, which she usually wore for tennis because of its short, full skirt. That would do, although it was a little conspicuous—easy for Tom Adams to identify in case he wanted to know what she was doing. She’d change her shoes, however, for she liked pumps better than sneakers.

Ready at last, she went through the back door of the bungalow to the garage. But here she met with a disappointment she had not expected. The car was not there!

Then she remembered. Her mother had promised to take Mrs. Partridge and her sisters to a country fair that afternoon and would be gone until six o’clock!

“So there’s nothing for me to do but walk,” she concluded. “Oh, if Cliff were only here so I could borrow his!” But if Cliff were here and his house had not been burned, there would be no necessity of sending that wire.

She started at once, cutting across a field and walking as fast as she could, in spite of the heat, for it was almost four o’clock now, and she and Jane had promised her mother that they would prepare the supper. But Jane was a good scout, Mary Louise thought; she’d go ahead just the same if she were alone, so that part needn’t worry her. The important thing was to get that telegram to Albany before anything disastrous happened.

Yet her fears were entirely for the Ditmars as she trudged up the long hill to the Adams farm. Never once was she afraid for her own sake—not until her own horrible fate descended upon her with the suddenness of a clap of thunder. Then, and then only did she realize what a risk she had taken by coming to this lonely place by herself. Away from her friends, her family—everybody—alone, with a cruel enemy and a crazy woman!

For Mary Louise Gay was forcibly prevented from going to the station that afternoon to send the wire to the police in Albany!

CHAPTER XIV

The Search

Jane Patterson finished her tennis match and came back across the river in a canoe belonging to one of the boys, just as Mary Louise had suggested. Although she had hoped that her chum would return in time for the afternoon swim, she was not surprised when Mary Louise failed to appear. Adams' farm was farther off than you thought—when you had to go the whole distance on foot. Jane remembered that Mrs. Gay had taken the car to the fair.

She managed to find Freckles in the water and asked him to come right back to the bungalow after the swim.

“Mary Lou has gone to Adams' farm to see Hattie,” she explained. “She had to walk, so she'll be all in when she gets back. Your mother will be tired too. So let's have supper ready, Freckles. You can set the table and crack the ice for the tea.”

“O.K., Jane,” agreed the boy. “I'll be with you as soon as I can dress.”

The two young people worked fast: at six o'clock, when Mrs. Gay drove back from the fair, they had the meal on the table.

“It certainly smells good, girls!” she exclaimed as she came through the kitchen door from the garage.

“Girls nothing!” retorted Freckles. “You mean ‘girl and boy,’ Mother. I did a lot of work for this meal.”

“That's fine, dear,” replied Mrs. Gay. “But where's Mary Lou?”

“She went over to Adams' farm to see Hattie,” answered Jane. “And she hasn't come back yet.”

“In all this heat? Oh, that’s too bad! She should have waited till I got home with the car. I didn’t know she was going.”

“She wasn’t sure of it herself. She was hoping to find Hattie over at the hotel. But evidently she didn’t, for she didn’t wait to play any tennis.”

“Well, I guess she’ll be along soon,” remarked Mrs. Gay cheerfully. “We’ll keep a plate hot for her. But let’s eat. We’re all hungry, and this food is too good to spoil by drying up.”

The meal passed off pleasantly; nobody thought of being worried by Mary Louise’s absence. But as the minutes went by and she did not come, Freckles was the first to become anxious. For he remembered the threat to the Ditmars on that coarse piece of paper that morning, and he knew that Mary Louise was involved in that same business.

When seven o’clock struck and still his sister had not put in an appearance, he suggested that his mother take the car and drive over to Adams’.

“It’s such a lonely road up to that farm,” he explained, “that if Mary Lou had sprained her ankle or hurt herself on the way, nobody might pass by for hours to give her help.”

Mrs. Gay was startled. It had not occurred to her that anything might have happened to her daughter. Mary Louise was always so self-reliant, and Shady Nook was such a safe place.

“You two people go,” said Jane. “I’ll stay here and wash the dishes. I want to squeeze some lemons, because some of the bunch are coming over here tonight—if that’s all right with you, Mrs. Gay.”

“Certainly it’s all right, dear. And Mary Lou will be delighted, too—I’m sure.”

Mrs. Gay backed the car out of the garage with Freckles in the seat beside her and drove slowly up the dirt road which led to Adams’ farm. The boy kept a sharp watch on both sides of the road, to make sure that his sister was not lying helpless along the way. Twice his mother stopped the car; and they both called Mary Louise’s name. But there was no response.

“She may just have stayed for supper with Hattie,” remarked Mrs. Gay. “And of

course, since neither of us has a telephone, she couldn't let us know. She'd think we wouldn't worry so long as she got home before dark."

"Oh, sure," muttered the boy. But he was anxious: his mother didn't know what had happened that morning.

They reached the Adams' gate at last and got out of the car. Old Mr. Adams was sitting alone on the porch with one leg propped up on a chair.

"Good-evening, Mr. Adams," began Mrs. Gay. "Is Mary Louise here? I'm her mother."

"No, she ain't," replied the old man, taking the pipe out of his mouth.

"Has she been here?"

"Not as I know of. Hattie and I have been to the fair all afternoon. If your daughter was here, she must have turned right around and gone home again. Nobody was home all afternoon except poor Rebecca. And she's sick abed."

A feeling of alarm crept over Mrs. Gay. What could have happened to Mary Louise?

"Was Tom home?" demanded Freckles, remembering his sister's warning.

"Don't reckon so. He was workin' over to the hotel today, after he helped our hired man this mornin'."

"Is he here now? Could we ask him?"

The old man shook his head.

"Tom packed up and left tonight, right after supper. Hattie drove him down to the Junction to catch the train. He's got a friend out West somewhere who owns a ranch. So Tom decided all of a sudden to go there. I tried to stop him, for we need him here, as I'm all crippled up with rheumatism half the time. But he wouldn't listen to me. Pig-headed, that's what I call it!"

Freckles' eyes opened wide with terror. It sounded as if Mary Louise had been right in assuming Tom's guilt in connection with the fires at Shady Nook.

Running away proved it! But what had he done to Mary Lou first?

“Could we talk to Rebecca?” inquired Mrs. Gay.

“Sure,” agreed Mr. Adams. “But it probably won’t do no good. She can’t remember things straight, you know.”

“She might remember seeing Mary Louise, if she had stopped in,” replied Mrs. Gay. “Anyhow, it’s worth trying.”

“Go right up,” said the old man. “Room at the back of the house. You won’t have no trouble finding it. Sorry I can’t go with you, but my leg’s pretty bad tonight.”

“Oh, that’s all right!” responded Mrs. Gay. “I’ll find the way by myself. You better stay here, Freckles.”

The boy looked disappointed; he would have liked to take another look at that queer creature and size her up for himself. Maybe she had done something to Mary Lou! But he sat down on the steps as his mother advised and waited patiently.

Mrs. Gay hurried on up to Rebecca’s room, and found the woman in bed, as she had expected, with her tangled gray hair spread over the pillows. She stared blankly at her visitor.

“I am Mary Louise’s mother, Rebecca,” announced Mrs. Gay. “You remember Mary Louise? The girl who saved the Smith baby in the fire?”

The woman nodded. “Yes, I know Mary Louise. She came to see me today. Got me a drink of water. It wasn’t well water, but it tasted good. She is a fine girl. I like Mary Louise.”

“What time was she here?”

“I don’t know. I can’t tell time. It’s all the same to me—except day and night. She was here in daytime.”

Mrs. Gay sighed.

“Where was she going after she left you?” she asked. “Did she happen to say?”

“No, she didn’t... I heard a car outside—I think it was my brother Tom’s. But I don’t know if Mary Louise had gone before that or not. I can’t remember.” Her voice trailed off as if she were half dreaming. “She said she’d look for well water for me, because I’m sick. She said she’d come again. Oh, Mary Louise is a good girl.”

Mrs. Gay walked to the doorway. There was nothing more to be learned from Rebecca. She wasn’t even sure that the woman knew what she was talking about.

If only she could talk to the brother! But it was too late now; the only thing to do was to wait for Hattie to return from the Junction and see whether she had any news.

“Rebecca says that Mary Louise was here this afternoon,” she told Mr. Adams and Freckles when she returned to the porch.

“I’m afraid that don’t mean nothin’,” remarked the old man. “Like as not, Rebecca’s confusing today with yesterday or even last week. She ain’t got no memory at all.”

“Do you think Hattie will be back soon?”

“I reckon so. Sounds like the Ford now, at the bottom of the hill. But she was away all afternoon, you recollect, at the fair.”

“I know,” agreed Mrs. Gay. “But Rebecca seems to remember a car arriving about the time Mary Louise left, and she thought it was your son’s. So maybe he saw Mary Louise and mentioned it to Hattie.”

Freckles’ heart stood still at these words. Tom Adams, with a car! What had he done to Mary Lou?

But he did not say anything; he waited for Hattie Adams to drive her car into the garage.

In another moment the girl appeared on the porch and nodded pleasantly to Mrs. Gay and Freckles.

“Where’s Mary Lou?” she inquired immediately.

“That’s just what we want to know!” cried Freckles. “She’s—lost! Did Tom say anything about seeing her?”

“No, he didn’t. He never mentioned her. Why?”

Mrs. Gay explained again what Rebecca had said, but Hattie was just as doubtful as her father had been about the veracity of any of Rebecca’s statements.

“I wouldn’t go by that,” she said. “But Mary Lou may be home by this time, waiting for you. Don’t worry till you find out.”

This sounded like good advice, so Mrs. Gay and Freckles got into their car and drove as quickly as possible back to Shady Nook. Jane, the Reed twins, Stuart Robinson, and the four new boys were all waiting anxiously on the Gays’ porch. But Mrs. Gay knew immediately from their expressions that Mary Louise had not returned.

“Get the boys together at once, Freckles,” commanded Stuart Robinson, “and we’ll search the woods thoroughly. Two of you fellows paddle across to the island, and two more go over to the hotel and hunt around there. Mary Lou may have sprained her ankle somewhere and be waiting for help.”

Mrs. Gay went inside the cottage, into her bedroom, and sat down, making a desperate effort to control her fears. But she couldn’t help thinking of all the dreadful stories she had read in the newspapers—stories of kidnaping and sudden death. Oh, if only her husband were here!

She picked up his last letter from the bureau. He was in Cleveland now and hoped to be with them soon. Soon! She must have him immediately. She remembered the promise she had given him when they said good-bye—to send for him if she needed him. Yes, she would wire tonight! She’d paddle across the river to the hotel and send a telegram over the phone.

Coming out of the door again she almost ran into Horace Ditmar, with Freckles beside him.

“We’re afraid this is serious, Mrs. Gay,” he said. “Freckles said Mary Louise suspected Tom Adams of starting the fires at Shady Nook and writing us a threat,

which we found under our door this morning. And now your boy tells me that Tom Adams has run away.... So we're afraid that he may have done something to Mary Louise."

"Oh no!" cried Mrs. Gay, aghast. "Oh, it just isn't possible!"

"But it is, Mother," said the boy. "And Mr. Ditmar thinks we should send for the police immediately. He'll go over to the hotel and send a wire now."

Mrs. Gay sank unsteadily into a chair. For an instant she thought she was going to faint. But she made a desperate effort to control herself; she realized that she needed all her powers in this terrible emergency.

"Yes, go, Mr. Ditmar," she said. "And telegraph to my husband at the same time." She scribbled a message on the envelope with Mr. Gay's address and handed it to the young man.

Mr. Ditmar left immediately, and Freckles brought his mother a glass of water. She drank it gratefully.

"Here comes Mrs. Reed," he announced cheerfully. "Have her stay with you while I join the boys, Mother," he said, bending down and kissing her. "For I can't leave you alone." In these last two hours the boy had suddenly seemed to grow up. His mother realized the fact, and, in spite of her trouble, she was grateful and proud.

"I'll be all right, dear," she replied. "And you go along. Mary Lou knows your whistle better than anything else, and if she is somewhere in the woods, you'll surely find her.... Go, dear!"

Freckles ran off, and a systematic search of all the country around Shady Nook began: with lanterns and flashlights and whistles, interspersed by frequent calls from the boys and girls. But as the darkness grew deeper and the silence of the woods more intense, an increasing sense of alarm took hold of all the searchers. Joking and laughter ceased; the only singing that broke out was forced, because someone thought it might help find Mary Louise. But it was all in vain.

Midnight came, and the various groups made their way back to Shady Nook, tired, hungry, and disheartened. Mrs. Gay and Mr. and Mrs. Reed and the three Partridge women were all still sitting on the Gays' porch, hopefully waiting for

news. But they knew from the slow, silent manner of the young people's return that they had not been successful.

"Make us some coffee, and we'll begin all over again," said Stuart Robinson. "Mary Lou must be somewhere!"

Mrs. Gay shook her head.

"No, I think you better all go to bed. The children must have their sleep. In the morning the police will come. Perhaps they will have some news for us."

"If only we hadn't let Tom Adams get away from us!" muttered Horace Ditmar. "We went back to Adams' and got the old man out of bed to try to learn Tom's address. But he said he didn't know it, and I'm inclined to believe he was speaking the truth."

Even in her half-frenzied state, Mrs. Gay looked at the young architect and thought what an admirable man he was. How anyone could have thought him guilty of any crime was more than she could understand. He was more help to her in the crisis than anyone else—except Freckles.

So, accepting Mrs. Gay's advice, the group dispersed to their own cottages, intending to continue the search the following morning.

CHAPTER XV

Captive

Mary Louise was not far away from Shady Nook in the matter of miles, but she felt as if she were worlds away. Everything was strangely different from anything she had ever known—grotesque and terrible. For the place she was taken to was an asylum for the insane!

Little did she think as she entered the Adams' farmhouse that afternoon that her freedom was to be snatched from her. That she was to be held in hopeless captivity, without any means of communication with the outside world. A prisoner in a house that was far worse than a jail, enduring a life that was living death!

When no one answered her knock at the Adams' door that afternoon, she opened the screen and walked in, calling first Hattie and then Rebecca by name. Finally the latter replied.

"I'm up here, sick abed!" called the woman. "Who be you?"

"It's Mary Louise," she answered. "May I come up and see you, Rebecca?"

"Yes, yes. Come! Have you found a well of clear water?"

Mary Louise laughed to herself as she ran up the stairs. She wished that she could find some well water for the poor deluded woman, but there was none in the vicinity. She wondered what Rebecca would do if she ever did discover a well.

She entered the bedroom, smiling and shaking her head at the poor eager creature.

"No, Rebecca—not yet. But I'll find you one some day. How are you feeling?"

“I’m better. I want to get out soon. Will you get me a drink of water, Mary Louise?”

“Certainly,” replied the girl. “From the kitchen?”

“Yes. From the kitchen.”

The woman sank back on her pillow, and Mary Louise went for the water. When she returned, Rebecca was half asleep.

“Here’s your water, Rebecca,” she said. “But where is Hattie?”

“I don’t know. Gone away, I guess. They’ve all gone away.... Soon I’ll go too....” Her voice trailed off as if she were half dreaming, and Mary Louise walked to the door. She heard the sound of a car in the driveway below, and hoping that it might be Hattie, she went down the stairs.

But the car standing in front of the house was not the dilapidated Ford that belonged to the Adams family. It was a big black limousine which reminded Mary Louise of a hearse or a funeral carriage, and she shuddered. It might have been an ambulance, but ambulances were usually white. She wondered what a car like that could be doing at the Adams farm.

Two men got down from the driver’s seat in front, and Tom Adams came and joined them at the porch steps. They talked in low tones to each other. Mary Louise opened the screen door and came out on the porch. Suddenly she heard her own name mentioned, and a cold chill of horror crept up her spine. What were they planning to do to her?

“She says she’s Mary Louise Gay,” remarked Tom. “Insists on it. And she does look like a girl by that name. But don’t believe her. She’s my sister Rebecca.” He raised his eyes and looked straight at Mary Louise. “Hello, Rebecca!” he said. “We’re going to take you for a ride!”

Mary Louise’s brown eyes flashed in anger.

“Rebecca’s upstairs, sick in bed,” she retorted. “Go and see for yourselves.”

Suddenly, with the agility of panthers, the two men sprang forward and grabbed Mary Louise’s wrists.

“Come along, Rebecca,” one of them said. “No use struggling. We’re taking you to a nice farm.”

With a desperate effort to free herself from the men’s grasp, Mary Louise kicked one of her captors in the leg. He let go of her hand, but the other man held her tightly.

“Wild little beast,” he remarked. “Now, sister, you take it easy. We ain’t going to hurt you. You’ll like it where you’re going—you’ll get better care than you do here. Your brother says there’s nobody here to look after you now that your mother’s gone.”

“He’s not my brother!” shouted Mary Louise. “And I can prove it! Just drive down to Shady Nook—a couple of miles—and ask anybody!”

But the men preferred to ignore this challenge; they picked Mary Louise up bodily and thrust her into the back of the limousine, shutting the door and turning the key in the lock!

She found herself sitting on a long seat that ran the length of the car. There were no windows on the side; only two tiny oval glasses in the back door permitted a little light to enter the enclosure. Before she could utter another sound she heard the engine start, and the vehicle went into motion. Over the rough, stony driveway, onto the dirt road that led away from the farm, in the opposite direction from Shady Nook.

Mary Louise’s first impulse was to scream as loudly as she could in the hope of attracting the notice of the occupants of some passing car or of some farmer working in his field. But second consideration told her that such a proceeding would do her no good at all. As soon as those men in the front seat explained that she was a crazy person being taken to an insane asylum, nobody would believe anything she said.

The realization of this fact brought a deathly hopelessness to her whole body. Her arms and legs felt inert, her head sank back against the cushion as if her very spirit were flowing away. Leaving her helpless—and finished with life.

For perhaps ten minutes she sat thus, unmindful of the country through which she was being driven. As if she had been stunned by a physical blow and no aid were near.

Then suddenly she thought of Tom Adams, and a fierce anger took possession of her, reviving her spirits, bringing her back to life. She would not give up! She would fight to the bitter end; she'd make him pay—and pay heavily—for his diabolical cruelty!

She moved along the seat to the far end of the car and peered through the tiny window. The road over which they were passing was narrow and rough; the country unfamiliar. It was not a main highway, Mary Louise instantly concluded, and she wondered in which direction it lay from Shady Nook. She wished now that she had watched it from the beginning. She did not even know whether they had crossed the river or not.

“Still, I suppose that doesn't really matter,” she thought. “Because, if I can manage to get away at all, I can easily find my family. They'll be hunting for me.” Tears of distress came to her eyes as she pictured her mother's anguish. And her father was so far away!

“Why did I ever try to be a detective?” she groaned. “The punishment is too horrible. Mother and Daddy would rather lose their cottage and have the whole settlement at Shady Nook burned than have me endure torture like this!”

On and on they went through the lonely, unpopulated country. Time seemed to stand still; it was as if the afternoon were to last forever. Yet when Mary Louise glanced at her wristwatch she saw that it was not yet five o'clock!

They crossed over a little stream, and the car turned at an angle and climbed a hill. Up, up they went, until they reached a narrow road at the summit. Looking down into the valley below Mary Louise could see a stream—not as wide as the river—winding its peaceful way in the summer sunshine. It was a beautiful spot—if you could enjoy beauty. But it meant nothing at all to the unhappy girl.

“That looks like a main road across the valley on the opposite side of the stream,” she thought. “If I can escape, I'll make for that. Thank goodness I know how to swim!”

She wished that she had thought to glance at her watch when the car started, so that she could roughly judge the distance from Shady Nook by the time it took to cover it. But she had been so miserable that she could not tell whether she had been riding twenty minutes or a couple of hours.

At last, however, the car came to a stop at a high iron gate which reminded Mary Louise of a penitentiary. So this was the way they guarded feeble-minded people!

One of the men got down from his seat, took a key from his pocket to unlock the gate, and swung the heavy iron doors open. When the car had gone through he locked them securely behind him.

A shiver of horror passed over Mary Louise as she heard that final click. A sense of hopelessness overpowered her to such an intense degree that she felt physically sick. A life of utter emptiness was closing her in, as if her mind and her soul had been extracted from her body. How much more fiendish her existence would be than that of any ordinary victim of kidnapers! But then, Tom Adams had not kidnaped her because he wanted a ransom, but only because he desired to get rid of her. Well, he had succeeded! Nobody in the whole world would think of looking for her in an insane asylum.

The car wound around a lovely driveway, shaded by trees, and stopped in front of a long, low plaster building that appeared to be at least a hundred years old. A man and a woman came out of the ivy-covered door as the driver unlocked the back of the limousine.

With her head held high in defiance, Mary Louise stepped out.

“How do you do, Rebecca,” greeted the woman, a plain-faced person of about fifty, in a gray dress.

“There has been a ghastly mistake!” announced Mary Louise, trying to keep her tone dignified. “Tom Adams is a criminal, and because I found him out he has sent me here, calling me his feeble-minded sister. I am not Rebecca Adams—but Mary Louise Gay!”

The man and the woman exchanged significant glances.

“Mr. Adams warned us that you would say that,” replied the man. “He said you do look like a girl named Mary Louise Gay. But try to forget it, Rebecca. We have your papers, signed by your own brother and your cousin, so there is nothing you can do about it but submit.”

“My cousin!” repeated Mary Louise, thinking of her aunt’s children, aged nine

and six. How could they commit anybody to an insane asylum?

“Yes. Stanfield Frazier.”

“Frazier!” she cried in scorn. “He’s not my cousin! He’s no relation. He’s a crook too, like Tom Adams.”

“Now, now, Rebecca, calm yourself,” advised the woman, taking Mary Louise’s arm. “And just come along with me. You don’t want to make trouble! Wouldn’t you rather walk by yourself than have these men carry you?”

Tears of anguish came to the girl’s eyes; she looked desperately about at the group of people who were surrounding her, searching for some spark of sympathy or understanding. But the men were all regarding her with an amused expression of tolerance, as if her action were just what they had expected.

“Isn’t there some way I can prove that I’m sane?” she demanded. “Some test I can take?”

“Oh, don’t get yourself all worked up, Rebecca,” answered the woman. “Your brother told us you were all right most of the time and that you probably wouldn’t give us any trouble. We’re not going to put you into chains. You’ll like it here.”

Mary Louise groaned. There was nothing she could do or say so long as they believed that wicked Tom Adams.

So she meekly followed the woman into the house. Its large hall and big reception room were plain and old-fashioned, with very little furniture in them, but she noticed that everything was scrupulously neat and clean. For that much she was thankful. Often, she had read, the places where kidnapers confined their victims were filthy and germ laden. She need have no fear of disease here—except disease of the mind!

A younger woman in the white uniform of a nurse came into the hall to meet them.

“This is Miss Stone, Rebecca,” announced the older woman. “She will help you and take care of you. Now go with Miss Stone to your room.”

“Didn’t you bring any bag, Rebecca?” asked the nurse, as she led Mary Louise up a flight of stairs to a long corridor.

Mary Louise smiled grimly.

“Kidnapers don’t usually allow their victims time to pack their suitcases,” she said. “And if you don’t mind, Miss Stone, will you call me by my right name? It’s Mary Louise Gay.”

The young woman nodded solemnly.

“Certainly, Mary Louise,” she replied.

Mary Louise looked at the nurse hopefully, wondering whether she was really finding a friend. Did the nurse believe her?

All the doors along the corridor were closed, but Mary Louise had no way of telling whether they were locked or not until, down near the end, she suddenly heard a loud pounding. Miss Stone stopped and, taking a key from her chain, unlocked the door. A mild-faced woman of about thirty-five came out.

“I just wanted to see who was coming,” she said. “Ah! A pretty girl.”

Miss Stone paused and introduced them courteously. The patient was dressed in the blue calico of the institution, but there was nothing queer or odd about her looks. She appeared to be much more normal than Rebecca Adams.

“This is Mary Louise Gay,” said Miss Stone. “She has come to live with us. And this, Mary Louise, is Joan of Arc. The girl who saved France, you remember?”

“Oh!” gasped Mary Louise, in amazement. Was Miss Stone joking, or did the patient really believe she was Joan of Arc?

The woman in calico smiled proudly.

“Yes,” she said. “I rode right at the head of my soldiers. I told them God was on our side. And we won! But they are going to burn me at the stake for being a witch if they ever find me. That’s why I stay here. I’m safe here. Aren’t I, Miss Stone?”

“Yes, dear, you’re safe,” was the nurse’s gentle assurance.

A lump came into Mary Louise’s throat. The pathos of it all! Yet how kind and sweet Miss Stone was. Oh, but—ghastly thought—the nurse was being kind to Mary Louise in the same way! That was why she humored her by calling her “Mary Louise.” And all the time she believed her to be Rebecca Adams!

Three doors farther down the nurse stopped and unlocked another door.

“This is to be your room, Mary Louise,” she said. “It’ll be nicer when you put some flowers in it. We have a lovely garden, and most of the patients have their own special flower beds. You can grow whatever you like best.”

Mary Louise looked about her. Never in her life had she seen such a plain room. It contained only a bed and a washstand and one chair. Not even a bureau or a table! The window was high and uncurtained. To her horror Mary Louise saw that it was protected by iron bars!

“You take off your clothing now and have a bath. You can put your own things in the drawer of that washstand, and I’ll bring you fresh clothing. Everybody wears blue here.”

“Where do I take my bath?” asked Mary Louise dully. Not that she cared in the least, except that it would be something to do.

“I’ll take you to the showers when I come back with your new clothing,” replied Miss Stone. And to Mary Louise’s dismay the nurse locked the door from the outside as she departed.

The next twelve hours seemed to Mary Louise the longest she had ever lived through. After her bath she was told to lie down until supper time. She was entirely alone in that bare room until six o’clock, with nothing to do but think. Finally an attendant brought her a tray of food, well cooked and wholesome but far from dainty. Nevertheless, Mary Louise ate it, for she knew that she must keep up her strength if she ever hoped to make an escape. Another attendant removed the tray, and she was left alone again until eight o’clock. Then Miss Stone returned.

“We have a little vesper service in the reception room, Mary Louise,” she said. “Would you like to come and join us?”

The girl jumped up eagerly. Anything would be better than this dreadful idleness.

“Don’t your patients have anything to do?” she inquired as she went down the hall with the nurse. “This doing nothing is enough to drive anybody crazy!” She smiled to herself at the use of the common expression and wondered whether Miss Stone noticed it.

But the nurse gave no sign of any amusement. “Oh, yes, Mary Louise,” she replied, “there will be lots for you to do tomorrow. Everybody takes some share in the work, if possible. Unless they are too ill. And we go for walks around the grounds and work in the garden. But we thought you’d be too tired tonight and would just want to rest.”

They joined a group of perhaps twenty people in the reception room for the singing of hymns, and the same woman who had met Mary Louise at the door of the building read the Bible. Mary Louise looked about curiously at her fellow inmates and did not find them particularly strange-looking. One or two of them had queer, staring eyes like Rebecca Adams, but for the most part they appeared normal. Which fact made it all the harder for Mary Louise to prove anything about herself to the caretakers!

At nine o’clock the service was over and everybody went to bed. But, exhausted as she was, Mary Louise could not go to sleep. She tried over and over to formulate some plan of escape, but with the locked doors, the constant supervision of nurses and attendants, and that high stone wall, it seemed absolutely hopeless.

It was only when the first gray light of dawn broke in the sky that she finally dozed off and then fell into a deep, heavy sleep.

CHAPTER XVI

Weary Waiting

Like her daughter, Mrs. Gay did not go to sleep until dawn of the following morning. Her mental torture was even keener than Mary Louise's, for her imagination suggested all sorts of horrible fates, worse than the one the girl was actually enduring. Physical violence, association with hardened criminals, hunger, thirst—and—death. That was the most terrifying thought of all—the fear that Mary Louise might already be dead!

Like her daughter's, too, Mrs. Gay's suffering was all the more intense because she had to bear it alone through the long, silent night. Freckles and Jane, tired out from their vigorous search, had fallen instantly asleep. There was nobody to sympathize with the poor frenzied mother. She swallowed dose after dose of aspirin, until finally, with the first gray streaks of dawn, she at last fell asleep.

Freckles was the first person awake in the household the next morning, and he immediately started the breakfast. Jane, arriving on the scene fifteen minutes later, was surprised and delighted at the boy's progress.

"We better not waken Mother," he said. "I don't suppose she got much sleep last night."

"I'm afraid not." Tears came to Jane's eyes as they rested on the forlorn little dog sitting so disconsolately in the corner of the kitchen. "Freckles, what do you think could have happened to Mary Lou?" she asked.

"I think Tom Adams did something to her. Kidnaped her, probably. But I had one idea this morning, Jane, while I was making the coffee. Maybe he hid her in his own house somewhere! We never thought to search that."

"Bright boy!" exclaimed Jane, so loudly as to awaken Mrs. Gay, who heard her

from her bedroom. For one ecstatic moment the woman hoped that her daughter had been found. But Freckles' next remark dispelled any such idea.

"It's worth looking into," he continued. "But I don't really think she's there, or Hattie would come and tell us. I can't believe Hattie is an enemy—or on Tom's side. She's too fond of Mary Lou."

Mrs. Gay, attired in a kimono and looking white and exhausted, peered in at the kitchen door.

"That coffee smells so good," she said, "that I just can't wait for a cup of it."

Freckles grinned in delight and poured out the steaming liquid. It seemed to revive his mother, and she drank it eagerly. But she could not eat any breakfast.

"We're going up to Adams' first," announced the boy. "I'll get Stu Robinson to drive us in his car—and we'll take Silky along. If Mary Lou should be hidden there, Silky'd find her.... And, Mother—if the police come, be sure to have them talk to Horace Ditmar and get a look at that threat he found shoved under his door yesterday!"

"I will, dear," returned Mrs. Gay, smiling to herself at the idea of taking orders from her small son. But the boy was proving himself both practical and businesslike in the management of the whole affair.

"I wonder whether Adelaide Ditmar will open her dining room today as she planned," remarked Jane.

A lump came into Mrs. Gay's throat, but she managed to reply calmly:

"I think so. She has all her food bought, and besides, the people are expecting it. Mrs. Reed told me last night that Sue and Mabel are both going to help her—if—if—Mary Lou doesn't come back in time. You had better tell Hattie Adams to come down to the Ditmars' as soon as she can, though I don't believe Adelaide is planning to serve lunch."

Jane nodded, and finished her breakfast. After she and Freckles and the little dog had gone, the people from the other bungalows began to arrive at the Gays', to start upon a new search for the missing girl. Horace Ditmar sent them off in various directions while he and several of the older women stayed behind to help

and to advise Mrs. Gay.

At nine-thirty a small red car drove into Shady Nook and stopped at the Gays' bungalow. Three plainclothes men got out, displaying their badges for identification.

"We want the whole story," they said. "So far we know nothing—except that Mary Louise Gay, of Riverside and Shady Nook, is missing."

"We don't know much more ourselves," sighed Mrs. Gay. Then she proceeded to tell the story of the girl's disappearance the preceding afternoon.

"As far as we know, the last person who saw her alive is Rebecca Adams, a feeble-minded woman who lives over at a farm where we know that Mary Louise started to go. Nobody saw her after that."

"Have you any suspicions at all?" inquired the detective.

Horace Ditmar answered that question by telling about the three fires at Shady Nook and by showing the paper which had warned him of the possibility of a fourth.

"Mary Louise suspected Tom Adams—the brother of this feeble-minded woman—though we don't know yet upon what clues she based her suspicions," he concluded. "But it looks as if Adams was guilty, for he ran away. He didn't take Mary Louise with him—we know that, because his sister drove him to the Junction—but we're afraid he did something to her first."

"So our first duty is to find this Tom Adams," announced the detective, rising. "Can you take us over to the farm now, Ditmar? Or rather, just one of us, for the other two better stay here and investigate that threat. And we want a picture of Miss Mary Louise Gay. We'll get one of Adams and print them both in every newspaper in the country."

"But that's not the only clue we'll work on," put in another of the men. "That may be entirely wrong, and Miss Gay may just have met with an accident, or even lost her memory. There are many cases of that, you know."

Mrs. Gay nodded. That was just the trouble: so many dreadful things might have happened to Mary Louise!

However, she resolved to keep up her spirits until she actually heard bad news. She could endure the tension in the daytime, she thought, by keeping herself active; perhaps, before night, her husband would come.

So she hunted out some pictures of Mary Louise for the detectives and answered their questions for an hour. Just as the two men left to go to Ditmars, to investigate the threat and guard Adelaide, the roar of an airplane in the sky drew Mrs. Gay's attention. It was an auto-giro, fluttering over a near-by field where there did not happen to be any trees.

Breathlessly she waited while it made its landing. But the motor did not stop, and only one man got out of the cockpit. Then, as the auto-giro speeded away, the man on the field began to run towards Shady Nook. In another moment she identified him as her husband—Detective Gay, of the police force!

He took the porch steps two at a time and, out of breath as he was, lifted his trembling wife into his arms. For the first time since the disaster Mrs. Gay broke down and sobbed. But what a relief it was to give way to her feelings at last! Her husband shared her anguish and understood, comforting her as best he could with words of assurance.

“We'll find her, dear, I'm sure we will!” he said. “Mary Lou isn't a baby: she'll show lots of pluck and courage. I'm counting on that daughter of ours every time!”

“Have you any plans at all, dear?” she inquired.

“Yes. Lots. I'm going to do a lot of telegraphing as soon as I get the whole story. I was never so thankful before that I'd chosen the detective profession.”

“Have you had anything to eat?”

Mr. Gay smiled. “Now that you mention it, I don't believe I have. You might fix me some coffee while you tell me just what happened.”

Freckles and Jane returned while Mr. Gay was eating his meal, but they had nothing to report. Hattie was sure that Tom could not be guilty; she believed that he was running away from his gambling debts. Nevertheless, she had consented immediately to a thorough search of the house and barn for the missing girl. Yet even Silky's sharp nose could not find her.

The boy was delighted to find his father at home; he felt immediately that a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. For, like Mary Louise, he believed that his father could almost accomplish the impossible.

“We’re going over to the other shore after lunch—with Silky,” he said, “and hunt some more.”

“That’s right, Son,” approved Mr. Gay. “We’ll never give up till we find Mary Lou!”

None of the other searchers returned with any news all that afternoon. The day was hot and sultry, and to Mrs. Gay, interminable. Everything was so strangely quiet at the little resort; no radios played, no young people shouted to each other or burst into singing. Even the birds seemed hushed, as if they too sensed the tragedy of the usually happy little colony.

Late in the afternoon the four girls who were working at the Ditmars’ went into the river to cool off with a swim, and Mr. Gay decided to join them. But it was more like a bath than a swim, and nobody seemed to enjoy it.

Mr. Gay dressed and joined his wife on the porch, waiting for the detectives to return. Suddenly a noisy car came towards them—a bright green roadster which was somehow familiar yet did not belong at Shady Nook. It was dusty and dirty; its two occupants wore goggles, as if they had been participating in a race, and until they spoke neither of the Gays recognized them. Then they identified them instantly as Max Miller and Norman Wilder, from Riverside.

“Any news yet?” demanded Max eagerly as he jumped out of the car.

“No, not a bit,” replied Mr. Gay. “How did you boys find out about it? Is it in the papers?”

“It’s in the afternoon edition,” replied Norman, handing a newspaper to the other. “But of course we started before that. There was a wire to the Riverside police last night, that we got wind of. So we started early this morning.”

“I think it’s fine of you both to come,” said Mrs. Gay, though she could not at the moment see what possible help they might afford.

“We’re going to have a swim, clean up our car, and eat,” announced Max; “then we’re going to drive all around here within a radius of a hundred miles, tooting our horn and going slowly.”

“I didn’t know you boys knew how to drive slowly,” remarked Mr. Gay teasingly.

“Well, we really won’t need to toot our horn,” returned Norman in the same light manner, “because the color of our car is loud enough to shriek for us!”

Mabel and Sue Reed, passing by the bungalow on their way back to the Ditmars’, stopped in and met the boys. Mrs. Gay asked them to put two extra places at the dinner table for them.

Gradually the searchers returned—without any success—and everybody went to Ditmars to dinner. It was a lovely meal. Adelaide Ditmar proved that she knew how to prepare food and serve it attractively, and, in spite of their anxiety, everybody enjoyed it. Everybody except Mrs. Gay, who could only pick at her food.

True to their resolve, Max and Norman drove off in their car immediately after supper, with Freckles and Jane along with them. The rest of the inhabitants of Shady Nook settled down to a quiet evening of waiting. Waiting and hoping for news.

About eight o’clock Mr. and Mrs. Frazier came over from the hotel to offer their sympathy to the Gays.

“I don’t want to alarm you, Gay,” said Frazier, “but I think you haven’t given enough thought to the river. Mary Louise was playing tennis on our court early in the afternoon, and the most natural thing in the world would be for her to take a swim afterwards. You know yourself that even the best of swimmers have cramps.”

Mrs. Gay clutched her husband’s arm tightly in an effort to control herself. What a horrible suggestion!

“Terrible as it is, drowning is better than lots of things that might happen,” remarked Mrs. Frazier.

Mrs. Gay glared at the woman with hatred in her eyes. How could she sit there and talk like that? She rose abruptly.

“You’ll have to excuse us now, Mrs. Frazier,” she said unsteadily. “My husband and I have things to do.”

The hotelkeeper and his wife got up from their chairs just as the detectives’ car stopped at the bungalow. Everybody waited tensely.

“No news of your daughter, Mrs. Gay,” announced one of the detectives, immediately. “But we are on Adams’ trail. He’s been spotted, speeding across the country in a stolen car. This afternoon they found the car, abandoned near a woods. Undoubtedly he’s guilty.”

Frazier’s white face became even more pasty-looking. Nobody noticed it, except Mr. Gay, who made it his business to watch people’s reactions.

“If I may say something,” put in the hotelkeeper, looking straight at the detective, “I think you’re on the wrong track. Adams is guilty of a small theft—he stole two hundred dollars from me, and he left some gambling debts. That’s why he’s running away. But I believe your real criminal is right here at Shady Nook!”

“Who?” demanded all the detectives at once.

“Ditmar. Horace Ditmar. These fires have proved to be a good thing for him. Ditmars took over all that boarding-house trade after Flicks’ Inn burned down. Mary Louise was on the inside, so they were probably afraid she’d find out too

much—and—disposed of her.”

“I don’t believe a word of it!” cried Mrs. Gay angrily. “I’d trust both Adelaide and Horace anywhere. And how about that threat they got? You saw that?” she asked the detectives.

“That was just a clever trick,” explained Frazier lightly, “to throw off suspicion. You notice it has not been carried out!”

Almost in hysterics, Mrs. Gay felt that she could not bear those dreadful Fraziers another minute. Desperately she clung to her husband’s arm for support.

“Will you men come inside?” suggested Mr. Gay, realizing how his wife was suffering. “Good-night, Mrs. Frazier. Good-night, Frazier.”

And so another long night passed without any news of Mary Louise. But it was not so terrible for Mrs. Gay as the first one, because her husband was with her. And Max Miller and Norman Wilder comforted her with the assurance that they were going to find Mary Louise the following day.

Somehow, by intuition, perhaps, Mrs. Gay believed them!

CHAPTER XVII

Release

While her parents and her friends at Shady Nook were imagining all sorts of horrors for Mary Louise, the day actually passed peacefully for her. It was a terrible shock to waken up in that bare little bedroom with the iron bars at the window, but after the first realization of it was over, she found comfort in work. For, unlike the previous night, she was not allowed to be idle.

Miss Stone came in at seven o'clock with a tray of breakfast in her hands.

"And how do you feel today, dear?" she inquired cheerfully.

Mary Louise opened sleepy eyes and looked about her, trying to remember where she was. For one ghastly moment she felt as if she would scream as the horror of the whole thing came back to her. But, realizing that such an act would only help to confirm her nurse's belief in her insanity, she managed to control herself. The sun was shining, Miss Stone was kind—surely Mary Louise would find a way out. So she smiled back at the woman.

"I'm fine, Miss Stone," she said. "Am I supposed to get dressed?"

"Eat your breakfast first," was the reply. "After today you'll probably eat with the other patients. But the doctor is coming in to make an examination this morning."

Mary Louise nodded. "And then what do I do?"

"You tidy up your own room and then take some part in the household duties. You may have your choice of cleaning, cooking, washing dishes, or sewing. Then you'll eat lunch in the dining room and spend an hour outdoors in the garden. After that there is a rest period, when you may read or sew, if you like. We have a small library, and there is a class in knitting too, if you prefer. Then

supper—and vespers.”

“It sounds fine—so much better than doing nothing,” replied Mary Louise. “I think for my particular work I’ll choose cooking. I’m pretty good at cakes and pies.”

“That’s nice, dear,” concluded Miss Stone, turning towards the door. “Be ready to see the doctor in about an hour.”

“May I have a shower?”

“Yes. I’ll come back in fifteen minutes to take you.”

“But I’m not a baby!” protested Mary Louise. “I’m quite used to giving myself baths.”

“I know, dear, but it’s a rule. Sometimes patients drown themselves if we don’t watch them. Maybe—later on——”

She did not finish the sentence, but left the room, locking the door behind her. It was very like a nightmare, Mary Louise thought, as she picked up her tray—a dream in which you found yourself locked up somewhere without any means of escape. But she meant to get away just the same, if she had to climb that ten-foot wall to accomplish it!

She decided immediately that she would be an exemplary patient, that she would work hard and do everything she was told to do. Gradually, perhaps, her liberty would be increased as the attendants learned that she could be trusted.

In spite of her blue calico uniform, Mary Louise looked exceedingly pretty that morning when the doctor came in to see her. Her cheeks were glowing with perfect health, and her dark eyes were smiling. The room, as well as her person, was meticulously neat.

She identified the doctor immediately as the man who had received her the day before at the door of the institution.

“Good-morning, Miss Adams,” he said, regarding her with admiration. “You’re looking well today.”

“I’m fine,” replied Mary Louise. “Only my name doesn’t happen to be Miss Adams,” she couldn’t help adding.

The physician smiled, and she detected a shade of pity in his expression. Something like that in Miss Stone’s face when she had humored that patient by calling her “Joan of Arc.”

But he made no reply and went ahead with the examination. When Miss Stone returned he told her that Miss Adams was in perfect physical condition.

“It’s only the brain,” thought Mary Louise in secret amusement. How often she and her young friends had made that remark to each other! She resolved never to speak jokingly of insanity again.

After the doctor’s visit her day proceeded in the orderly manner which Miss Stone had outlined. She cooked and washed dishes and ate lunch with the patients. Then she went out in the garden, where she was assigned a flower bed of her own.

But Mary Louise was not interested in flower beds at the moment. She pretended to work, all the while looking about her at the grounds around the asylum, at the high stone wall below and into the valley beyond. Across this valley, on a level with the institution, she could see a white road that ran like a ribbon along the hill in the distance. This road, she decided, must be a main highway, or at least a drive frequented by automobiles—otherwise it would not be so smooth and white....

Staring at this road in silence, an inspiration came to Mary Louise. An idea that might bring about her longed-for release!

She waited eagerly for the nurse to come over to where she was working, but she was careful to keep her tone matter-of-fact when she did make her request. Miss Stone must not guess her hidden purpose!

“May I break off two sticks from some bush?” she asked indifferently. “I’d like to practice my semaphore.”

“What’s that, dear?” inquired Miss Stone skeptically. “Is it anything dangerous?”

Mary Louise smiled.

“Oh, no. It’s just part of a Girl Scout’s training. You’ve heard of Girl Scouts, haven’t you?”

“Yes, I believe I have. Anyway, I’ve heard of Boy Scouts, so I suppose the Girl Scouts is an organization like theirs—for girls.”

“That’s right,” agreed Mary Louise. “And I have always been very much interested in it. I don’t want to forget all that I have learned. So if I had a couple of sticks and a needle and thread, I could make a pair of flags and—and—practice every day.”

She uttered the last sentence haltingly, fearful lest Miss Stone might guess her reason for wanting them and refuse. But as the nurse had no idea that semaphore meant signaling messages, she was entirely unsuspecting. And it had always been her policy to humor her patients in pursuit of any harmless amusements.

So that afternoon she brought Mary Louise needles and cotton and scissors and sat with her while she cut up her red-and-white sports dress for the flags. It seemed a pity, Miss Stone thought, to destroy such a pretty dress, but it was not likely that Mary Louise would ever need it again. It was a sad fact that few of their patients ever returned to the outside world!

Mary Louise finished her flags just before supper and laid them carefully away behind the washstand. Tomorrow—oh, happy thought!—she would try her luck.

Hope is indeed a great tonic. Mary Louise went right to sleep that night and slept soundly until morning. She performed her duties so quickly and with such intelligence that even Miss Stone began to wonder whether there had not been some mistake in confining the girl to the institution. But as they did not take a daily paper at the asylum, and as they were entirely cut off from the outside world, she had no way of knowing about the desperate search that was going on all over the country for Mary Louise Gay.

“Now that I have finished my work, may I go out into the garden and practice my semaphore for an hour before lunch?” the girl asked her nurse.

“Yes, certainly,” agreed Miss Stone. “I’ll go with you, because I want to spray the rose bushes.”

Mary Louise was not so pleased to be accompanied, but after all, Miss Stone’s

presence would mean freedom from other attendants. Nobody would molest her while her own nurse was with her.

She selected a spot high up on the terrace, from whence she could plainly see the ribbon of white road across the valley. Then she began to signal her message:

“I AM MARY LOUISE GAY. HELP!”

Over and over again she repeated the same letters, hope coming into her heart each time a car swung into view, despair taking possession of her when it failed to stop. Perhaps, she thought, she was too far away to be seen. She glanced behind her, at the green bushes, and moved along where she might have the gray wall of the institution for her background. Red and white should show up brilliantly in contrast to somber gray.

Half an hour passed, during which perhaps a dozen cars went by without stopping, and Mary Louise’s arms became weary. But she did not give up. Sometimes, she was certain, one of her own friends’ cars would come over that hill—and stop.

Miss Stone, watching the girl out of the corner of her eye, nodded sadly to herself. She must be crazy after all, she decided, to go through that silly routine over and over again. Intelligent on most subjects as she had discovered Mary Louise to be, she must be unbalanced on this particular obsession.

Still Mary Louise went on trying.

“I AM MARY LOUISE GAY. HELP!”

she signaled again, for the twenty-fourth time, as a small, bright car appeared on the road.

The car was proceeding very slowly; it looked as if it could scarcely climb the hill. Then, to the girl’s intense joy, she watched it stop. Perhaps it was only because of a faulty engine or a puncture—but—oh—it was stopping!

Her heart beat so fast and her hands trembled so that she could hardly repeat the message. But she forced herself to go through it again. This might be her one chance—her vital hope of escape!

She knew now what it must feel like to be abandoned at sea and all at once to glimpse a sail on the empty waters, bringing hope, and rescue, and life—if it stopped. But, oh, the utter despair if it continued on its course unheeding!

Two figures which looked like little dwarfs in the distance jumped out of the car and stood still, evidently watching Mary Louise's motions. Frantic with excitement, she spelled the message again, this time very slowly, forming the letters carefully and pausing a long second between each word:

“I AM MARY LOUISE GAY. HELP HELP HELP!”

The two tiny figures waited until she had finished and then waved their arms frantically.

She watched them in feverish anguish as they returned to the car and took something from the back of it. For five long minutes they busied themselves in some way which she could not understand, while she waited, tense with emotion.

Miss Stone strolled over and spoke to her, startling her so that she almost dropped her flags.

“Tired, dear?” inquired the nurse sympathetically.

“No! No!” protested Mary Louise. “Let me stay fifteen minutes more. Please!”

Her eyes were still fixed upon the car across the valley. One of the men was stepping away from it now, holding up both arms, which waved two dark flags. Made from clothing, perhaps, on the spur of the moment. And then he began to signal.

Breathlessly Mary Louise watched the letters as they came, spelling out words that brought floods of joy to her heart. Overwhelming her with happiness such as she had never known before. For the message which she read was this:

“WE ARE COMING MARY LOU. MAX AND NORMAN.”

Great tears of bliss rushed to her eyes and rolled down her cheeks; her hands trembled, and her arms grew limp. In the exhaustion of her relief she dropped down weakly to the ground.

Miss Stone came and bent over her anxiously, fearing that some curious spell had come over Mary Louise. A fit, perhaps, which would explain why her brother had wished to confine this girl in the asylum.

“I’ll help you up, dear,” the nurse said, “and we’ll go into the house. You had better lie down for a while.”

“But I’m all right!” exclaimed Mary Louise, jumping happily to her feet. “My friends are coming for me, Miss Stone!” She threw her arms around the woman and hugged her. “Two boys from my home town—in Riverside.”

“Yes, yes, dear,” agreed Miss Stone, sure now that Mary Louise was raving. “But come inside now and rest.”

“No, I don’t want to rest,” objected the girl. “You said I could stay out till lunch, and there’s still ten minutes left. I want to wait for Max and Norman.”

“All right, dear, if you’ll promise to calm yourself. Sit down there on the step while I finish these rose bushes.”

Mary Louise did as she was told, keeping her eyes fixed on the gate, wondering how long it would take for the boys to get across that valley, hoping that they wouldn’t get lost. She picked up her home-made flags and touched them lovingly. “Suppose I had never joined the Girl Scouts—and suppose I had never become an expert signaler!” she thought. She shivered at the very idea.

She did not have to wait long, however. In less than ten minutes she saw the gardener unlock the big iron gate and a dear, familiar green roadster speed up the hill and stop at the door of the asylum. In an instant both boys were out of the car. Max was the first to reach Mary Louise. Without any question of permission, he took her into his arms and kissed her again and again. Then Norman kissed her too, not quite so ardently as Max.

Finally she freed herself laughingly from their embraces and introduced them to Miss Stone. The boys looked questioningly at the woman. If she had been responsible for the kidnaping of Mary Louise, why was the girl so polite to her?

Max took a revolver from his pocket, just to be prepared in case of violence.

Mary Louise laughed merrily.

“You don’t need that, Max,” she said. “Miss Stone won’t do anything desperate. She is a nurse.”

“A nurse? Is this a hospital?” Alarm crept into Max’s voice. “Oh, Mary Lou, you’re not hurt, are you?”

“No, not a bit. Don’t you know what kind of place this is, Max? It’s an asylum for the insane! I’m supposed to be crazy.”

Horrified, Max sprang forward and seized Miss Stone by the arm.

“What kind of diabolical plot is this?” he demanded. “Whose accomplice are you?” He pulled a newspaper out of his pocket and shook it in the nurse’s face. “The whole country’s frantic over the disappearance of Mary Louise Gay!”

Miss Stone gazed at the picture in the paper with increasing fear. Had she—and the rest of the staff at the asylum—been accomplices to a hideous crime?

But Mary Louise replied for her reassuringly.

“Miss Stone’s innocent, Max,” she explained. “Please let her go. So are the others here. They’re just obeying orders. Tom Adams put me in here, calling me his feeble-minded sister Rebecca. He really does happen to have one, you may have heard, and I understand her papers for confinement were filed once before. Mr. Frazier signed my commitment too, pretending to be a cousin. Those two men are the only guilty ones.”

“Tom Adams!” repeated Max and Norman at the same time, and Norman added:

“Yes, that’s what Freckles said. They’re looking for Tom Adams. He ran away from Shady Nook—or wherever it is he lives. The police are after him.”

“How about Frazier?” demanded Mary Louise.

“Is he guilty?” asked Max.

“More so than Tom,” replied the girl. “Oh, I must get back to tell the police before Frazier sneaks away!” She turned to the nurse. “May I go with the boys now?”

“I’ll have to ask the doctor,” replied Miss Stone, hurrying inside to the office.

It took no persuasion at all, however, to obtain the doctor’s consent. As soon as he read the account in the newspaper and saw that Tom Adams was a fugitive from the law, he gladly agreed to let Mary Louise go free. In fact, he was anxious that she should, lest he be blamed for participation in the crime.

So Mary Louise jumped into the car between the two boys, and in less than an hour she saw the dear familiar trees of Shady Nook in the distance. As the car approached her own bungalow, she could distinguish her mother—yes, and her father—sitting on the porch in an attitude of hopeless despair.

Oh, what fun it was going to be to surprise them so joyfully!

CHAPTER XVIII

Return

Both Mr. and Mrs. Gay looked up disconsolately as the green car approached. Suddenly their expressions of listlessness changed to incredulity—then to rapture. Mary Louise was home!

In another second the girl had flown up the steps and was hugging both parents at once. Mrs. Gay could only gasp in her happiness. It was Mr. Gay who asked his daughter whether she was unhurt and unharmed.

“I’m fine!” returned Mary Louise joyfully. “And, oh, so happy!”

“Darling!” murmured her mother, her voice choked with emotion.

“Now praise these wonderful boys,” insisted the girl. “My rescuers.”

Max and Norman tried to look modest and to wave aside their accomplishment with a gesture. But Mr. Gay seized their hands in a fervor of gratitude.

“I can’t find words to tell you what it means to us!” he said. “You two boys have succeeded where four professional detectives failed. It’s—it’s marvelous.”

“Oh, it wasn’t anything at all, except persistence on our part,” explained Max. “The real credit goes to Mary Lou. It was a swell idea she had.”

“What idea?” demanded Mr. Gay.

“Signaling for help. With semaphore flags—just as we all used to do in the Scouts.”

“But where were you, Mary Lou?” asked her father. “Sit down and tell us all about it.”

“First tell me whether you’re hungry,” put in her mother.

“No, not specially,” replied Mary Louise. “They fed us pretty well at the insane asylum.”

It was fun to watch her parents’ startled expressions at this announcement—fun now that the experience was all over.

“Insane asylum!” they both repeated in horror. And then for the first time they noticed her blue calico dress.

Mary Louise nodded and proceeded to tell her story. Briefly and quickly, for she remembered that she wanted to catch the two criminals.

“Has Mr. Frazier run away too?” she inquired, when she had finished.

“No, he’s over at his hotel,” replied Mr. Gay. “I saw him this morning.”

“You must arrest him, Daddy!” cried the girl. “He was the cause of the three fires at Shady Nook. I know it!”

“But how do you know, Mary Lou?” asked her father. “What proof have you?”

“I overheard him and Tom Adams talking in the hotel garage. They didn’t actually mention fires, but I’m sure they meant them. I have their conversation down in my notebook. I left it in my desk. It’s probably still there.”

“Suppose,” suggested Mr. Gay, “that you tell us the story of your suspicions—and clues—from the beginning.”

“While I’m getting lunch,” added Mrs. Gay.

Mary Louise ran into her bedroom and found the little notebook. “I’ll just change my dress,” she called laughingly, “and be with you in a minute.... But tell me where Jane and Freckles are.”

“Out hunting for you. With Silky!” was the reply.

A couple of minutes later she returned to the porch, looking more like herself in her own modern clothing. She sat down on the swing and opened her notebook.

“I first suspected Tom Adams the day after Flicks’ Inn burned down,” she began. “All of the people of Shady Nook were over on the little island that night on a picnic, and Hattie Adams told me she expected to have Tom take her. But he wasn’t anywhere to be found. And the boys saw a big fellow in the woods who answered his description.

“But I sort of gave up the idea of his being guilty when I heard he had lost some work by Flicks’ Inn burning down. It threw me off the track for a while; I really suspected his feeble-minded sister Rebecca.

“Then the Smiths’ house caught fire, and Rebecca gave us a warning—so I suspected her all the more. Finding that pack of Cliff’s cards in the can of water didn’t prove a thing to me. I never believed he was guilty.”

“It was absurd to arrest him,” commented Mr. Gay. “The blundering idiot who caused it——”

Mary Louise’s laugh ran out merrily.

“You and Jane will have to get together, Dad,” she said. “You agree so perfectly about David McCall!”

“Never did care for the fellow,” her father muttered. “Give me men with brains—and sense!” He looked admiringly at Max and Norman. “But get on with the story, Mary Lou.”

“It was the day after the Smiths’ fire that I really seriously suspected Tom Adams,” she continued. “I trailed him to the store at Four Corners and found him gambling. He told a man that he’d pay him a hundred dollars, which he expected to collect immediately. And that set me thinking.”

“Why?” inquired Max.

“Because a farmhand doesn’t earn a hundred dollars so easily, especially from tightwads like Frazier. Everybody knows that man pays miserable wages.... Then, besides that, I overheard Tom Adams explaining a card trick, and that fact made me guess that he had gotten hold of one of Cliff’s decks of cards and either accidentally or purposely dropped them at the Smiths’.”

Mr. Gay nodded approvingly. He loved to watch the logical working of his

daughter's mind.

“So I began to put two and two together,” she went on. “Somebody was paying Tom a lot of money—lots more than a hundred dollars, I learned—for doing something. What, I asked myself, could the job be except setting those houses on fire? And who wanted them burned down except Frazier, or possibly Horace Ditmar, who, as you know, is an architect?”

“So you narrowed your suspects down to two people—besides Tom Adams?” inquired Mr. Gay admiringly.

“Yes. And when Adelaide Ditmar got that threat I was positive Frazier was responsible. He wanted the business, and he was doing everything he could to get it. But even then I had no proof.”

“So what did you do?” asked Max. “And why did Tom Adams suspect that you knew anything?”

“It was all because of this conversation,” answered Mary Louise, opening her notebook. “I overheard it near Frazier's garage, and then I was stupid enough to let them see me. I even told them I was going over to the farm to talk to Hattie.”

“That was a mistake,” remarked Mr. Gay.

“A mistake I paid for pretty dearly,” agreed the girl. “But it's all right now, so it really doesn't matter.... Now let me read you the conversation between Frazier and Tom Adams on the afternoon I was taken away.”

Quickly, in the words of the two men, she read to her listeners of Tom's demand for money and Mr. Frazier's reluctant compliance with his claims. When she had finished she looked eagerly at her father.

“Isn't Frazier guilty?” she asked.

“Of course he's guilty,” agreed the detective. “But he won't ever admit it. He'll squirm out of it, because we haven't got proof in so many words. He'll say he was talking about something entirely different to Tom Adams.”

“But can't he be arrested?” persisted Mary Louise, a note of disappointment creeping into her voice.

“I don’t see how—until we find Tom Adams. He’ll establish Frazier’s guilt, all right. I can’t see Adams shouldering the blame alone.”

Mary Louise frowned; she hated the idea of the hotelkeeper’s freedom, even though it might be only temporary. But suddenly her face lighted up with inspiration.

“I have it!” she cried. “He can be arrested for signing that paper confining me to the insane asylum, can’t he, Dad?”

Mr. Gay looked startled.

“What paper?” he demanded.

Mary Louise explained that, since the commitment had to be signed by two relatives of the patient, Mr. Frazier had posed as her cousin. That was enough, Mr. Gay said immediately: all that they needed as evidence was the paper itself. They would drive over to the institution that afternoon and secure it.

Luncheon was indeed a happy meal in the Gay household that day. Although Freckles and Jane did not return, the two boys and Mary Louise kept up a constant banter of laughter and merriment. Mr. and Mrs. Gay were quieter, but a light of rapture shone in their eyes.

Just at the conclusion of the meal Mrs. Hunter and Cliff arrived. Prepared to enter a house of misery and fear, they could not believe their ears as they heard the gayety from within.

“Mary Lou!” cried Cliff incredulously.

“Cliff!” exclaimed the girl, jumping up and running to the screen door. “You’re free!”

“And you’re home!” returned the young man, seizing both of her hands.

In spite of his arrest, Clifford Hunter was the same care-free young person. In a few minutes he was showing his card tricks to Max and Norman, delighted to find a new audience.

When the whole story had been retold to the Hunters, with the caution that they

say nothing of it to Mr. Frazier, Mary Louise and the three boys walked around the little resort to tell everybody there the glad news. Then she and her father and Max took the car and drove to the Adams farm. Mr. Gay thought it would be wise to take old Mr. Adams with them to visit the asylum, and Mary Louise thought it would be interesting to bring Rebecca—just to let Miss Stone and the other attendants meet the real Rebecca Adams!

With Max at the wheel they had no difficulty in finding the asylum. What fun it was, Mary Louise thought, to pass through those iron gates now—knowing that she was safe! Yet instinctively she reached for her father's hand and held it securely as the car proceeded up the long driveway.

The same doctor and the same head nurse came out to receive them as upon Mary Louise's first visit. Mr. Gay displayed his badge at once and explained his errand. The woman nodded and hurried into the office for the paper.

While she was gone, Rebecca Adams, growing restless, stepped out of the car, lugging her heavy water pitcher in her arms. At the same moment Miss Stone, Mary Louise's special nurse, came out of the building.

"Miss Stone, I want you to meet the real Rebecca Adams," said Mary Louise, with a twinkle in her eye.

Rebecca turned eagerly to the nurse.

"Can you show me where there is a well of clear water?" she asked immediately.

"Yes," replied Miss Stone gravely. "Back of the building. We have a fine well."

"Oh!" cried the woman in ecstasy. "At last!" She looked over at her father, and there were tears of earnestness in her eyes. "Let me stay here, Father! This is my home, where I want to live!" Her voice grew more wistful. "A well of clear water!" she repeated. "Please take me to it, kind lady!"

"Perhaps it is for the best," agreed old Mr. Adams. "There's nobody to take good care of Rebecca at home now that her mother's dead and I'm crippled up with rheumatism. She can stay if she wants to."

And so, at her own request, Rebecca Adams took up her life at the quiet institution, and the rest of the party, with the paper which was to be used as

evidence against Frazier in their hands, drove back to Shady Nook.

Mary Louise went into her bedroom and put on her prettiest dress, awaiting the arrival of Jane and Freckles and her friends. What a glorious evening it was going to be for them all!

CHAPTER XIX

Conclusion

Mary Louise was putting the last dabs of powder on her nose when she heard a car stop at the porch steps. Peering through the screened window of her bedroom she immediately decided that it must be the detectives. Yes—and, oh, joy of joys!—they had Tom Adams with them!

In another moment the men were out of the car and up on the porch, where her father joined them.

“Congratulations!” exclaimed Mr. Gay. “I see that you got Tom Adams. I remember him now.”

“Yes,” answered one of the men. “But he won’t admit a thing about your daughter. He says he never saw Mary Louise after she went back to the tennis court that afternoon.”

“On what grounds could you arrest him, then?” demanded Mr. Gay.

“He stole a car on his way to the West.”

Mary Louise repressed a giggle and turned away from the window. Her father evidently meant to find out what he could before he announced his daughter’s return.

“You have a sister Rebecca, haven’t you, Adams?” he inquired.

The young man nodded. “Yes. She’s feeble-minded. Why?”

“We know that Mary Louise saw her the afternoon she disappeared. Rebecca told us so, and she also said that you came home that afternoon just as my daughter started to leave the farm.”

“Rebecca’s mind wanders a lot,” muttered Tom. “She don’t know what she’s talkin’ about half the time.” He shifted his feet uneasily.

“You—have been thinking of putting Rebecca into an asylum?” persisted Mr. Gay.

“Yeah. We considered it. Why?”

“Because she’s in one now,” announced Mr. Gay calmly. “Of her own free will. An asylum about twenty miles from here. A Dr. Fetter, I believe, is the head of the institution.”

He paused and gazed intently at Tom. The young man’s jaw dropped, his face grew white, and his hands trembled.

Mr. Gay burst out laughing, and Mary Louise came to the screen door.

“Hello, Tom,” she said quietly.

The young man started as if he had seen a ghost. But he managed to stammer a reply. “Hello, Miss Gay,” he said.

All three of the plainclothes men stepped forward in amazement. “You found her, Gay?” they demanded of Mary Louise’s father.

“No,” answered Mr. Gay. “To be frank, I didn’t. Two of her young friends from Riverside did. She was confined in an insane asylum about twenty miles from Shady Nook, under the name of Rebecca Adams!”

All of Tom’s pretence fell away from him at this announcement. He knew his game was up. His limbs grew weak; he groveled at the men’s feet.

“Don’t send me to the chair!” he cried. “I didn’t harm her. She’s all right, ain’t she?”

“We’ll let the judge and the jury decide that,” replied Mr. Gay. “Now, suppose you sit down there and tell us the truth, Adams. You might as well, for we know most of it already!”

The young man crawled into a seat, but he made no attempt to tell his story.

“We know that you burned three houses here at Shady Nook,” said Mr. Gay. “We know, too, that you did it because you were bribed by Frazier. Didn’t he pay you a certain sum of money to start those fires?”

“Yes, he did,” acknowledged Tom. “He gave me five hundred dollars.”

“Why did he want them burned down?” asked one of the plainclothes men.

“He figured that he’d get five hundred at least from the Hunters during the summer, entertaining their friends and all. Then Flicks’ fire turned out to be better business yet. All the folks from Shady Nook, except the Ditmars, begun eatin’ at the hotel, once the inn was gone. And Smiths’ burnin’ down brought all them children and servants and even the Ma and Pa over to the Royal.”

“Did Frazier expect to burn any more cottages?” was the next question.

“No, he wasn’t plannin’ on it. Only, when Mrs. Ditmar started up a boardin’ house and took his business away from him, that made him sore. But I wasn’t goin’ a do no more dirty work. I figured I’d just get my money and clear out. I never did expect to burn Ditmars’—only threaten ’em.”

“But what made you do that dreadful thing to Mary Louise?” demanded Mr. Gay.

“I wanted to get rid of her till I made my get-away. Frazier and me was scared she was onto somethin’ and would send for you, and you’d figure it all out, Mr. Gay. Frazier thought, if I was gone, he’d be safe. He’d just deny everything. The idea of callin’ Mary Louise ‘Rebecca’ just popped into my head when she told us she was goin’ over to the farm to see Hattie that afternoon. I knew Hattie and Dad was off to the fair. So I jumped in my car and run over to the asylum and made the arrangements. We just got back in time to nab her.”

One of the men stood up.

“Detective Gay,” he Said, “I think you and I had better go over and arrest Frazier now. These other two men can take charge of Adams.” He turned to Mary Louise, who was still standing in the doorway. “Is there any question you want to ask this criminal, Miss Gay, before we take him away?”

“Yes,” answered Mary Louise, stepping through the doorway. “I would like to

know how that pack of cards came to be dropped at the Smiths' the night of their fire—how Tom happened to have them in his possession.”

The young man flushed.

“One day I was watchin’ Hunter do a trick on the hotel porch. I noticed he put the cards in his coat pocket. Later on, he hung the coat over the back of a chair while he went off to play tennis. So I sneaked up and took ’em out of his pocket, to use to show the trick to the boys. I thought they was marked, but they wasn’t. Hunter sure is clever at tricks.

“Then when I heard people was suspectin’ him of burnin’ his own cottage down for the insurance, I thought I might as well help that suspicion along. So I dropped his pack of cards into that can of water at the Smiths’. And sure enough, it worked!”

Mary Louise’s eyes were filled with contempt, but she did not put her feeling into words. Instead, she nodded to the detectives, and the men all left the porch. Fifteen minutes later Frazier’s arrest was accomplished, and the three plainclothes men started for Albany with both criminals in their custody.

Mary Louise and her parents watched them go with a sigh of relief.

“That’s that,” said her father, with a smile.

“Now, if only Jane and Freckles would come,” added her mother, “we could be perfectly happy. It’s time to go to dinner.”

In a couple of minutes Mrs. Gay’s wish was granted. Down the road half a dozen young people came running, for they had just heard the wonderful news that Mary Louise was back. Silky reached his mistress first, then Freckles arrived, with Jane and four of the boys close behind.

Never, if she lived to be a hundred, would Mary Louise forget that wonderful dinner at the Ditmars’. The joy of being back home again, the happiness of her friends, the companionship of her father—oh, everything seemed perfect that night to the lovely brown-eyed girl. And not least of it all was the satisfaction of knowing that the mystery of the fires was solved at last! Shady Nook was safe again for everybody—to enjoy for many, many summers to come!



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