

THE MYSTERY
OF THE
SECRET BAND

EDITH LAVELL

The Project Gutenberg eBook, The Mystery of the Secret Band, by Edith Lavell

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org

Title: The Mystery of the Secret Band

Author: Edith Lavell

Release Date: August 28, 2013 [eBook #43584]

Language: English

Character set encoding: UTF-8

***START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MYSTERY OF
THE SECRET BAND***

E-text prepared by Stephen Hutcheson, Dave Morgan,
and the Online Distributed Proofreading Team
(<http://www.pgdp.net>)

“Mary Lou! Mary Lou! Are you alive?” Max cried.

“Mary Lou! Mary Lou! Are you alive?” Max cried.
([Page 110](#)) (THE MYSTERY OF THE SECRET BAND)

The MARY LOU Series

The Mystery of the Secret Band

By
EDITH LAVELL

Author's Logo

THE SAALFIELD PUBLISHING COMPANY
Akron, Ohio New York

The MARY LOU Series
by
EDITH LAVELL

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

Copyright, MCMXXXV
The Saalfield Publishing Company
Printed in the United States of America

Contents

CHAPTER

	PAGE
I. A Real Detective	11
II. The Job	26
III. The Book Club	38
IV. A Midnight Visitor	54
V. Another Robbery	68
VI. Saturday Afternoon	78
VII. The Abandoned House	92
VIII. Knocked Out	110
IX. Lunch at the Bellevue	120
X. In the Dead of Night	132
XI. Bail	150
XII. Detective Gay Arrives	164
XIII. A Prisoner in the Dark	178
XIV. The Secret Band	194
XV. Christmas Morning	210
XVI. Two Captures	220
XVII. A Sad Story	231
XVIII. Conclusion	246

CHAPTER I

A Real Detective

Mary Louise stamped the snow from her feet and removed her goloshes on the porch. Whistling the Christmas carol her class had just sung at school, she opened the door of her house and stepped inside.

Her mother was sitting in an armchair in the living room, sewing. She looked up with a smile at her daughter.

“How did your entertainment go?” she inquired.

“Swell!” replied Mary Louise enthusiastically. “The seniors were great. You should have seen Max!”

“I’d like to have seen Mary Louise Gay,” mused her mother. “But this snow—and your father had the car——”

“Oh, I wasn’t so hot,” laughed Mary Louise modestly. “I’ll tell you who was the star of the afternoon—little Rosemary Dotts. She was so funny. She forgot all of her piece except the second line—‘I’m going to have plum pudding!’ Well, she said that once, and then she stared around at the audience and repeated it. And still she couldn’t think of any more, so she said it again, and rubbed her fat little tummy as she repeated it. Well, she kept that up until I thought we’d just pass out laughing at her. Honestly, the tears were rolling down my cheeks. Her teacher had to come up to the platform and take her away.”

“That must have been funny,” agreed Mrs. Gay. “Well, I guess you’re thankful that it’s all over. How do you like this weather for your vacation?”

Mary Louise’s brown eyes sparkled with pleasure.

“It’s keen!” she exclaimed. She executed a little dance step in her joy. “Two

whole weeks with nothing to do but coast and skate and dance!”

“And eat and sleep once in a while.”

“Oh yes, of course. Especially eat. What would Christmas be without eating?”

“What are you going to do now?” inquired her mother.

“Go coasting. Max and Norman are bringing the bobsled over in ten minutes, and Jane and I are supposed to be ready.”

“You better hurry, then. Get something to eat first. And—I forgot to tell you—your father wants to see you at half-past five this afternoon. Be sure to be home in time. He said he wanted to ‘consult’ you.”

“About somebody’s Christmas present? I thought all our Christmas shopping was finished last week.”

“It was. This hasn’t anything to do with presents, but it concerns your Christmas vacation, I believe,” replied Mrs. Gay.

“Oh, that sounds exciting!” exclaimed Mary Louise. Mr. Gay was a detective on the police force, and, knowing his daughter’s keen interest in the solution of crimes, he sometimes discussed his cases with her. Already she had shown marked ability in the same line herself by unraveling two baffling mysteries the preceding summer.

She ran out into the kitchen and poured out a glass of milk for herself and cut a piece of chocolate cake. This brisk weather certainly made her feel hungry, and the refreshments tasted good. Then she dashed upstairs to change into her “snow suit,” a long-trousered costume that happened to be popular with the older girls at the moment. When she was all ready she opened her side window and whistled to her chum, Jane Patterson, who lived across the snow-covered lawn in the house next door.

“Yo, Jane!” she called.

Immediately a corresponding window flew up, and a youthful face appeared at the enclosure.

“Ready!” was the reply. “The boys there yet?”

“I think I hear them,” returned Mary Louise. “Come on over.”

The windows were slammed down simultaneously, and the two girls dashed downstairs to their porches. Before they had finished putting on their goloshes, the boys were at the Gays’ house.

“Left the sled at the gate,” announced Max Miller, Mary Louise’s especial boyfriend in Riverside.

“Do you think the snow’s packed hard enough?” demanded Jane.

“Hope so,” returned Max, with a grin. “The kids were sledding last night over near Cooper’s woods, so they ought to have made a track. Anyhow, we can have some fun. You’ve just got to be outdoors, weather like this.”

They made their way across the yard, chatting about the school entertainment, their dates for the next two weeks, and the fun which Christmas always brought them. When they reached the hill where the coasting was the best, near Riverside, they found many of their other high-school friends, and for two hours they alternately rode down the steep incline at a breathtaking speed and then trudged slowly back to the top. The sun was setting, and the afternoon was gone before they knew it.

“Oh, I must go home!” exclaimed Mary Louise, glancing at her wrist-watch in amazement.

“It’s only five o’clock,” returned Max complacently. “You don’t eat at your house before six-thirty, do you?”

“Come on, Mary Lou!” called Jane. “All aboard!”

Her chum shook her head.

“I can’t, Jane. I’ve got to be home by five-thirty.”

“Why the rush?” demanded Max.

“I have to see my father. He left word with Mother for me to be there.”

“Oh, you can see him at supper,” observed Jane lightly. “You don’t want to break up the party, do you?”

“No, of course not. No need for that at all. I’ll just run along by myself. You people take some more rides.”

“Nix,” answered Max loyally. “You’re not going home alone past these woods. If you have to go, Mary Lou, I’ll go too.”

“Oh, we might as well all go,” said Jane. “I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to be on time for a meal once in a while. Still, I don’t see what all the fuss is about.”

Max looked straight into Mary Louise’s eyes, a serious expression on his face.

“Mary Lou,” he asked, “you’re not doing any more detective stuff, are you? Surely last summer was enough!”

The girl laughed.

“Yes, it was plenty. Haven’t I been pretty good all fall? Never tried to listen in on any of Dad’s cases or hunt for clues!”

“I should think you’d be cured,” remarked Jane. “The whole town could burn down before I’d go through an experience like yours last summer, to discover a criminal. And if it hadn’t been for Max and Norman——”

“I owe them my life!” said Mary Louise, half seriously and half smilingly. But in her heart she felt a deep sense of gratitude to her two youthful rescuers.

“Max could use it,” remarked Norman slyly.

“I’ll say I could,” muttered the other young man fervently. “But you really don’t think you’ll do dangerous things again, do you, Mary Lou?” he asked eagerly. “You’ll leave the solving of mysteries and crimes to your father hereafter, won’t you?”

Mary Louise’s eyes twinkled.

“I’m not making any rash promises. It sort of gets into the blood, Max. There’s no other thrill like it. I’d rather solve a mystery than eat.... But I really don’t

think there is anything for me to solve now. So you can put your mind at rest.”

“I’ll feel safer after this talk with your father is over,” returned the young man.

They came to a hill, and the subject was forgotten as they all piled on the sled and rode down together.

It was only a little past five-thirty when Mary Louise opened the door of her house. Her father was already there, beside the roaring logs in the fireplace, comfortably smoking.

Mr. Gay was a tall, impressive-looking man, with a determined jaw which announced to the world that he usually accomplished whatever he set out to do. He was proud of his daughter’s detective work that summer, and delighted to have her follow in his footsteps, though he wished he might keep her always from the more gruesome features in the pursuit of crimes and criminals.

“Hello, Mary Lou!” he called, gazing admiringly at her rosy cheeks and sparkling eyes. “Did you have a good time?”

“Wonderful!” she replied, hanging up her snowflaked coat. “I’m sorry to be late, Dad, but I had a hard time getting the others home.”

“That’s all right, Daughter. It won’t take long for me to tell you what I have in mind. It may take longer for you to decide upon your answer.”

Mary Louise sat down opposite him and waited expectantly, not saying another word.

“There is a small hotel for women in Philadelphia,” he began. “It is a pretty up-to-date place, though they try to keep their rates down, because it is endowed, and supposedly was started for girls in moderate circumstances. They have been having some trouble lately, valuables have been stolen—and they are practically sure that none of the servants is guilty. So they want a detective.”

“A detective?” repeated Mary Louise breathlessly. “You mean——”

“Yes, I mean you, Mary Lou. The proposition was put up to me, and naturally I can’t handle it myself. I was to find them a woman detective for a week or so,

and I suggested you. The woman in charge is delighted. She said a young girl like you could work better than anyone else because no one would suspect you of being a detective. And you could have a room near hers, under her protection, you see.

“Now the great question is: would you want to give up your holiday for this purpose? All those engagements you have—all the fun you have planned with your young friends? Christmas Day alone in a strange city? Would it be worth it to you?”

It did not take Mary Louise a moment to make her decision.

“I’d love it, Dad!” she cried ecstatically. “But I shouldn’t know how to go about it,” she added hesitatingly. “What to do—how to begin.”

“Mrs. Hilliard—she is the hotel manager—would give you all the facts,” explained her father. “I’d go with you and get you started. But you must consider carefully, Mary Lou. Think of your friends and your mother and your own pleasures. You can let me know tomorrow.”

Mary Louise nodded solemnly.

“I know, Daddy. But this seems like the chance of a lifetime. Because you see I mean to be a detective when I graduate from high school. This is something definite to go on—a real experience, which I can make use of when I apply for a job.”

“Yes, of course. And, by the way, there is a salary attached. You are to get twenty-five dollars a week, and an extra bonus if you get any of the lost valuables back.”

“Oh, Daddy!” The exclamation was almost a whisper, so awed was Mary Louise at the thought of actually earning money in the work that she loved best in all the world.

“When would I start?” she asked.

“I could take you with me to Philadelphia tomorrow morning. But that wouldn’t give you much time to write notes to your friends and pack your things. I suppose you’d have a lot of engagements to break.”

“Yes, but they don’t matter.”

“Don’t you want to think it over another day? I could come back and take you after the weekend.”

“No, Daddy, there’s not a question of doubt in my mind. I want to try it and start as soon as possible. Some of the crowd will be at Jane’s tonight, and I can tell them and phone to the others. I’ll pack my clothes before I go. Have you told Mother yet?”

“No, I haven’t. I thought there was no use stirring her up if you didn’t care to undertake it. But now we’ll have to break the news to her, if you’re sure.”

“You tell her, Daddy!” urged Mary Louise. “It will be easier.”

“All right, I will,” he promised.

A voice sounded from the kitchen. “Mary Louise, could you do an errand for me? You’ll just have time before supper.”

“Yes, Mother,” replied the girl, jumping to her feet. Then in a whisper to her father she added, “Tell her while I’m gone.”

Picking up her coat again, she ran out into the kitchen.

“I want you to take this basket of jellies and fruit cake over to old Mrs. Detweiler,” said Mrs. Gay. “I think it would be nice for them to have the things earlier this year, because they have so little at Christmas time.”

“Yes it would, Mother,” agreed the girl absently.

“Ask them whether they’ve heard anything from Margaret,” added Mrs. Gay. “Maybe she’s coming home for Christmas.”

“She wasn’t home all summer, was she, Mother?”

“No. And they didn’t hear from her, either. They’re terribly worried. I can’t see why Margaret Detweiler would do a thing like that, when her grandparents have been so good to her all her life. Why, Mrs. Detweiler wore the same dress for five years just so she could put Margaret through high school. And the girl

always seemed so grateful and affectionate, too.”

“Maybe something happened to her,” suggested Mary Louise.

“Surely they would have heard if it had.... Well, run along, dear. And come right back, because dinner is practically ready.”

Mary Louise pulled on her beret and her goloshes and went out into the snow again. It was entirely dark now, but the stars were shining, and the air was just cold enough to be invigorating. How good it was to be young and lively and happy! How sorry she felt for this poor old couple whom she was visiting, missing their granddaughter so dreadfully. But perhaps everything was all right. Maybe Margaret Detweiler was coming home for Christmas.

The small brick house where the old couple lived was only a few blocks from Mary Louise’s home. Half walking, half running, the girl covered the distance in less than ten minutes. She saw a low light in the living room and knocked at the door.

Both of the Detweilers were well over seventy, and they lived modestly but comfortably on a small pension which Mr. Detweiler received. It had been sufficient for their needs until the death of Margaret’s parents obliged them to take care of their only grandchild. But they had gladly sacrificed everything to give Margaret an education and a happy girlhood. She was older than Mary Louise by three or four years, so that the latter had never known her well. But she had always seemed like a sweet girl.

Mr. Detweiler opened the door and insisted that Mary Louise come inside. Both the old people loved Mrs. Gay and enjoyed the wonderful presents of her own making she sent every Christmas. They were profuse in their thanks.

“You must take off your things and get warm before you start out again,” urged Mrs. Detweiler.

“I’m really not a bit cold,” replied Mary Louise. “And Mother told me to come right back, as supper will be waiting. But she wanted me to ask you whether you had heard anything from Margaret.”

Tears came to the old lady’s eyes, and she shook her head.

“Not a thing since last Christmas,” she answered sadly. “You know she didn’t come home then, but she wrote to us and sent us a box of lovely presents. Expensive things, so I knew she must be doing well. She had a position in a Harrisburg store at first, you know, and then she told us she had gotten a fine job in a Philadelphia store. That was where the last letter came from—the last we ever received from her!”

“Didn’t you write to her?” asked Mary Louise.

“Yes, of course we did. But the letter was returned to us.”

“What store was she working in? I am going to Philadelphia for the Christmas holidays, and I might be able to find her.”

“I’m not sure. But the package was marked ‘Strawbridge and Clothier’ on the box. Did you ever hear of that store?”

“Yes, I did. And I’ll go there and make inquiries for you, Mrs. Detweiler.”

The old lady seized Mary Louise’s hand gratefully.

“Oh, if you could only find her, Mary Louise,” she exclaimed, “we’d be the happiest couple alive!”

“I’ll do the best I can,” promised the girl as she turned to the door.

She ran all the way home, eager to find out what her mother was going to say in reply to her father’s startling proposition about her Christmas vacation.

CHAPTER II

The Job

If Mrs. Gay did not like the idea of losing her daughter for two weeks, at least she kept the feeling to herself. She congratulated Mary Louise heartily on being chosen for a difficult piece of work.

“You’re a lucky girl!” cried Freckles, Mary Louise’s young brother. “Wish I was old enough to take the job!”

“You couldn’t take this one, Son,” his father reminded him, “because it’s a woman’s job. A man would be out of place in a woman’s hotel. But Mary Lou can go about unnoticed—people will think she’s just a guest.”

“Twenty-five bucks a week!” repeated Freckles. “What are you going to do with all that money, Sis?”

“I don’t know. Wait and see if I earn it. But if I do, we’ll all have something nice out of it.”

“I wasn’t asking for it!” protested the boy.

“No, I know you weren’t. But wait, and we’ll see.” She turned to her mother. “The Detweilers haven’t heard a thing from Margaret, Mother. Not since they received a box last Christmas from Philadelphia. But I promised to try to hunt her up for them.”

“Oh, I feel so sorry for them!” exclaimed Mrs. Gay. “I do hope that nothing has happened to Margaret.”

“So do I. But, anyhow, that will give me two jobs in Philadelphia.”

“Yes,” agreed her father, “and you can give that as your reason for being in

Philadelphia—to the other guests at the hotel—if you care to.”

“That’s an idea,” said Mary Louise. “And maybe this is the more important of the two. I’m sure Margaret Detweiler is more precious to her grandparents than money and valuables to the women at that hotel.”

Though her mother accepted the situation calmly—owing to her father’s persuasion, no doubt—Mary Louise found her best friends less agreeable. Jane raised a howl of protest when she heard of the plan, and Max Miller looked so crushed and unhappy that for a moment or two Mary Louise even considered the idea of giving the whole thing up.

“I asked you two months ago to go to the senior dance during Christmas week,” he said. “And you promised me faithfully, Mary Lou!”

“I know, Max. But I couldn’t foresee anything like this coming up.”

“It spoils my whole vacation. It spoils my whole senior year, because this is the biggest affair we have.... In fact, it spoils my whole life!”

“Now, Max, be reasonable! We’d have only a few dances together—you’re class president, don’t forget, and you’ll need to perform your social duties—and any other girl will do as your partner.”

“No other girl will do at all,” he protested stubbornly. “I won’t take anybody else. I’ll go stag. I’d stay home entirely if I weren’t president!”

“Well, maybe I’ll have the whole mystery solved in the week before Christmas, and get home in time for the dance,” remarked Mary Louise optimistically.

“More likely you’ll stay a week overtime,” muttered the young man. “Or maybe take on the job for good and never come back to Riverside at all.”

Mary Louise laughed.

“You certainly can dish out gloom when you want to, Max! You don’t suppose my parents would allow me to leave high school and take a regular job when I’m only sixteen, do you? I shan’t be seventeen till next spring, you know.”

But Max refused to be consoled, and Jane Patterson upheld him in his attitude. It

was ridiculous, foolhardy, dumb, silly—every adjective she could think of—to go to a strange city and be all alone during Christmas week when you could be having a perfectly wonderful time in Riverside.

“You’ll get to be a dried-up old maid by the time you’re twenty-five,” she told her chum. “And what good will your career be to you then?”

“Lots of good,” returned Mary Louise complacently. “If I’m going to be an old maid, I’ll certainly want a career. But I don’t see why a career should interfere with marriage. I’ll have plenty of time to have it first.”

“All the men will be married by that time.”

“I’ll take a chance,” laughed Mary Louise.

Nothing anybody said could stop her. Mary Louise was more thrilled than she had ever been in her life, and she meant to put her whole soul into this job. Not only for her own sake, but for her father’s, as well. In her two previous experiences, personal inclination had made her unravel the mysteries, but now she felt that her father’s reputation was involved. If he recommended someone who was incompetent, a failure would reflect upon him. Oh, she must succeed—if it were humanly possible!

She left the party early that evening and went home to finish packing her suitcase. Immediately after breakfast the next morning she and her father took the train to Philadelphia.

The snow had ceased falling, but the country was still covered with white. The sun shone, and the landscape was lovely. Mary Louise had never been to Philadelphia before, and she watched everything eagerly as she approached the terminal. It was a big city, in comparison with Riverside or even Harrisburg. But not so big as New York, which she had visited several times.

“Where is the hotel, Daddy?” she asked as they left the train. “And what is its name?”

“It is up near the Parkway, and it is called ‘Stoddard House,’ because a wealthy woman by the name of Stoddard left some money in her will to build it and help keep it up. It is a very attractive place.”

“I wonder how many rooms it has,” said his daughter.

“Not so many as you might expect, because I understand the whole first floor is planned for the girls’ social uses. A card room, several small rooms for the girls to entertain callers, a library, a larger reception room for dancing, and the dining room are all part of the plan. But you’ll soon go all over the place and see for yourself.”

Mary Louise’s eyes sparkled.

“It is going to be thrilling, Dad!” she said.

“I hope you don’t run into any danger,” he remarked a little apprehensively. “The Philadelphia police will have your name on file—I saw to that—so the minute you call for help you can get it. And don’t hesitate to phone me long distance any time you need me. I’ll give you my list of addresses for the week. Don’t stop for expense—we can’t consider money in cases like this.”

Mary Louise nodded proudly. Never in her life had she been so happy. She walked along beside her father with her head high and her eyes shining. Her only misgiving, as they approached the hotel, was caused by her extreme youth. She hoped fervently that nobody would guess her age.

The hotel was an attractive place. Set back from the street by a small terrace, its trim brick walls and white-painted doorway and windows looked cozy and home-like. What a nice place to live, Mary Louise thought, if you weren’t lucky enough to have a home of your own!

How thankful she was that the place wasn’t gloomy and tumbledown like Dark Cedars, where she had made her first investigations as an amateur detective! Nobody would be telling her that ghosts haunted the walls of Stoddard House.

Her father opened the door for her, and she preceded him into the lobby. It was rather small, as lobbies go, with only one counter-desk, one lounge, and a couple of elevators, which you worked yourself, at the side. But doors opened out from the lobby on all sides, revealing glimpses of numerous attractive reception rooms beyond.

Mr. Gay nodded to the girl at the desk and inquired for Mrs. Hilliard. In a couple of minutes a stout middle-aged woman appeared and smiled pleasantly at him.

He introduced Mary Louise.

“Let’s get back into my office where we can talk undisturbed,” suggested Mrs. Hilliard, leading the way out of a door and along a hall to another smaller room. “Now sit down and I’ll tell you all about our difficulties.”

Mr. Gay and his daughter made themselves comfortable, and Mary Louise took out her notebook. The same notebook which she had made so valuable on two previous occasions.

“Last September was the first time we ever had any trouble at all,” began Mrs. Hilliard. “We lost a complete set of silverware—a dozen each of knives, forks, and spoons. But as these were only plated, the loss did not run into a great deal of money, so we didn’t make much fuss. I supposed that one of the maids stole them—a waitress who left the next day to be married.

“But I must have been mistaken, for more things disappeared after she left. A very unusual vase we had in the library, quite valuable too, for it had belonged in the Stoddard family. That made it look as if the thief were a connoisseur.

“The matron and I were watching the help carefully, and we felt sure that none of them was responsible. We hadn’t many guests at the time—there are only about a dozen who live here permanently. And there happened to be only a couple of transients.”

“What are ‘transients,’ Mrs. Hilliard?” asked Mary Louise, who was unfamiliar with the term.

“They’re the people who stop in for a day or two—or even a week—and don’t stay permanently,” explained the other.

“I should think they’d be the people who would be most likely to steal,” observed Mary Louise. “Because they could get away with it more easily.”

“I thought so too, at first. But when things kept right on being stolen, and the same transients never came back, it began to look to me as if one of the permanent lodgers were responsible... These two girls—I have forgotten their names—were here when the silverware and the vase disappeared, but they were not here in October when our watches were taken.”

“How many watches?” asked Mary Louise.

“Four—including my own!”

“And were there any transients here at that time?”

“Just one. A chorus girl named Mary Green. She stayed a couple of days and then said her show was closing up.”

The young detective wrote all these facts into her notebook and asked whether that was all.

“Not quite,” replied Mrs. Hilliard. “Last Friday Miss Violet Granger had a valuable oil painting stolen from her room, and a purse containing fifty dollars.... So you see the situation has become pretty serious. Two of our regular guests have moved away because of it, and others have threatened to do so if anything else is stolen.”

She looked doubtfully at Mary Louise. “I’m sure I don’t know how you would go about an investigation like this,” she said. “But perhaps you do. Are you willing to try it?”

“Of course I am!” cried the girl eagerly. “It’s just the kind of thing I love. I’ve put down everything you said, Mrs. Hilliard, and I’m all ready to go to work now. I want to see the hotel and meet the guests as soon as possible.”

“I think Mary Louise had better keep secret the fact that she is spying on them,” put in Mr. Gay. “Just let them think that she is a young friend of yours, Mrs. Hilliard, visiting you for her Christmas vacation. As a matter of fact, she wants to look up a young girl from Riverside, whose whereabouts have been lost by her relations. But use your own discretion, Mrs. Hilliard.”

“I will, Mr. Gay,” agreed the woman. “And I will take good care of Mary Louise for you,” she added.

“That’s right. No late hours—or being out alone at night, Mary Lou. Don’t forget that this is a big city, and girls can easily get lost.”

“I’ll be careful, Daddy,” she promised.

Mr. Gay kissed his daughter good-bye, and Mary Louise and Mrs. Hilliard took the elevator to the second floor.

“There are ten rooms on each floor,” the manager explained. “The fourth floor belongs to the help, and I have my own little three-room apartment at the back.

“The third floor is reserved for our permanent guests. We have thirteen of them now—some two in a room, some alone.

“Our second floor is principally for transients, although sometimes guests prefer to live there permanently. One woman named Mrs. Macgregor, a wealthy widow, likes her room and bath so much that she has decided to keep it indefinitely. But most of the guests on the second floor come and go....

“And now, my dear, here is your room. I was going to take you into my own apartment at first, but I decided that would be too far away from everybody. Here you can mix more with the other guests. Of course, whenever you get lonely, you can come up with me. I have some nice books, if you care to read in the evening, and a radio. And perhaps you brought your knitting?”

“I forgot all about that,” replied Mary Louise. “But of course I do knit, and I can easily buy some wool and some needles.”

Mrs. Hilliard opened the door of the room that was to be Mary Louise’s and handed her the key.

“Now I’ll leave you to rest and unpack,” she said. “Perhaps you can come down early before dinner to meet some of the girls in the reception room. The younger ones usually play the radio and dance a little before dinner.”

“I’ll be there!” returned Mary Louise joyfully.

CHAPTER III

The Book Club

Mary Louise was a little awe-struck as she sat down alone in her new bedroom. The first time she had ever been away from home by herself, without any friends! Alone in a big city—working on a job! It seemed to her that she had suddenly grown up. She couldn't be the same care-free high-school girl who had gone coasting only yesterday afternoon with her friends.

A momentary sensation of depression took hold of her as she thought of Jane and the boys and the informal party she was missing that evening. It would be wonderful if Jane could be with her now, sharing her experiences as she always had, helping her to solve this mystery. But such a thing was impossible, of course. Jane wouldn't want to give up the Christmas gayety at Riverside, and besides, this was a real job. You couldn't bring your friends along on a real job as if it were only play.

Then she thought of that other Riverside girl alone in this big city. Margaret Detweiler, the girl who had so mysteriously disappeared. What could have happened to her? Suppose something like that should happen to Mary Louise!

"I'm positively getting morbid," she thought, jumping up from the chair on which she was seated and beginning to unpack her things. "I'd better get dressed and go down and meet some of the young people. I'll never accomplish anything by mooning about like this."

She unpacked her suitcase and hung her clothing in the closet. What a neat little room it was, with its pretty maple furniture and white ruffled curtains! So different from the common, ugly boarding-house bedroom! She was lucky to have such a nice place to live in. And Mrs. Hilliard was certainly a dear.

She found the shower bath down the hall, and feeling refreshed, slipped into a

new wine-red crêpe, which her mother had bought her especially for the holidays. It was very becoming, and her eyes sparkled as she ran down the steps to the first floor. No use bothering with elevators when she had only one flight to go.

Mrs. Hilliard was at the desk, talking to the secretary, who was putting on her hat and coat.

“Oh, Mary Louise,” she said, “I want you to come here and register and meet Miss Horton. This is Miss Gay,” she explained, “a young friend of mine. She is visiting me for the holidays, and I forgot to have her register when she came in. But as she is using room 206, and not my apartment, I think she had better register.”

Mary Louise nodded approvingly and wrote her name in the book.

“You have never come across a girl named Margaret Detweiler, have you, Miss Horton?” she asked. “I want to find her if I can while I am in Philadelphia.”

The secretary shook her head.

“No, I don’t think so. You might look through the book, though. I can’t remember all the transients who have stopped here at Stoddard House.”

“Naturally,” agreed Mary Louise, and she turned the pages eagerly. But of course she did not find the name. Coincidences like that don’t often happen, and besides, she reasoned, if she did find it, it wouldn’t do her much good. That wouldn’t tell her where Margaret was now.

“Come into the music room with me,” said Mrs. Hilliard. “I see one of our newest arrivals here—a young girl who came only last week. She can’t be more than nineteen or twenty. I think you’d like each other.”

The girl, an attractive brunette with a gay manner and a little too much lipstick, was standing beside the radio, turning the dials. She looked up as Mrs. Hilliard and Mary Louise entered the room.

“Miss Brooks, I want you to meet a friend of mine—Miss Gay,” said Mrs. Hilliard. “Perhaps I’d better say ‘Pauline’ and ‘Mary Louise,’ because I know you young people don’t bother with last names.”

The girls smiled at each other, and the manager went towards the door.

“Would you be good enough to take care of Mary Louise—introduce her to any of the other guests who come in—Miss Brooks? I have to go back to the desk, for the secretary has gone home.”

“Certainly,” agreed Pauline immediately. She turned on some dance music. “What do you say we dance?” she asked Mary Louise. “And does everybody call you by both names?”

“Most people shorten it to ‘Mary Lou.’ Yes, I love to dance. That’s a dandy fox trot.”

The girls stepped off, Pauline talking gayly all the time, asking Mary Louise all sorts of questions: where she was from, how long she was going to stay, and so on. Mary Louise answered pleasantly, happy to have found a new friend. It wouldn’t be so bad without Jane, now that she had found a girl near her own age in Philadelphia, although she thought that Pauline was probably nearer twenty-five than twenty. Middle-aged people like Mrs. Hilliard weren’t so good at guessing young people’s ages, unless they had children of their own.

“I wish I could take Pauline into my confidence,” thought Mary Louise, “and have her help me the way Jane did. It would be so much nicer.” But she knew that would not be wise: her father and Mrs. Hilliard wanted her to keep her job a secret. However, she did make it a point to ask Pauline a few questions in return for those she had answered. Not that she was interested in Pauline as a suspect—the girl had only arrived last week, Mrs. Hilliard said—but because she really wanted a young companion while she was in this strange city.

“My parents are dead,” Pauline told her. “I have a rich aunt who usually stays at the Ritz when she’s in Philadelphia, but I don’t care enough about her to live with her. I sort of flit from place to place, and write fashion articles for the magazines whenever my income runs short. I have a pretty good time.”

“Have you ever stayed at Stoddard House before?” asked Mary Louise.

“No, I usually avoid women’s places like Y. W. C. A.’s and girls’ clubs,” was the reply. “But this sort of looked different to me, and I thought I’d give it a try. It’s pretty good, don’t you think?”

“I like it very much.”

By this time half-a-dozen people had entered the room, and two more couples were dancing. Suddenly Mary Louise felt bewildered. How could she possibly get to know so many people in the short space of two weeks and hope to find the thief?

The music changed, and the other dancers left the room. Apparently the dining-room doors were open.

“Gosh, I couldn’t introduce you to any of those women, Mary Lou,” said Pauline. “I don’t know any of their names.”

“Oh, that’s all right,” agreed the young detective. “I’m not feeling a bit lonely.”

“Let’s go eat—or are you supposed to wait for Mrs. Hilliard?”

“No, she told me not to. She’s such a busy person, she has to snatch her meals whenever she can. But I’ll be with her in the evenings.”

“Exciting life!” observed Pauline. “Maybe I can rake up a date for you later. I’ve got one myself for tonight, and I’ll sound Ben out. If he can get hold of another fellow for tomorrow night——”

“Oh, I don’t think I better make any plans,” interrupted Mary Louise. “Though I do appreciate it a lot, Pauline. But you see I am Mrs. Hilliard’s guest. I have to consult her.”

“O.K.”

The two girls went into the dining room, an attractive place, with tables for two and four persons, and chose one of the smaller ones.

“We don’t want any of the old dames parking with us,” observed Pauline, glancing at a couple of elderly women just entering the room. “They cramp my style.”

“Rather,” laughed Mary Louise, though she secretly wished she might meet some of the “old dames,” as Pauline called them. Any one of them might be the thief.

Pauline Brooks was very different from the girls of Riverside—not nearly so refined, Mary Louise thought—but she was a gay companion and made witty remarks about everything. No doubt she was a clever writer.

Just as the girls finished their excellent dinner, Mrs. Hilliard came into the room. Pauline stood up.

“I’ll be running along, Mary Lou,” she said. “Now you have company I better leave you and get dressed.”

Mary Louise smiled. “Have a good time—and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Not too early!” warned Pauline. “I’ll probably be dancing till the small hours tonight.” She left the room, and Mrs. Hilliard sat down in her place.

“Will you stay here with me while I eat my dinner, Mary Louise?” she asked.

“Yes, indeed,” replied the girl.

“And did you enjoy your dinner?”

“It was wonderful! Just like a fine hotel.”

“I think Stoddard House is a fine hotel—on a small scale, of course.... And now I have a suggestion to offer for tonight,” she continued as she ate her dinner. “Some of the regular guests here have a book club which meets once a week. I seldom go to the meetings—I never seem to have time—but I thought I could take you tonight, and in that way you would get acquainted with some of these people. Though I don’t suppose you’ll find the person we’re looking for among them. Thieves aren’t often book lovers.”

“But it will help me to get the people sorted out, and I am so at sea,” said Mary Louise. “I think it is a fine idea, Mrs. Hilliard. What time does the club meet?”

“Seven-thirty. But we’ll go to my room first, and you can copy down the names of all the guests, and their room numbers.”

“Oh, that’s great!” she cried, thankful to be getting at something definite to start with.

As soon as Mrs. Hilliard finished her dinner she and Mary Louise took the elevator to the fourth floor and walked down the long corridor to the back of the hotel. Here was Mrs. Hilliard's own private apartment, a cozy suite of three rooms and a bath.

Mary Louise settled herself comfortably in an armchair and took out her notebook.

"Do you want the names of the maids?" asked Mrs. Hilliard as she picked up some papers from her desk.

"No, not yet," replied the girl. "You believe in their innocence, so I think I'd rather study the guests first."

Mrs. Hilliard handed her a paper, a methodical list of the bedrooms on the second and third floors, and Mary Louise copied it, just as it was, into her notebook:

"Second Floor:

Room 200	Pauline Brooks.
202	May and Lucy Fletcher.
204	
206	Mary Louise Gay.
208	
201	Mrs. B. B. Macgregor.
203	
205	Anne Starling.
207	
209	

Third Floor:

Room 300	Miss Henrietta Stoddard.
302	Mrs. Weinberger.
304	Miss Hortense Weinberger.
306	Dorothy Semple.
308	Miss Hastings.
301	Ruth and Evelyn Walder.

303

305 Mrs. Moyer.

307

309 Miss Violet Granger.”

“You have quite a lot of empty rooms, haven’t you, Mrs. Hilliard?” inquired Mary Louise, when she had finished her copy.

“Yes. It’s always dull at this time of year. And we never are very full. After all, it’s rather expensive, with wages on the scale they are now.”

“How much do you charge?”

“Fourteen dollars a week. But that doesn’t cover our expenses.”

“No, I’m sure it doesn’t. Everything is lovely—I didn’t tell you how much I like my room—and the food couldn’t be better.”

“Well, we have an income from the Stoddard estate which helps to pay expenses,” Mrs. Hilliard explained.

“There is a woman here named Miss Henrietta Stoddard,” observed Mary Louise, looking at her list. “Is she any relation of the founder?”

“Yes, she is her niece. Old Mrs. Stoddard provided in her will that Henrietta should be allowed to live here free all her life, as long as she was single or a widow.”

“How old a woman is she?”

“About forty-five now, I should judge. And very bitter. She expected to inherit her aunt’s money, and she even tried to break the will. She hasn’t any money—I think she does odd jobs like taking care of children and doing hand sewing for her spending money and her clothing.”

“Hm!” remarked Mary Louise.

Mrs. Hilliard smiled. “I know what you are thinking—and I kind of think so myself. That Miss Stoddard is the thief. But you’d never believe it to look at her. She’s prim and proper and austere.”

“You never can tell,” said Mary Louise.

“No, that’s true.... Well, you’ll have a good chance to judge for yourself tonight. Miss Stoddard is the one who is in charge of the book club. There is a library fund in the endowment, and these women decide upon what to buy.”

“Tell me which of these guests belong to the club,” urged the girl.

“All the regular residents belong, except Miss Violet Granger. She is an artist—she draws for magazines and for an advertising firm—and she always keeps apart from the other guests. She is the one from whom the oil painting and the fifty dollars were stolen.”

Mary Louise nodded and put a check beside Miss Granger’s name.

“Now,” she said, “I ought to check the names of all the other people who have had valuables stolen. Who else was there?”

“Well, as I told you, the hotel itself lost the silverware and the Chinese vase. Then there were four watches stolen—my own, Mrs. Weinberger’s, and the two Walder girls.... By the way, they are lovely girls, Mary Louise—they’ve lived here a couple of years, and I know their families—I’m sure you’re going to like them....

“And the final—at least, I hope it’s the final robbery—was the painting and the money from Miss Granger’s room. But I have a feeling that isn’t the end, and the guests are all nervous too. It’s hurting our business—and—making my own job seem uncertain.”

Mary Louise closed her notebook thoughtfully and sighed.

“I’ll do the best I can, Mrs. Hilliard,” she promised solemnly.

Ten minutes later they took the elevator to the first floor, and Mrs. Hilliard led the way into the library. It was a cheerful room with an open fireplace, a number of comfortable chairs and built-in bookcases around the walls.

Miss Henrietta Stoddard, a plain-looking woman with spectacles, sat at the table on one side, with a pile of books and a notebook beside her. She was talking to an elderly woman and a younger one. Mrs. Hilliard introduced Mary Louise.

“Mrs. Weinberger and Miss Weinberger,” she said, and Mary Louise immediately placed them as the mother and daughter who lived in rooms 302 and 304.

The daughter was complaining to Miss Stoddard.

“I don’t see why we can’t have some more exciting books,” she said. “Something a little more youthful.”

Miss Stoddard drew the corners of her severe mouth together.

“We buy just what the club votes for,” she replied icily.

“Because the younger members never come to put in their votes!” returned the younger woman petulantly. “I asked the Walder girls to come to the meeting tonight, but of course they had dates.” She turned eagerly to Mary Louise. “You can put in a vote, Miss Gay!” she exclaimed. “Will you suggest something youthful?”

Mary Louise smiled. “I shan’t be here long enough to belong to the club,” she answered. “I’m just visiting Mrs. Hilliard for the vacation.”

“You’re a schoolgirl?”

“Yes. A junior at Riverside High School.”

“Never heard of it,” returned Miss Weinberger, abruptly and scornfully.

“I’m afraid it’s not famous—like Yale or Harvard,” remarked Mary Louise, with a sly smile.

Miss Weinberger went on talking to the others in her complaining, whining tone. Mary Louise disliked her intensely, but she didn’t believe she would ever steal anything.

“What time is it?” demanded Miss Stoddard sharply.

“I don’t know. My watch was stolen, you know,” replied Mrs. Weinberger, looking accusingly at Mrs. Hilliard, as if it were her fault.

“You never heard anything about those watches, did you?” inquired Miss Stoddard.

“No,” replied the manager, keeping her eyes away from Mary Louise. “There was a night watchman that night, but he said he didn’t see any burglar or hear any disturbance.”

“The night watchman couldn’t watch four watches,” Mary Louise remarked facetiously.

“Yes, there were four stolen,” agreed Mrs. Weinberger. “I suppose Mrs. Hilliard told you?”

Mary Louise flushed: she must be more careful in the future.

“I think that bleached-blond chorus girl took them,” observed Miss Weinberger. “She was here then and left the next day. That name of hers was probably assumed. ‘Mary Green!’ Too common!”

Mary Louise wanted to write this in her notebook, but caution bade her wait till the meeting was over.

The door opened, and an old lady came in, leaning on her cane. She was past eighty, but very bright and cheerful, with beautiful gray hair and a charming smile.

Mrs. Hilliard sprang up and offered her the best chair in the room and introduced Mary Louise to her. Her name was Mrs. Moyer.

Now the meeting began: the guests returned the books they had borrowed and discussed new ones to purchase. At half-past nine a maid brought in tea and cakes, and the evening ended sociably.

Thankful to slip off alone to write her observations in her notebook, Mary Louise went to her own room.

CHAPTER IV

A Midnight Visitor

Mary Louise put on her kimono and stretched herself out comfortably on her pretty bed, with her notebook in her hands. What a lovely room it was! What a charming little bedside table, with its silk-shaded lamp, its dainty ice-water jug—and its telephone. For that convenience especially she was thankful: she'd far rather have a telephone than a radio. Little did she realize how soon she was to find that instrument so useful!

She opened her notebook at the page upon which she had written the guests' names, and counted them. Fourteen people besides herself, and of that number she had met only five. Rather a slow beginning!

"If I only had Jane here, she'd know everybody in the place by now," she thought wistfully. "Jane is clever, but she does jump at conclusions. Maybe I'm better off alone."

She glanced at the notebook again and resolved not to bother yet with the names of people she hadn't met. She'd concentrate instead upon the five that she did know. She began at the beginning with the girl with whom she had danced and eaten supper.

"Pauline Brooks couldn't be guilty," she decided. "Because she came to Stoddard House only a few days ago for the first time. After the first two robberies had taken place. So she's out...."

"Now I'm not so sure about Miss Henrietta Stoddard. She might even believe she had a right to steal things, because she was cheated out of her inheritance. Yes—I'll watch Miss Stoddard carefully."

"Next those two Weinberger women. Hardly possible, when the mother lost her

own watch. Of course, thieves sometimes pretend to have things stolen, just to establish their innocence, the same way murderers often wound themselves—for alibis. But, just the same, I believe those women are honest. They're pretty well off, too, to judge from their clothes and their jewelry.”

She came to the last person she had met—the old lady who had come to the book-club meeting with a cane—Mrs. Moyer. Mary Louise's face broke into a smile. Nobody in her right senses could suspect a person like that!

That was all. Except the secretary, Miss Horton, whom she had met at the desk.

Mary Louise closed the notebook and put it on the table beside her. That was enough for tonight; now she'd try to get some sleep. She put out the light and opened the window. Snow still covered everything except the streets and the sidewalks, and the moon shone over the roofs of the buildings beyond. Right below her side window was a fire escape, which made her feel somehow safe and secure.

It was not nearly so quiet here as in Riverside; automobile horns honked now and again, and the sound of trolleys from the street in front was plainly heard. But Mary Louise was not worried about the noise, and a few minutes after she was in bed she was sound asleep.

How many hours later she was awakened by a dream about Margaret Detweiler, Mary Louise had no way of knowing, for she had left her watch on the bureau. She thought she had found Margaret alone in an empty house, cold and starving to death, and she was trying to remember just what principles of first aid to apply, when she awoke and found it was only a dream.

But something, she realized instantly, had awakened her. Something—somebody—was in her room!

Her first sensation was one of terror. A ghost—no, a gypsy, perhaps—who would clap a gag over her mouth and bind her hand and foot! But before she uttered a sound she remembered where she was and why she was there. A delirious feeling of triumph stole over her, making her believe that success was at hand for her in her sleuthing. If this person were really the Stoddard House sneak thief, Mary Louise could lie still and watch her, for the room was light enough from the moon and the street lamps to show up the intruder quite plainly.

Ever so cautiously, without turning her head or making any kind of sound, she rolled her eyes toward her bureau, where she could sense the intruder to be. Her reward was immediate: she saw a short person in dark clothing standing there, carefully picking up some object.

“My purse—and my watch!” Mary Louise thought grimly. The little engraved watch her father had given her last Christmas.

The figure turned around and silently crept towards the door. But sudden, swift dismay took possession of Mary Louise, making her tremble with fear and disappointment. The thief was not a woman, whom she could hope to identify as a guest at Stoddard House. He was a man!

He turned the key in the lock so quietly that only the tiniest click could be heard. Then, just as softly, he closed the door again and vanished into the hall.

Mary Louise gasped audibly with both relief and disappointment. Relief that he was gone, disappointment that he was a common, ordinary burglar whom she could not hope to catch.

Nevertheless, she meant to do what she could, so she turned on her light and reached for the telephone beside her bed. In another moment she had told her story to the police, and, so perfect were their radio signals, in less than five minutes one of their cars stood at the door of the hotel.

Meanwhile, Mary Louise had hastily thrown on a few clothes and run down the stairs to warn the night watchman.

The halls were lighted all night, as well as the lobby of the hotel; she did not see how the burglar could escape without attracting the watchman’s notice.

She found him quietly smoking a pipe on the doorstep. He said he had seen nobody.

“I think the burglar came in through the window from the fire escape,” Mary Louise said.

“Don’t see how he could,” returned the man. “I’ve been around there at the side for the last half hour. Nobody came along that alley.”

Baffled, Mary Louise summoned Mrs. Hilliard on the house phone, and by the time she stepped out of the elevator the two policemen had arrived.

“The thief must be hiding somewhere in the building,” concluded Mary Louise. “Waiting for a chance to slip away.”

“We’ll have to make a search,” announced Mrs. Hilliard. “You guard the doorway and the stairway, Mike,” she said to the watchman, “and one of you officers go around the first floor and see whether the windows are all securely locked—in case the burglar escaped through one of them. Then the other officer can come with Miss Gay and me while we search the floors above.”

Immediately the plan was put into effect, and the searchers began on the second floor, looking first in the corridors and closets and empty rooms, then knocking at the doors of the guests’ rooms.

Pauline Brooks’ door was the first they went to, and here a light shone under the cracks.

“Sorry to disturb you, Miss Brooks,” called Mrs. Hilliard, “but a sneak thief has gotten into the hotel, and we want to find him. May we come in?”

“Just a minute,” replied the girl. “Till I put on my bath robe. I was out late—at a dance, and I’m just undressing now.”

“What time is it, anyway?” asked Mary Louise. “You see, my watch was stolen.”

“It’s only a few minutes after one,” replied the policeman.

A moment later Pauline unlocked the door, and the three people entered. The room was very untidy: clothing had been flung about everywhere, and two open suitcases occupied the chairs.

“Look in the closet,” advised Mrs. Hilliard.

“There’s nobody there,” answered Pauline. “I’ve just been in it. But you might look under the bed. That’s where men always hide in the bedroom farces.”

“You wouldn’t think this was a ‘bedroom farce’ if you’d just lost your watch and your purse,” remarked Mary Louise sharply.

“I’m sorry, Mary Lou,” apologized Pauline. “You see, I didn’t know that *you* were the victim.”

“We’ve got to get along,” interrupted the officer. “There’s nobody here—I’m sure of that.”

They passed on to the other rooms, waking up the guests when it was necessary, apologizing, explaining—and finding nobody. In only two of the rooms besides Pauline’s had they found lights burning. Miss Granger, the artist, was still working on some drawings she was making for a magazine, and Miss Henrietta Stoddard, who explained that she was “such a poor sleeper,” was reading a book. But both these women said that they had heard no disturbance.

When the search was completed and the group returned to the first floor of the hotel, the watchman and the officer had nothing to report. The windows on the ground floor were all securely locked, the latter announced, and the former said that no one had escaped by the front door or the fire escape.

“It’s either an inside job or your young friend dreamed it,” one of the policemen said to Mrs. Hilliard.

“It couldn’t be an inside job,” returned the manager. “For there isn’t any man who lives in the hotel.”

“And I didn’t dream it,” protested Mary Louise. “Because my watch and my purse are gone, and my door was unlocked. I locked it myself when I went to bed last night.”

“Well, we’ll keep an eye on the building all night,” promised the policeman as he opened the door. “Let us know if you have any more trouble.”

When the men had gone, Mrs. Hilliard persuaded Mary Louise to come to her apartment for the rest of the night. She had a couch-bed in her sitting room which she often used for her own guests.

Mary Louise agreed, but it was a long while before she fell asleep again. She kept listening for sounds, imagining she heard footsteps in the hall, or windows opening somewhere in the building. But at last she dozed off, and slept until Mrs. Hilliard’s alarm awakened her the next morning.

“You had better go down to the dining room for your breakfast, Mary Louise,” said the manager. “I just have orange juice and coffee, up here—if I go into the dining room I am tempted to overeat, and I put on weight.”

“All right,” agreed Mary Louise. “I want to go to my room for fresh clothing anyway—I just grabbed these things last night in a hurry.... Mrs. Hilliard, what do you think of last night’s occurrence?”

“I don’t know what to think. I was convinced that all our robberies before this were inside jobs, because our watchman was so careful. But now I don’t know. Of course, this may be something entirely different. We’ll see if anything happens tonight. You’re sure it was a man, Mary Louise?”

“Positive. He wore a cap pulled down over his head, and a mask over his eyes. He had on a dark suit—sneakers, too, for I couldn’t hear him walk.”

“Did he have a gun?”

“I don’t know, because I pretended to be asleep, so he didn’t need to defend himself. He got out so quickly. Where could he have vanished to?”

Mrs. Hilliard shook her head with a sigh.

“I haven’t the slightest idea,” she said.

“Of course, he might have had an accomplice,” mused Mary Louise. “Some woman may have let him out her window to the fire escape. Still, the watchman was keeping his eye on that....” Mary Louise’s tone became dreary. “I guess I’m not much use to you, Mrs. Hilliard. I don’t think I ought to take the salary.”

“You mean you want to go home, Mary Louise?”

“Oh no! I wouldn’t leave now for anything. But I mean I probably shan’t be any help in finding a thief like that. So I oughtn’t to accept any pay.”

“Don’t worry about that,” returned Mrs. Hilliard, patting Mary Louise’s arm affectionately. “You just do the best you can. Nobody can do more. I’d really like it proved that none of our guests is the thief. I’d much rather find out that it was a common burglar.”

Reassured, Mary Louise went to her own room and dressed. By the time she reached the dining room the guests who held positions had already eaten their breakfasts and gone, and the others, who had nothing to do all day, had not yet put in an appearance. It was only a little after eight, but the dining room was deserted.

“I wish I had somebody to talk to,” she thought sadly as she seated herself at a little table by a window. The sunlight streamed in through the dainty ruffled curtains, there were rosebuds in the center of her table, and a menu from which she could order anything she wanted, but Mary Louise was not happy. She felt baffled and lonely.

She ordered grapefruit first, and just as she finished it, Mrs. Weinberger came

into the room. She made her way straight to Mary Louise's table.

"May I sit with you, Miss Gay?" she asked. "My daughter won't eat breakfast for fear of gaining a pound, and it's so lonesome eating all by yourself."

Mary Louise smiled cordially.

"I think so too, Mrs. Weinberger," she replied. "I'll be delighted to have you."

"Do you feel nervous after last night? It must have been terrible to be right in the room when the burglar got in. I was away when my watch was stolen."

"Tell me about it, Mrs. Weinberger," urged Mary Louise.

"I was over in Mrs. Moyer's room," the woman explained, after she had given her order to the waitress, "and my daughter went out of my room and couldn't remember whether she locked the door or not. Anyway, I discovered that my watch was gone when I was dressing for dinner." She sighed. "It was very valuable—a present from my late husband."

Mary Louise had an inspiration.

"I believe I'll visit some pawnshops today, to ask about mine," she said, "and I can inquire about yours at the same time, if you want me to, Mrs. Weinberger."

"Yes, indeed! But I am afraid it is too late now. Mine was an old-fashioned watch—we used to wear them pinned on our dresses, with a brooch. Mine had seven diamonds on it in front, and my initials 'E. W.' in tiny pearls on the back."

"Did you advertise?"

"Yes, of course. But nothing came of it. My daughter thinks that transient guest—a chorus girl named Mary Green—stole it. We tried to trace her, but we couldn't find her name with any of the theatrical companies in town at the time."

"She never came back here to Stoddard House?"

"Oh no."

"And were the other watches stolen the same day?"

“Yes. Mrs. Hilliard’s was taken during the supper hour, but she had laid it down on the desk, so that was her own carelessness. But the Walder girls had theirs taken while they were asleep—just as yours was.”

“What were theirs like?”

“Plain gold wrist-watches, with their initials—R. W. and E. W. Their names are Ruth and Evelyn.”

“Well, I’ll do what I can,” concluded Mary Louise. “And now let’s talk about something pleasant.”

So for the rest of the meal she and Mrs. Weinberger discussed books and the current moving pictures.

CHAPTER V

Another Robbery

Mary Louise had three separate plans in view for the morning. First, she would visit as many pawnshops as possible in the vicinity and ask to see their displays of watches. Second, she meant to go to Strawbridge and Clothier's department store and find out whether Margaret Detweiler had worked there, and why and when she had left. And third, she wanted to find some pretext to call on Miss Henrietta Stoddard in her own room and observe her closely.

As she walked out of the dining room she met Mrs. Hilliard going towards her little office on the first floor.

"Could I see you for a moment, Mrs. Hilliard?" she inquired.

"Certainly, my dear. Come into the office with me."

Mary Louise followed her into the room, but she did not sit down. She knew how busy the hotel manager would be on Saturday morning.

"I have decided to visit some pawnshops, Mrs. Hilliard," she said. "I have my own watch to identify, and I got a pretty good description of Mrs. Weinberger's today. But I want you to tell me a little more about the other things that were stolen."

"The silverware had an ivy-leaf pattern, and the initials 'S. H.'—for Stoddard House—engraved on it," replied the woman. "The vase was an old Chinese one, of an odd size, with decorations in that peculiar red they so often use. I believe I can draw it better than I can describe it. But I feel sure you'd never find it in a pawnshop. Whoever stole that sold it to an antique dealer."

However, she picked up her pencil and roughly sketched the vase for Mary Louise, giving her a good idea of its appearance. At the same time she described

the painting which had been stolen from Miss Granger's room—an original by the American artist Whistler.

Mary Louise wrote all these facts in her notebook and kept the drawing.

“That's fine, Mrs. Hilliard,” she said as she opened the door. “I'm going out now, and I'll be back for lunch.”

“Good-bye and good luck!”

Mary Louise went to her room, and from the telephone book beside her bed she listed the addresses of all the pawnshops in the neighborhood. This was going to be fun, she thought—at least, if she didn't lose her nerve.

She hesitated for a few minutes outside of the first shop she came to. The iron bars guarding the window, the three balls in the doorway, seemed rather forbidding. For Mary Louise had never been inside a pawnshop.

“I can say I want to buy a watch,” she thought. “I do, too—I certainly need one. But I'm afraid I'd rather have a brand-new Ingersoll than a gold one that has belonged to somebody else. Still, I don't have to tell the shopkeeper that.”

Boldly she opened the door and went in.

She had expected to find an old man with spectacles and a skullcap, the typical pawnbroker one sees in the moving pictures. But there was nothing different about this man behind the counter from any ordinary storekeeper.

“Good-morning, miss,” he said. “What can I do for you today?”

“I want to look at ladies' watches,” replied Mary Louise steadily.

The man nodded and indicated a glass case on the opposite side of the shop. Mary Louise examined its contents intently.

“The fact is,” she said, “my own watch was stolen. I thought maybe it might have been pawned, and I'd look around in the shops first, before I buy one, in the hope of finding it.”

“Recently?”

“Yes. Last night.”

The man smiled.

“If it had been pawned last night or this morning, you wouldn’t find it offered for sale yet. We have to hold all valuables until the time on their tickets expires.”

“Oh, of course! How stupid of me... Well, could you tell me whether any ladies’ watches have been pawned here since midnight last night?”

“Yes, we’ve taken in two,” replied the man graciously. “And I don’t mind showing them to you. I’m not in league with any thieves. I’m an honest man.”

“I’m sure of it,” agreed Mary Louise instantly.

But she was disappointed upon sight of the watches. Neither of them was hers, nor did either remotely resemble Mrs. Weinberger’s or any of the other three stolen from Stoddard House.

“Thank you ever so much,” she said finally. “I think I’ll look around a little more and ask about my own, and if I can’t find it, I may come back and buy one of yours. Several of those you have are very pretty.”

Thoroughly satisfied with her interview, she walked down the street until she came to another shop. It was on the corner of an alley, and just as she approached the intersection she noticed a woman in an old-fashioned brown suit coming out of the side door of the pawnshop. The woman glanced about furtively, as if she did not care to be seen, and caught Mary Louise’s eyes. With a gasp of surprise, the girl recognized her immediately. It was Miss Henrietta Stoddard!

Before Mary Louise could even nod to her, the woman had slipped across the street and around the corner, lost amid the Saturday morning crowd that was thronging the busy street. Mary Louise repressed a smile and entered the pawnshop by the front door.

She repeated her former experience, with this difference, however: she did not find the shopkeeper nearly so cordial or so willing to co-operate. Finally she asked point-blank what the woman in the brown suit had just pawned.

“I can’t see that that’s any of your business, miss,” he replied disagreeably. “But I will tell you that it wasn’t a watch.”

Mary Louise wasn’t sure that she believed him. But there was nothing that she could do without enlisting the help of her father.

She visited four other shops without any success, and finally decided to abandon the plan. It was too hopeless, too hit-or-miss, to expect to find those watches by that kind of searching. Far better, she concluded, to concentrate on observing the actions of the people at Stoddard House. Especially Miss Henrietta Stoddard herself!

So she turned her steps to the big department store where she believed Margaret Detweiler had worked till last Christmas and inquired her way to the employment office. The store was brilliantly decorated for Christmas, and crowds of late shoppers filled the aisles and the elevators, so that it was not easy to reach her destination.

Nor was the employment manager’s office empty. Even at this late date, applicants were evidently hoping for jobs, and Mary Louise had to sit down and wait her turn. It was half an hour later that she found herself opposite the manager’s desk.

Mechanically a clerk handed her an application to fill out.

“I don’t want a position,” Mary Louise said immediately. “I want to see whether I can get any information about a girl named Margaret Detweiler who, I think, worked in your store up to last Christmas. Would it be too much trouble to look her up in your files? I know you’re busy——”

“Oh, that’s all right,” replied the manager pleasantly, and she repeated the name to the clerk.

“You see,” explained Mary Louise, “Margaret Detweiler’s grandparents haven’t heard from her for a year, and they’re dreadfully worried. Margaret is all they have in the world.”

The clerk found the card immediately.

“Miss Detweiler did work here for six months last year,” she stated. “In the

jewelry department. And then she was dismissed for stealing.”

“Stealing!” repeated Mary Louise, aghast at such news. “Why, I can’t believe it! Margaret was the most upright, honest girl at home; she came from the best people. How did it happen?”

“I remember her now,” announced the employment manager. “A pretty, dark-eyed girl who always dressed rather plainly. Yes, I was surprised too. But she had been ill, I believe, and perhaps she wasn’t quite herself. Maybe she had doctor’s bills and so on. It was too bad, for if she had come to me I could have helped her out with a loan.”

“Was she sent to prison?” asked Mary Louise in a hoarse whisper. Oh, the disgrace of the thing! It would kill old Mrs. Detweiler if she ever found it out.

“No, she wasn’t. We found the stolen article in Miss Detweiler’s shoe. At least, one of the things she took—a link bracelet. We didn’t recover the ring, but a wealthy woman, a customer who happened to be in the jewelry department at the time, evidently felt sorry for Miss Detweiler and offered to pay for the ring. We didn’t let her, but of course we had to dismiss the girl.”

“You haven’t any idea where Margaret went—or what she did?”

“Only that this woman—her name was Mrs. Ferguson, I remember, and she lived at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel—promised Miss Detweiler a job. So perhaps everything is all right now.”

“I hope so!” exclaimed Mary Louise fervently. And thanking the woman profusely she left the office and the store.

But she had her misgivings. If everything had turned out all right, why hadn’t Margaret written to her grandparents? Who was this Mrs. Ferguson, and why had she done this kindness for an unknown girl? Mary Louise meant to find out, if she could.

She inquired her way to the Benjamin Franklin Hotel and asked at the desk for Mrs. Ferguson. But she was informed that no such person lived there.

“Would you have last year’s register?” she asked timidly. She hated to put everybody to so much trouble.

The clerk smiled: nobody could resist Mary Louise.

“I’ll get it for you,” he said.

After a good deal of searching she found a Mrs. H. R. Ferguson registered at the hotel on the twenty-third of the previous December, with only the indefinite address of Chicago, Illinois, after her name. Margaret Detweiler did not appear in the book at all: evidently she had never stayed at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel.

With a sigh of disappointment, Mary Louise thanked the clerk and left. Nothing had been gained by that visit.

“It must be lunch time,” she decided, after glancing in vain at her wrist, where she was accustomed to wear her watch. “I guess I’ll go back to the house.”

The minute she entered the door of Stoddard House, the most terrible commotion greeted her. A woman’s shriek rang through the air; someone cried out, “Catch her—she’s fainted!” the elevator doors slammed, and people appeared from everywhere, in wild confusion.

Mary Louise dashed through the door to the desk just in time to see Mrs. Macgregor, the wealthy widow who lived in room 201, drop down on the bench beside the elevator. Women pressed all around her prostrate figure: guests, maids, Mrs. Hilliard, and the secretary, Miss Horton, who offered a glass of water to the unconscious woman. But nobody seemed to know what it was all about.

Presently Mrs. Macgregor opened her eyes and accepted a sip of the water. Then she glared accusingly at Mrs. Hilliard.

“I’ve been robbed!” she cried. “Five hundred dollars and a pair of diamond earrings!”

CHAPTER VI

Saturday Afternoon

“Do you feel any better now, Mrs. Macgregor?” inquired Mrs. Hilliard, as the stricken woman sat upright on the bench.

“Better!” she repeated angrily. “I’ll never feel better till I get my money back again.”

Mary Louise repressed a smile. Macgregor was a Scotch name.

“Now, tell us how it happened,” urged Mrs. Hilliard. “When did you first miss the money?”

“Just a few minutes ago, when I came out of my bath.” She became hysterical again. “Lock the doors!” she cried. “Search everybody! Call the police!”

Mary Louise caught Mrs. Hilliard’s eye.

“Shall I?” she asked.

Mrs. Hilliard nodded. “And tell the janitor to lock the doors and station himself at the front to let the guests in who come home, for the girls will be coming into lunch from work. Today’s a half holiday.”

By the time Mary Louise had returned, she found the crowd somewhat dispersed. The servants had gone back to their work, but several new arrivals had joined Mrs. Hilliard and Mrs. Macgregor. The two Walder girls, about whom Mary Louise had heard so much, were there, and Mrs. Hilliard introduced them. They were both very attractive, very much the same type as Mary Louise’s own friends in Riverside. Much more real, she thought, than Pauline Brooks, with her vivid make-up and her boastful talk.

“That is a great deal of money to keep in your room, Mrs. Macgregor,” Evelyn Walder said. “Especially after all the robberies we’ve been having at Stoddard House.”

“That’s just it! It was on account of these terrible goings-on that I took the money and the diamonds from a little safe I have and got them ready to put into the bank. Somebody was too quick for me. But I’m pretty sure I know who it was: Ida, the chambermaid!”

“Oh, no!” protested Mrs. Hilliard. “Ida has been with me two years, and I know she’s honest.”

“Send for her,” commanded Mrs. Macgregor.

While they were waiting for the girl to appear, Mrs. Macgregor explained more calmly just what had happened.

“I had the money and the diamonds in a bag on my bureau,” she said. “I was running the water in my bathroom when I heard a knock at the door. I unlocked it, and Ida came in with clean towels and a fresh bureau cover. While she was fixing the bureau cover, I hurried back to the bathroom, put the towels away, and turned off the water. My bath salts fell out of the closet when I opened the door to put the towels away, so I was delayed two or three minutes gathering them up. I heard Ida go out and close the door behind her, and I got into my bath. When I came back into the bedroom, my bag was gone.”

“But you didn’t scream immediately,” observed Mrs. Hilliard. “You must have waited to dress.”

“I had dressed in the bathroom, before I knew the bag was stolen.”

“Wasn’t anybody else in your room all morning, Mrs. Macgregor?” Mary Louise couldn’t help asking.

“Only Miss Stoddard. She had gone out to buy me some thread—she does my mending for me—and she stopped in on her return from the store and took some of my lingerie to her room.”

At this moment the chambermaid, a girl of about twenty-two, approached the group. Either she knew nothing about the robbery, or else she was a splendid

actress, for she appeared entirely unconcerned.

“You wanted me, Mrs. Hilliard?” she inquired.

“Listen to the innocent baby!” mocked Mrs. Macgregor scornfully.

Ida looked puzzled, and Mrs. Hilliard briefly explained the situation. The girl denied the whole thing immediately.

“There wasn’t any bag on the bureau, Mrs. Macgregor,” she said. “I know, because I changed the cover.”

“Maybe it wasn’t on the bureau,” admitted Mrs. Macgregor. “But it was somewhere in the room. You’re going to be searched!”

The girl looked imploringly at Mrs. Hilliard, but the latter could not refuse to grant Mrs. Macgregor’s demand.

“I can prove I didn’t take any bag,” said Ida. “By Miss Brooks. I went right into her room next and made her bed. She can tell you I did. She was just going out—I’m sure she’ll remember.”

“Is Miss Brooks here?”

“I think she left the hotel about fifteen minutes ago,” stated Miss Horton, the secretary. “Before Mrs. Macgregor screamed.”

“Well, we can ask her when she comes back,” said Mrs. Hilliard. “Where were you, Ida, when I sent for you?”

“Still in Miss Brooks’ room,” replied the girl tearfully. “I was running the vacuum cleaner, so I never heard the disturbance.”

Mrs. Hilliard turned to Mrs. Macgregor. “If Ida did steal your bag,” she said, “she would have to have it concealed on her person. Mary Louise, you take Ida to my apartment and have her undress and prove that she isn’t hiding anything.”

Without a word the two girls did as they were told and took the elevator to the fourth floor. Mary Louise felt dreadfully sorry for her companion, who by this time was shaking and sobbing. She put her arm through Ida’s as they entered

Mrs. Hilliard's apartment.

"You know, Ida," she said, "if you did do this it would be lots easier for you if you'd own up now. The police are bound to find out anyhow, sooner or later."

"But I didn't, miss!" protested the other girl. "I never stole anything in my life. I was brought up different. I'm a good girl, and my mother would die if she knew I was even accused of stealing."

Instinctively Mary Louise believed her. Nevertheless, she had to do as she was told, and she carefully made the search. But she found nothing.

Satisfied, she took the girl back to Mrs. Hilliard. The police had already arrived, and more of the hotel guests had returned. Miss Stoddard was sitting beside Mrs. Macgregor, and Mary Louise longed to suggest that she—or rather her room—be searched.

However, the police attended to that. One officer took each floor, and everybody's room was systematically gone through. But the valuable bag could not be found.

The doors of the hotel were unlocked, and everybody was allowed to go in and out again as she pleased. Mary Louise watched eagerly for Pauline Brooks, hoping that she would prove Ida's alibi, but Miss Brooks did not return. Undoubtedly she had a date somewhere—a lively girl like Pauline could not imagine wasting her Saturday afternoon on "females," as she would call the guests at Stoddard House.

The dining-room doors were thrown open, and Mary Louise and Mrs. Hilliard went in to their lunch together. The older woman seemed dreadfully depressed.

"Mrs. Macgregor is leaving this afternoon," she said. "And the Weinbergers go tomorrow. If this keeps up, the hotel will be empty in another week.... And I'll lose my position."

"Oh, I hope not," replied Mary Louise. "Everybody can't leave because things are stolen, for there are robberies everywhere. The big hotels all employ private detectives, and yet I've read that an awful lot of things are taken just the same. Some people make their living just by robbing hotel guests. So, no matter where people go, they run a risk. Even in homes of their own."

“Yes, that’s true. But Stoddard House has been particularly unlucky, and you know things like this get around.”

“I’m going to do my best to find out who is the guilty person,” Mary Louise assured her. “And this morning’s robbery ought to narrow down my suspects to those who were at the house at the time. At least, if you can help me by telling me who they are.”

“Yes, I think I can. Besides Mrs. Macgregor and myself, there were only Miss Stoddard, the two Weinbergers, Mrs. Moyer, and Miss Brooks. All the rest of the guests have positions and were away at work.”

Mary Louise took her notebook and checked off the list.

“That does make it easier, unless one of the help is guilty. They were all here at the time.... But of course the thief may be that same man who stole my watch.”

“Yes, that’s possible, especially if he is an accomplice of one of the guests—of Miss Stoddard, for instance.”

“Yes. I’ve been thinking about her. She was in Mrs. Macgregor’s room, you know.” But Mary Louise did not tell Mrs. Hilliard about seeing Miss Stoddard sneaking out of the pawnshop.

“You better go to a movie this afternoon, Mary Louise, and forget all about it for the time being,” advised the manager. “Shan’t I ask the Walder girls to take you along? They usually go to a show.”

“No, thanks, Mrs. Hilliard. It’s very thoughtful of you, but I want to go back to the department store and make another inquiry about the lost girl I’m trying to trace. I’d like a chance to talk to Miss Stoddard too, and to Pauline Brooks when she comes back. Maybe she saw the thief, if she came out of her room when Ida said she did.”

“Well, do as you like. Only don’t worry too much, dear.”

Mary Louise finished her lunch and went out into the open air again. Now that she was becoming a little more familiar with the city, she thought she would like to walk along Chestnut and Walnut streets, to have a look at the big hotels and the expensive shops. The downtown district was thronged with people,

shopping, going to matinées, hurrying home for their weekend holiday; the confusion was overwhelming after the quiet of Riverside. But Mary Louise enjoyed the excitement: it would be something to write home about.

At Broad and Walnut streets she stopped to admire the Ritz Hotel, a tall, imposing building of white stone, where Pauline Brooks had said that her aunt usually stayed when she was visiting Philadelphia. What fun it would be to have luncheon or tea there some day! If only she had somebody to go with. Perhaps Pauline would take her, if she asked her. Mary Louise wanted to be able to tell the Riverside girls about it.

Half a block farther on she saw Pauline herself coming towards her, accompanied by a stout, stylishly dressed woman and a very blond girl of her own age.

“That must be Pauline’s aunt,” Mary Louise thought, noticing what a hard, unpleasant face the woman had, how unattractive she was, in spite of her elegant clothes. “No wonder Pauline doesn’t want to live with her!”

“Hello, Pauline!” she said brightly. It was wonderful to meet somebody she knew in this big, strange city.

Pauline, who had not noticed Mary Louise, looked up in surprise.

“Oh, hello—uh—Emmy Lou,” she replied.

Mary Louise laughed and stood still. “We’ve had all sorts of excitement at Stoddard House, Pauline. I want to tell you about it.”

The woman and the blond girl continued to walk on, but Pauline stopped for a moment.

“You mean besides last night?” she asked.

“Yes. Another robbery. Mrs. Macgregor——”

“Tell me at supper time, Emmy Lou,” interrupted Pauline. “These people are in a hurry. I’ve got to go.”

Mary Louise was disappointed; she did so want to ask Pauline whether Ida’s

story were true. Now she'd have to wait.

She continued her walk down Walnut Street until she came to Ninth, then she turned up to Market Street and entered the department store where she had made the inquiries that morning concerning Margaret Detweiler.

There were not so many people visiting the employment manager that afternoon as in the morning: perhaps everybody thought Saturday afternoon a poor time to look for a job. Mary Louise was thankful for this, and apologized profusely for taking the busy woman's time again.

"I couldn't find anybody by the name of Ferguson at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel now," she said, "or any trace of Margaret Detweiler at all, there. But after I left the hotel it occurred to me that if you would give me the address that Margaret had while she was working here, I might make inquiries at the boarding house, or wherever it was that she lived. They might know something. Do you think that would be too much trouble?"

"No trouble at all," replied the woman pleasantly. She told the clerk to look in the files again. The address was a number on Pine Street, and Mary Louise asked where that street was located, as she copied it down in her notebook.

"Not far away," was the reply. "You can easily walk there in a few minutes." She gave Mary Louise explicit directions.

It was a shabby red-brick house in a poor but respectable neighborhood. A colored woman answered Mary Louise's ring.

"Nothing today!" said the woman instantly, without giving Mary Louise a chance to speak first.

"I'm not selling anything," replied the girl, laughing. "I wanted to ask the landlady here about a girl named Margaret Detweiler who used to live here. Could you ask her to spare me a minute or two?"

"All right," agreed the servant. "Come in."

She ushered Mary Louise into a neat but gloomy parlor, and in a couple of minutes the landlady appeared.

“I understand you want to ask me about Miss Detweiler?” she inquired.

“Yes,” answered Mary Louise. “I am trying to find her for her grandparents. The employment manager of the department store said she lived here. Is that correct?”

“Yes, it is. Miss Detweiler lived here for about five months. She seemed like a nice quiet girl, with no bad habits. She paid regular till the last month she was here, when she took sick and had to spend a lot of money on medicines and doctor’s bills. Then, all of a sudden, she slipped away without payin’ her bill, and I never saw her again.”

“She owes you money?” demanded Mary Louise.

“No, she don’t now. A couple of weeks after she left, she sent it to me in a registered letter. So we’re square now.”

“Didn’t she send her address?”

“No, she didn’t.”

“Where was the letter postmarked?”

“Center Square. A little town up the state.”

“Do you still have the envelope?”

“No, I haven’t. But I remember the name, because I used to know folks at Center Square.”

“Didn’t Margaret say anything in her letter about how she was getting on or what she was doing?” asked Mary Louise.

“There wasn’t any letter. Just a folded piece of paper.”

“Oh, that’s too bad! And what was the date?”

“Sometime in January. Let’s see, it must have been near the start of the month, for I remember I used some of that money to buy my grandson a birthday present, and his birthday’s on the seventh.”

“Well, I thank you very much for what you have told me,” concluded Mary Louise. “Maybe it will lead to something. I’ll go to Center Square and make inquiries. You see,” she explained, “Margaret Detweiler’s grandparents are very unhappy because they haven’t heard from her, and I want to do all in my power to find her. Margaret is all they have, and they love her dearly.”

The woman’s eyes filled with tears.

“And may you have good luck, my dear child!” she said.

CHAPTER VII

The Abandoned House

When Mary Louise returned to the hotel, she found everything quiet. She went immediately to the fourth floor; Mrs. Hilliard was in her sitting room, knitting and listening to the radio.

“Has anything happened since I left?” asked the girl eagerly.

“No,” replied the manager. “Except that another guest has departed. Your friend Pauline Brooks came back, packed her bag, paid her bill, and left. Of course, she was only a transient anyway, but the hotel is so empty that I was hoping she would stay a while.”

“I met her on the street with her aunt,” Mary Louise said. “But she didn’t have time to talk to me. Did you question her about Ida’s story?”

“Yes, and she said it was true that Ida did come into her room to make the bed at that time, because she, Miss Brooks, had slept late. But she didn’t know how long the maid had stayed because she left the hotel before Mrs. Macgregor discovered her loss and screamed. So it is possible that Ida went back into Mrs. Macgregor’s room.”

“Personally I believe the girl is innocent,” stated Mary Louise.

“So do I. As I said, she has been with me two years, and I have always found her absolutely trustworthy. It probably was a sneak thief. The police are on the lookout for somebody like that.”

“Did you talk to Miss Stoddard?”

“No, I didn’t. She went out this afternoon.”

“She’ll bear watching,” remarked Mary Louise.

“I think so too,” agreed the other... “Now, tell me what you did with yourself this afternoon.”

Mary Louise related the story of her visit to Margaret Detweiler’s former boarding house and the scant information she had obtained. “Is Center Square far away?” she asked.

“Oh, a couple of hours’ drive, if you have a car. But do you really think it would do you any good to go there? The girl was probably only passing through and stopped at the postoffice to mail her letter to the landlady.”

“Yes, I am afraid that is all there was to it. But I could at least make inquiries, and after all, it’s the only clue I have. I’d never be satisfied if I didn’t do the very best I could to find Margaret for her grandparents.”

Mary Louise stayed a little longer with Mrs. Hilliard; then she went to her own room to dress for dinner. But suddenly she was terribly homesick. Jane and the boys would be coasting all afternoon, she knew, for there would still be plenty of snow left in the country, and there was a dance tonight at another friend’s. Max would be coming for her in his runabout; she would be wearing her blue silk dress—and—and—Her eyes filled with tears. Wasn’t she just being terribly foolish to stay here in Philadelphia, missing all those good times? And for what? There wasn’t a chance in the world that she’d discover the thief, when even the police were unsuccessful.

“But I’ll never learn to be a detective until I try—and—learn to accept failures,” she told herself sternly, and she knew that, all things considered, she had not been foolish. It might be hard at the time to give up all the fun, but in the long run it would be worth it. She ought to be thanking her lucky stars for the chance!

Somewhat reassured, she dressed and went downstairs to the reception room, where the radio was playing. She found the two Walder girls, whom she had met at noontime when Mrs. Macgregor raised the commotion. Mary Louise greeted them cordially.

“It’s beginning to rain,” said Evelyn Walder, “so Sis and I thought we’d stay in tonight and try to get up a game of bridge. Do you play, Mary Lou?”

“Yes, indeed,” replied Mary Louise. “I love it. Whom shall we get for a fourth? Mrs. Hilliard?”

“Mrs. Hilliard doesn’t like to play, and besides, she has to get up and answer the telephone so much that she usually just knits in the evenings. Maybe we can get one of the Fletcher girls.”

“No, I heard Lucy say that they had a date,” returned Ruth Walder.

Mary Louise looked disappointed; she was so anxious to meet all the guests at Stoddard House. She had an inspiration, however. “How about Miss Stoddard?” she asked. “Does she play?”

The other two girls looked at Mary Louise in amazement.

“Sure, she plays bridge,” replied Evelyn. “But we don’t want her! If you don’t mind my slang, I’ll say she’s a pain in the neck.”

Mary Louise smiled: she thought so too.

“Mrs. Weinberger is nice, even if she is a lot older than we are,” observed Ruth. “And she loves to play, because her daughter goes out every Saturday night with her boy-friend, I think.”

The others agreed to this suggestion, and Mrs. Weinberger accepted the invitation immediately. So the evening passed pleasantly, but Mary Louise did not feel that she had learned anything of value to her job.

The party broke up about ten-thirty; Mary Louise went to her room and took out her notebook.

“It’s getting so confusing,” she mused. “So many things stolen, so many people involved. These two robberies since I came—the one in my room last night, and Mrs. Macgregor’s today—make five in all. I wonder if they could all have been done by the same person. Maybe—maybe it’s a secret band of some kind! With Miss Henrietta Stoddard as its leader!”

Her one determination, when she awakened the next morning, was to have a talk with Miss Stoddard. Accordingly, after breakfast she asked Mrs. Hilliard how that could best be arranged.

“Miss Stoddard always goes to Christ Church,” was the reply. “Why couldn’t you plan to go with her?”

“That’s a wonderful idea, Mrs. Hilliard! I always did want to visit Christ Church—we read so much about it in history.”

“I’ll ask her to take you with her,” offered the manager, “when she comes out of the dining room.”

The arrangement was easily made, and a couple of hours later Mary Louise met Miss Stoddard in the lobby of the hotel. Today the spinster was not wearing the shabby brown suit; indeed, she looked quite neat and stylish in a dark blue coat trimmed with fur.

The rain had washed most of the snow away, and the sun was shining, so both Mary Louise and Miss Stoddard thought it would be pleasant to walk down to Second and Market streets, where the historic church was situated. For a while they talked of its significance in colonial Philadelphia, and Miss Stoddard promised to show Mary Louise the pew in which George Washington and his family had worshiped.

It was Miss Stoddard, however, who gave the conversation a personal turn.

“You saw me come out of that pawnshop yesterday, didn’t you, Miss Gay?” she inquired. “I wanted to ask you not to say anything about my visit to Mrs. Hilliard or to any of the other guests.”

“But it is nothing to be ashamed of, Miss Stoddard,” protested Mary Louise. “Lots of people pawn things.”

“I know. But not women of my type, usually. I’m rather hard pressed for money now, so I sold an old brooch of my mother’s. It didn’t bring much.”

Mary Louise nodded and looked at her companion. But she could not tell whether she were telling the truth or not.

“Then,” continued Miss Stoddard, “my visit might look suspicious to some people—after all these robberies at the hotel.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

“But it really proves my innocence, because if I had taken all that money of Mrs. Macgregor’s I shouldn’t be rushing to a pawnshop now to get a little more.”

That was a good point; Mary Louise had not thought of it before.

“Who do you think did all the stealing, Miss Stoddard?” she asked point-blank.

“The Weinberger girl! I suppose you’d call her a woman, but she seems like just a girl to me. She and the young man she goes with are in league together. I think he’s out of work, and the two of them have been planning to get married. So they’ve been stealing right and left.”

“Even her own mother’s watch?”

“Yes, even that.”

Mary Louise was silent. It was an entirely new idea to her. Yet it was possible; the Weinbergers had been at Stoddard House ever since the things began to be stolen. If Hortense Weinberger were going to marry this young man of hers, she could use the silverware, the vase, and the painting in her new house or apartment. The watches could be pawned, and the money would be enough to keep the young couple for a while.... Yes, the explanation was logical.

“I have reason to believe that this couple will elope tonight,” announced Miss Stoddard.

Mary Louise’s eyes opened wide with excitement. “If that man is the thief, and if I can see him to identify him,” she said, “maybe that will solve the mystery. You remember, Miss Stoddard, a man stole my watch. He was short and of slight build—but of course I couldn’t see his face. Is Miss Weinberger’s friend like that?”

“I don’t know. I never saw him. But I overheard a phone call, and Hortense Weinberger said she’d slip out about eleven tonight. Could you be watching then?”

“Yes, yes!” cried Mary Louise joyfully. Oh, suppose it were true, and she could identify the man! Wouldn’t it be too wonderful?

“I think you’re terribly clever, Miss Stoddard,” she said, “if you really have

found the solution. It will mean so much to Mrs. Hilliard. She has been worried to death.”

They had been so interested in their conversation that they did not realize how near they were to the church. In another minute they were walking reverently into the old building, and for the next hour and a half, robberies and mysteries were forgotten in the solemn beauty of the service. Nor did they refer to the subject afterwards, but walked back to the hotel talking about historic Philadelphia.

Mary Louise went to her room after dinner and wrote down everything Miss Stoddard had said about Hortense Weinberger. The explanation was so plausible that she could hardly wait for the evening to come, with her chance to identify her own particular burglar. If he were the man who had entered her room, the whole thing would be solved and she could go home for Christmas! Oh, how glad she was that she had had that talk with Miss Stoddard!

In the midst of her daydreams a knock sounded at the door. A maid handed her a card with the name “Max Miller” engraved on it.

Mary Louise let out a wild whoop of joy and, not waiting to explain, dashed past the maid and down the steps to the lobby. And there he was. Good old Max—looking handsomer than ever! Mary Louise could have hugged him in her delight.

“Max! You angel!” she cried. “How did you know I’d be so glad to see you?”

“Because I knew how glad I’d be to see you,” he replied, still holding onto her hand.

Mary Louise withdrew it laughingly.

“Women talk,” she reminded him, glancing about her.

“O.K.,” he grinned. “How are you? Solved your mystery yet?”

“Oh no. I’ve had my own watch and five dollars stolen—that’s all!”

“And you call this a good time! Well, Mary Lou, you certainly can take it.... But haven’t you had enough, little girl? Please come home with me!”

Mary Louise's eyes flashed in anger.

"Is that what you came here for, Max Miller?" she demanded.

"No—oh, no! I didn't expect you'd come home. I just wanted to see you, so I drove down. Started early this morning. Now let's go places and do things!"

"Where? You can't do much in Philadelphia on Sunday."

"Anywhere. We can take a drive and have our supper at some nice place away from this henhouse."

"Now, Max——"

"Get your coat and hat. There's a good girl."

"But, Max, you must be sick of driving. And if you expect to start back tonight _____"

"I don't. I'm staying over at the Y.M. for a couple of days. So I can watch you. Now, don't get excited! I have your parents' consent. In fact, they thought it was a bully idea. You may be a wonderful detective, Mary Lou, but just the same you're a darned pretty girl. And pretty girls alone in strange cities...."

"I have Mrs. Hilliard," she reminded him.

"Yes, I know. That's what makes it *look* all right. But it doesn't make you safe, just the same. You could easily be kidnaped."

"You're not going to follow me everywhere I go, are you?" she asked, in concern.

"No. Just keep an eye on you for a couple of days. And maybe help you a bit. With a car at your disposal, you may be able to clear up things quicker and go home in time for the senior prom. That's my little scheme, in a nutshell."

"It will be wonderful," agreed Mary Louise. "I'll admit there have been moments when I've been homesick, Max." Her eyes brightened. "I know where I want to go this afternoon! To Center Square."

“Where’s that?”

“I don’t know. Out in the country somewhere—you can look it up on your map.”

“O.K. I’m ready, Mary Lou. The car is at the door. Run up and get your hat and coat. Wrap up warmly. It’s a lot warmer, and most of the snow’s gone, but you know my runabout isn’t like a heated limousine.”

In five minutes she was back again, looking very pretty in her squirrel coat, with its matching toque. Leaving word for Mrs. Hilliard that she would not be back for supper, she got into the car with Max.

As the couple started, Mary Louise explained why she wanted to go to Center Square: that her project had nothing to do with the thefts at the hotel but was the hope of tracing Margaret Detweiler. And she told her companion the facts she had learned about the girl.

“I’m even more anxious to find her than to solve the mystery at Stoddard House,” she said, “because of those two old people. It’s just too dreadful for them.”

Max nodded. He knew the Detweilers and felt extremely sorry for them. Everybody in Riverside liked them and pitied them in their distress.

“I just can’t bear to tell them that Margaret was dismissed from the department store for stealing,” she added.

“I wouldn’t,” advised Max. “Better tell them nothing at all than that. It wouldn’t help any and would only cause them unhappiness.”

Mary Louise asked about everything that had happened at Riverside since she had left. It had been only two days, but it seemed like an age. Max described the party the night before, but it was a poor affair without Mary Lou, according to his idea, and he had left early so he could get off at daybreak this morning.

The day was clear and warm, and except for the slush on the roads the drive was delightful. The young people were happy to be together again and enjoyed every minute of it.

It was already dusk of the short winter day when they arrived at Center Square

and stopped at the country hotel.

“We’re going to want dinner in an hour or so,” Max told the clerk. “But first we want to see whether we can locate a girl who was here late last winter. Did a young woman named Margaret Detweiler ever register here?”

The clerk obligingly looked through his book. But the name was not there.

“She’s tall and slender and very dark,” said Mary Louise. “Has wavy hair and an olive complexion.”

The clerk shook his head.

“No, I don’t remember seein’ anybody like that around. Not many strangers come here—except automobile parties sometimes, stoppin’ to eat.”

“Are there any empty houses she might have rented?” was Mary Louise’s next question.

“None rented as I know of. There’s some abandoned houses around, places where people sometimes come just for the summer.”

“Where?”

The clerk gave the directions.

“Now one more question. Where does the postmaster live? For of course the postoffice is closed on Sunday.”

“Sure it’s closed. But the postmaster lives right over top of it. Across the street a way from here.”

Mary Louise and Max went there next and were fortunate enough to find the man at home. When Mary Louise told him about the registered letter and described the girl, he said he believed he did remember. So few people came to the little country town; still fewer registered letters. But Margaret hadn’t stopped in a car, he thought—she had walked from somewhere. No, he was positive she hadn’t been boarding with any of the folks around, or he’d have heard of it.

Well, that was something definite! Maybe she was hiding in one of those empty

houses the clerk had spoken of, to escape from the police.

Max turned his car off the main highway into a little dirt road, almost impassable with its slush and snow. He stopped in front of the first empty house which the clerk had described. It was dark and forlorn.

“There would be some sort of light if anybody were living there,” observed Max.

“You can’t tell,” replied Mary Louise. “If Margaret were hiding, she’d be careful about lights. Let’s get out and look.”

“But why should she hide? Didn’t you tell me the employment manager promised not to send her to jail?”

“Yes, but you don’t know what crimes she’s committed since. If she were behaving herself, wouldn’t she have written to her grandparents? Either she’s dead or she’s doing something wrong.”

They waded through slush over their shoe-tops but could see no signs of any life. Mary Louise decided to try another house.

“It’s a wild theory, Mary Lou, but you’re the doctor,” agreed Max. “So long as my bus’ll run, I’m game.”

“You are a sport, Max! I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Men are helpful sometimes, aren’t they?”

“I guess they’re absolutely necessary,” replied Mary Louise modestly. “I never seem to be able to get along without them.”

“That’s the proper attitude for a girl,” he answered gayly.

Farther along the road they stopped in front of another empty house. It was situated at the top of a steep incline and almost completely surrounded by trees.

“Can you climb that hill, Max?” she asked.

“I can try—if you think there’s any use,” he replied.

It was a difficult task, for the driveway was so covered with slush that it was

hard to tell which was road and which was field. But Max made it in low gear, and they came to a stop in front of a barn, under a big tree.

The house was shabby and unpainted; its windows were covered with boards, and its heavy doors without glass. Mary Louise shuddered: it reminded her of Dark Cedars.

Max turned off the motor and jumped out of the car.

“Nobody home, I guess,” he announced.

From her seat in the car Mary Louise stared at the house, peering into the strip of glass above the boards on the windows. She thought she saw a flicker of light, as if a candle were burning. Yes, she was sure of it—and—a face appeared at the window! Two frightened eyes looked right into hers. A second later another face appeared, more plainly than the first, for this person evidently had hold of the candle. The first face had vanished, and Mary Louise saw only that of an exceedingly ugly woman—someone who looked somehow familiar.

That very instant the tiny light went out, and at the same moment Mary Louise sank unconscious in her seat. A stone, hurled from the tree above her, had hit her right on the head!

CHAPTER VIII

Knocked Out

Max, who was standing on the ground near by, heard the heavy thud of the stone as it hit the floor of the car. Turning about sharply, he saw Mary Louise slumped in her seat, unconscious from the blow. He flung open the door and jumped in beside her.

“Mary Lou! Mary Lou! Are you alive?” he cried desperately.

The girl did not answer.

“Help! Help!” he shrieked, at the top of his lungs.

A mocking laugh sounded from the tree above. Max looked up, but in the darkness he could see no one. How he wished he had his flashlight! But it was behind in the rumble seat, and he daren’t waste a minute; he must get Mary Lou to a doctor with all possible speed.

Starting his engine immediately—for there was no reply to his call for help—he circled around the tree and crept cautiously down the slippery hill, praying as he had never prayed before. Oh, suppose Mary Louise were dead!

With as much speed as he dared put on, he drove back to the Center Square hotel. As he came to a stop he felt a little movement beside him, and Mary Louise raised her head and opened her eyes.

“Where are we, Max?” she asked. “What happened?”

“Oh, my darling!” he cried, flinging his arm around her shoulders. “You are alive!”

The girl managed a feeble laugh.

“Of course I am. My head hurts dreadfully, though. What happened?”

“You were hit by a stone—see it there, on the floor?—from that tree we were parked under. It knocked you out.... Now, can you manage to walk up to the hotel, or shall I carry you?”

“I can walk,” she replied, taking his arm.

In the light of the hotel doorway Max saw the blood running down her neck. He wiped it with his handkerchief.

“Can we have a doctor immediately?” he asked the hotel clerk the moment they were inside the door.

“Yes, there’s one in the dining room now, eating his dinner. I’ll call him. An accident?”

Max explained the strange happening at the empty house, but the clerk said he did not know anything about the place. He had not heard of any gangsters in these parts.

The doctor came immediately and dressed Mary Louise’s head. The cut was not serious, he assured her; it was not in a vital place. When it was washed and bandaged she was able to eat her dinner with enjoyment.

“Maybe that first person I saw was Margaret Detweiler,” she said. “I wish I could stay here all night and go investigate tomorrow. But Mother wouldn’t approve of it.”

“I should say not!” thundered Max. “I’m taking you back to Mrs. Hilliard tonight, and I think you had better go home to Riverside tomorrow.”

“Indeed I won’t, Max. And that reminds me, I have to be at the hotel tonight at eleven o’clock. I want to spy on an elopement.”

“Elopement! What next?”

“Well, one of the guests, a Miss Stoddard, who happens to be a niece of the founder of Stoddard House, thinks another guest is eloping tonight. She thinks this couple are responsible for all the robberies at the hotel. You know it was a

man who entered my room and stole my watch, so I hoped maybe I could identify this fellow as the burglar. If I could, the mystery would be solved.”

“And you could go home?”

“Yes, unless I could find out something more about Margaret Detweiler. But I wouldn’t stay here just on purpose for that. I’d go home and see what I could do from there, with Dad’s help.”

“What time is it now, I wonder?” asked Max. “We must get back without fail!”

“I don’t know,” replied Mary Louise regretfully. “I haven’t any watch.”

“I’m going to buy you one for Christmas, if I get a check from Dad,” announced Max. “Of course, it will be late, but I’ll give you your other present first, so you wouldn’t mind that, would you, Mary Lou?”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort!” protested the girl. “I couldn’t accept it. If you get a check from your father it’s to buy something for yourself. I’ll get an Ingersoll tomorrow when I’m in town.... Now, what time is it?”

“It’s half-past eight. If you feel able, I think we better go along, because I don’t dare drive too fast on these slippery roads at night.”

“I’m all right—I only have a headache now. So let’s get going.”

Max paid the bill, and they were off.

“Now, what will your plans be for tomorrow?” he inquired, as they rode along.

“I’d like to come out here and visit that empty house with a policeman,” she replied. “If it’s possible, I will. But of course I have to see what turns up at the hotel. That is my real job: I’m being paid for it, and my father and Mrs. Hilliard are counting on me to do my best.”

“I wouldn’t care if you never saw Center Square again,” muttered Max resentfully. “Still, it would be great to catch the guy who threw that rock at you.”

“And find out whether the girl really was Margaret Detweiler. Yes, and I’d like to see that ugly woman again. I’ve seen her face before somewhere, but I can’t

place her. You don't forget a face like that."

"There's something crooked about their hiding in that house," remarked Max.

"Yes, of course.... Well, to continue with my plans: I'll see what develops tonight. If there really is an elopement, I'll try to identify that man. If he isn't anything like my burglar, I'll believe that Miss Stoddard is guilty herself and that she just made the whole story up to throw suspicion away from herself."

Max regarded her admiringly.

"You are a pretty clever girl, Mary Lou," he said. "I do think you'll make a swell detective."

"Thanks, Max. But I'm afraid there's nothing clever about that. It's just using common sense."

"Well, the good detectives say that's the most important thing: not to let anything escape their notice and to use common sense all the time."

They talked of other things for a while, of school and dances and basketball. Finally they reached Stoddard House, a little after ten o'clock.

"Oh, I do hope we're in time!" exclaimed Mary Louise.

They found the hotel almost deserted. Mrs. Hilliard was sitting in a chair, knitting. Nobody else was around.

"Did you have a good time, dear?" she asked, after Max had been introduced to her.

"An exciting time," replied the young man. "Mary Lou was hit on the head with a stone and knocked out. But detectives have to expect that sort of thing, I suppose."

"Sh!" warned the girl. "Nobody except Mrs. Hilliard is supposed to know I'm acting as detective."

"I didn't k-n-o-w that!" apologized Max, in the tone of Joe Penner.

Mrs. Hilliard looked troubled. "Tell me what happened," she urged.

Briefly Mary Louise related the story, and the good woman was relieved to hear that the blow was not serious. She was thankful, too, that the job at Stoddard House had not been responsible for it.

"Are the Weinbergers still here?" was Mary Louise's next question.

"Mrs. Weinberger is. But her daughter went out early this afternoon, and I don't think she came back. Her mother was in a great stew at supper time. You would think from the way she carries on that her daughter was a girl in her teens instead of a woman of twenty-eight or so."

A look of disappointment crossed Mary Louise's face.

"I must see Miss Stoddard," she announced. "Max, you wait here with Mrs. Hilliard till I come back, because I may need you. I shan't be gone long."

She ran off and took the elevator to the third floor and knocked at Miss Stoddard's door.

“Who is it?” was the query.

“Mary Louise Gay. May I come in, Miss Stoddard?”

The woman turned the key in the lock and opened the door. She was dressed in a kimono and slippers.

“You’re too late, Miss Gay,” she said. “Miss Weinberger has already eloped. I’m sure of it. I saw her get into a taxi this afternoon, and one of the maids came out and brought her her suitcase. She probably had hidden it somewhere from her mother. She’s probably married by now—and run off with all the money and jewelry from Stoddard House!”

“Oh!” gasped Mary Louise in dismay. “Why wasn’t I here! Did you see the man, Miss Stoddard?”

“No—unless he was the taxi driver. But I didn’t even get a good look at him.”

“Probably she was to join him somewhere. He wouldn’t risk coming near the house in broad daylight if he was the burglar who entered my room.”

“No, that’s true.”

“If Hortense Weinberger really is married,” said Mary Louise, “don’t you suppose her mother will hear about it tomorrow? And if I keep in touch with her mother, I ought to see the man when he comes back from the honeymoon.”

“Mrs. Weinberger was planning to leave Stoddard House tomorrow,” returned Miss Stoddard.

“Yes, I know. But this may alter her plans. And besides, she will surely give her forwarding address to Mrs. Hilliard. She has no reason to hide; she doesn’t have any idea that her daughter or her husband is suspected of stealing.”

“I hope you’re right, Miss Gay.... Now, tell me what happened to your head.”

“I was riding in an open car, and a stone fell out of a tree and hit me,” she answered simply.

The older woman pulled down the corners of her mouth and looked doubtful.

“Of course, she’s thinking I’m just a wild young girl,” Mary Louise concluded. But it really didn’t matter in the least to her what Miss Stoddard chose to believe about her. “Well, I must get to bed, Miss Stoddard,” she said aloud. “So good-night.”

“Good-night,” returned the other, carefully locking the door after Mary Louise went out.

A moment later the girl joined Mrs. Hilliard and Max on the first floor.

“Miss Stoddard thinks Miss Weinberger eloped this afternoon,” she announced.

Mrs. Hilliard laughed incredulously.

“Old maids love to imagine romances,” she said. “Well, we’ll see.... Now, don’t you think you had better go to bed?” she asked Mary Louise in a motherly way.

“Yes, I do,” agreed the girl, “Max, if you’re still here, I’d be glad to have you come to lunch with me tomorrow. We’re allowed to have men to meals, aren’t we, Mrs. Hilliard?”

“Certainly, dear.”

“Nix on that!” protested the young man immediately. “Can you imagine me—one lone fellow—in that dining room full of dames? Looking me over and snickering at the way I wear my hair or tie my shoes? Nothing doing! I’ll call for you at one, Mary Lou, and we’ll go out somewhere to lunch.”

“O.K.,” agreed the girl, smiling. “See you then!”

CHAPTER IX

Lunch at the Bellevue

Mary Louise slept late the following morning. The dining-room doors had been closed for an hour when Mrs. Hilliard finally came into her room.

“What time is it, Mrs. Hilliard?” she inquired, opening her eyes and staring at the bright sunlight pouring through the windows.

“It’s almost eleven o’clock. I thought you had better sleep this morning, Mary Louise, on account of your head. How do you feel?”

“Oh, I’m all right, Mrs. Hilliard, thank you. But this is no time for anybody with a job to get up! I’ll get fired.”

The woman laughed.

“My dear, you are doing all that anybody could do, I believe. I am afraid the situation is hopeless. Mrs. Weinberger moved out this morning.”

“Did she hear from her daughter?”

“Yes, she had a telegram. She is married and has gone to New York for a honeymoon over Christmas.”

“How did her mother take it?”

“Very badly. She seemed all cut up about it. The man has a job as a taxi driver, and though Mrs. Weinberger has never met him, she is sure he is a rough, uneducated fellow.”

“Miss Stoddard thinks he is our thief,” announced Mary Louise. “She believes he has been working with Miss Weinberger’s help.” Mrs. Hilliard’s eyes opened

wide in astonishment.

“That might be possible,” she said.

“Yes. You remember it was a man who entered my room Friday night. And with Miss Weinberger to watch out for him, he could have sneaked into ’most any of the rooms. That’s the theory I wanted to work on today. Where did Mrs. Weinberger go?”

“To the Bellevue—temporarily. She said that she’d find something cheaper later on and send me her forwarding address. But she will stay at the big hotel for a few days, till her daughter comes back.”

“Then I’m going to go see her there. Isn’t there something she left that I could take over to her, to use for an excuse?”

“A special-delivery letter arrived a few minutes ago. I was going to send it over this afternoon by one of the maids.”

“Let me take it! And I’ll have Max take me there to lunch so I can say I was coming to the hotel anyway. Where is it?”

“Broad and Walnut—right across the street from the Ritz Carlton. Your friend will probably know.... Now, you get dressed, Mary Louise, and come over to my apartment for a cup of coffee. You must have something before you leave.”

“Thanks very much, Mrs. Hilliard. If it isn’t too much trouble.”

She was ready before one o’clock, her bandage entirely covered by her hat, and was waiting downstairs in the lobby for Max when he arrived.

“You’re looking fine today, Mary Lou!” he exclaimed admiringly. “How’s the head?”

“Oh, it’s all right. Max, could we go to the Bellevue for lunch? And will you please let me pay the bill—out of my salary? Because it’s on account of the job that I want to go there.”

“Sure we can go,” he replied. “But nix on the bill. Unless you eat everything on the bill of fare.”

“I know, but it’s a big hotel, and it may be dreadfully expensive.”

“We’ll see,” he agreed.

Max left his car in an open-air garage near the hotel, and the two young people entered together. Mary Louise thought it was a lovely place, and she pressed Max’s arm jubilantly. What fun it was to have a companion! She wouldn’t have enjoyed lunching there alone at all, but having Max made it seem like a party.

The hotel was quite crowded, probably with numerous vacation guests and Christmas shoppers, and the young couple made their way slowly to the dining room. In the passageway they suddenly came upon Pauline Brooks with another girl—the same blond girl she had been with on Walnut Street the preceding Saturday noon.

“Pauline!” exclaimed Mary Louise. “How are you?”

Pauline turned around, and seeing Mary Louise’s handsome companion her smile included him. Mary Louise introduced Max, and Pauline in turn introduced the cute little blond as Miss Jackson. The girl immediately began to roll her eyes at Max.

“I was so disappointed that you moved away from Stoddard House,” said Mary Louise.

“I didn’t like the atmosphere,” replied Pauline. “Too much stealing. I was afraid I wouldn’t have anything left if I stayed.”

“But you didn’t lose anything, did you?” asked Mary Louise.

“No, but I wasn’t taking any chances. Besides, it’s a lot more comfortable here.”

“Here? I thought you were at the Ritz?”

Pauline laughed.

“I was. But my aunt went out to the country, so I moved over here. Like it better.”

“I see.”

Suddenly a thought came to Mary Louise: That woman whom she had seen in the empty house—her face looked like Pauline’s aunt! That was the person she had reminded her of!

“Is your aunt’s place at Center Square?” she inquired.

Mary Louise thought she saw Pauline start at the question, but she answered it carelessly enough. “It’s not in any town,” she said. “Just in the country... Well, I’ll be seein’ you.” She started away.

“Wait a minute,” begged Mary Louise. “Did you girls ever meet a girl named Margaret Detweiler, from Riverside? I am trying to find her for her grandmother.”

“Margaret Detweiler—yes——” began Miss Jackson.

But Pauline interrupted her. “You’re thinking of Margaret Lyla, Blondie,” she corrected. “We don’t know any Margaret Detweiler.”

“That’s right,” agreed the other girl, in obvious confusion.

Mary Louise sighed: she had probably been mistaken. And it was all so mixed up, anyhow. Her memory of the night before, of those two faces at the window, was already growing vague.

She and Max went on into the dining room.

“Some high-steppers,” remarked Max. “Not your type, Mary Lou.”

“I don’t care for the little blonde,” agreed Mary Louise. “But I did sort of like Pauline Brooks. She was my first friend here in Philadelphia, and she seemed awfully sociable.”

“I don’t like her,” said Max emphatically.

Of course, Mary Louise was flattered, and she smiled contentedly.

“Well, you needn’t worry—she’ll never be one of my best friends,” she said.

The waiter led them to a table with a pretty bouquet on the shining white linen

cover, and Mary Louise felt almost as if she were at a party. An orchestra was playing, and there were many people dancing. Everything here spoke of gayety and life: no wonder Pauline Brooks referred the Bellevue to Stoddard House. But she must be very rich to be able to stay here.

“A big city is grand, isn’t it?” she remarked to Max, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “But it can be an awfully lonely place too, Mary Lou. It all depends on who is with you.” And his eyes told her who the person was whom he preferred.

“Yes, I guess you’re right, Max. I was lonely—and it was wonderful of you to come. I wish you could stay the whole time here with me.”

“I’m supposed to go back tonight, or tomorrow morning early at the latest. But I could break that on one condition.”

“What’s that?” demanded Mary Louise.

He lowered his voice to almost a whisper.

“Mary Lou, you know how much I care for you. You know I’ve adored you since the first minute I met you. There’s never been anybody else. Let’s get married—now—today—and keep it secret till I graduate in June. Then——”

The waiter approached diplomatically. Mary Louise picked up the menu in confusion. She had never dreamed Max would suggest such a thing. Why, she had no idea of getting married for years and years!

“I’ll take this special luncheon,” she said, noticing that its cost was moderate.

“I will too,” added Max, anxious to get rid of the waiter.

“What do you say, Mary Lou? Will you?” His voice was so eager that the girl was deeply touched.

“Oh no, Max. I couldn’t. I don’t love you—or anybody—that way yet. And I couldn’t deceive my parents or let you deceive yours.”

“We might just tell our fathers and mothers,” he suggested.

“No, no, I couldn’t. Let’s don’t even talk about it. I’m here in Philadelphia on a detective job, and I mean to give it my very best. I’ll be sorry to have you go home, but maybe it will be better. I’ll work harder if I haven’t anybody to play around with. Now—what would you say to a dance while we wait for our first course?”

The couple glided off to the music, and more than one person in that big dining room noticed the graceful, handsome pair and envied them their happiness. When they came back to their seats their soup was ready for them.

“Here come your friends,” remarked Max, as Pauline Brooks and her blond companion entered the dining room. “And take a look at the fellows they have with them!”

“I don’t like their looks,” announced Mary Louise emphatically.

“Neither do I, needless to say. Just goes to show you what kind of girls they are.... Mary Lou, I want you to drop that Brooks woman. She might get you into harm. Promise me!”

“No need to promise,” laughed Mary Louise. “I’ll probably never see her again now that she’s moved away from Stoddard House.”

Mary Louise ate her luncheon with keen enjoyment. There was nothing like going without breakfast, she said, to give you an appetite for lunch.

“Do you think there’s any chance of your getting home for Christmas?” asked Max wistfully.

“No, I don’t believe so,” she replied. “I try not to think about it. It will be my first Christmas away from home, the first time I ever didn’t hang up my stocking. But, Max, if I could solve this mystery for Mrs. Hillard, it would be worth ten Christmas stockings to me. I just can’t tell you what it means.”

“Yes, I realize that. But it doesn’t seem right. The fun at home—visiting each other’s houses after dinner, and the Christmas dance at the Country Club! Gosh, Mary Lou, I just can’t bear it!”

“Why, Max, I’ll be the homesick one—not you,” she reminded him.

Her eyes traveled around the room while they were waiting for their dessert, and she caught sight of Mrs. Weinberger, eating a lonely lunch in a corner by a window, looking as if she didn’t care whether she lived or died. Mary Louise felt dreadfully sorry for her; she was glad to have an excuse to go to speak to her after lunch.

She took Max over and introduced him. Mrs. Weinberger acknowledged the introduction, but she did not smile. She looked as if she might never smile again.

“Yet how much gloomier she would be if she knew we suspected her daughter and her husband of those crimes!” thought Mary Louise.

“I have a special-delivery letter for you, Mrs. Weinberger,” she said. “I was coming here for lunch, so Mrs. Hilliard asked me to bring it over to you.”

“Thank you,” replied the woman, taking the letter and splitting the envelope immediately. “You heard that my daughter is married, Miss Gay?”

“Yes, Mrs. Hilliard told me.” Mary Louise longed to ask when the honeymooners would be back, but she hesitated because Mrs. Weinberger looked so gloomy.

The woman drew a snapshot from the envelope.

“Why, here is their picture!” she exclaimed. “And—he’s positively handsome!”

Eagerly she handed the photograph to Mary Louise, anxious for the girl’s good opinion of the new son-in-law.

What an opportunity for the young detective! Mary Louise’s fingers actually trembled as she took hold of the picture.

But all her hopes were dashed to pieces at the first glance. The man was as different from Mary Louise’s burglar as anyone could possibly be. Six feet tall and broad-shouldered, he was smiling down tenderly at his new wife, who was at least a foot shorter.

“He’s charming, Mrs. Weinberger,” she tried to say steadily. “May I offer my

congratulations?”

The older woman straightened up—and actually smiled!

“He is a civil engineer,” she read proudly. “But he couldn’t get a job, so he’s driving a taxi! Well, that’s an honest living, isn’t it?”

“I should say so!” exclaimed Max. “You’re lucky you don’t have to support him—as so many mothers and fathers-in-law have to nowadays.”

Mary Louise was pleased for Mrs. Weinberger’s sake but disappointed for her own. Miss Stoddard was all wrong: the solution was incorrect. And she was just as much at sea as ever!

“There’s your friend Pauline Brooks,” remarked Mrs. Weinberger. “And—look who’s with her!”

“That’s a friend of hers—a Miss Jackson,” explained Mary Louise, as the two girls, with their boy-friends, got up to dance.

“Miss Jackson nothing! That’s Mary Green—the chorus girl who was staying at Stoddard House when my watch was stolen. I’d like to have a talk with that young woman. But I suppose it wouldn’t do any good.”

Mary Louise’s eyes narrowed until they were only slits; she was thinking deeply. Mary Green—alias Miss Jackson! The next step was to find out whether Pauline Brooks too had a different name at this hotel!

Maybe at last she was on the right track.

CHAPTER X

In the Dead of Night

“How about a movie?” suggested Max, as the young couple left the hotel dining room.

“Oh no, Max,” replied Mary Louise. “No, thanks. I have to work now. I’m going to stay right here.”

“In the hotel? Doing what?”

“Some investigating.”

“You think that young man is guilty? He looked honest to me.”

“No, I don’t believe he’s guilty. I—I’ll explain later, Max, if anything comes of my investigations.... Now, run along and do something without me.”

“Can I see you tonight?”

“I could probably go to an early show with you after dinner. I’m not sure, so don’t stay in Philadelphia just on account of that. I mean, if you want to start back home.”

“I’m going to start home at daylight tomorrow, morning,” replied the young man. “So I’ll surely be around tonight. At Stoddard House soon after seven.”

“All right, I’ll see you then. And thanks for a lovely lunch, Max. It’s been wonderful.”

The young man departed, and Mary Louise hunted a desk in one of the smaller rooms of the Bellevue—set aside for writing. She placed a sheet of paper in front of her and took up a pen, as if she were writing a letter. But what she really

wanted to do was to think.

“I was wrong twice,” she reasoned. “First in suspecting Miss Stoddard, then in believing Miss Weinberger guilty. I’ll go more carefully this time.

“If my very first guess was right—that the transient guests were stealing the valuables from Stoddard House—I must begin all over again. Mrs. Hilliard said there were two girls staying at the hotel for a day or so when the silverware and the vase were stolen.... Are these girls in league with Mary Green and Pauline Brooks? Are they all members of a secret band of thieves? That’s the first question I have to answer.”

She frowned and opened her notebook. Why hadn’t she gotten the names of those girls from Mrs. Hilliard’s old register?

The second crime—the stealing of the watches—she could pin on Mary Green, alias “Blondie Jackson.”

Now for the last three robberies. They had all taken place while Pauline Brooks was at Stoddard House!

Mary Louise considered them separately. Pauline could have stolen Miss Granger’s money and her picture, but it was a man who entered Mary Louise’s bedroom on Friday night and who took her watch and her money. Was one of those young men whom Pauline was dining with today an accomplice? If so, how did he escape from the hotel? Out of Pauline’s window?

Finally, she thought over the circumstances of Mrs. Macgregor’s robbery, and she almost laughed out loud at her own stupidity. Pauline had left her own room as soon as the maid came in to clean it; she had slipped into Mrs. Macgregor’s room and stolen the bag containing the valuables and had left the hotel immediately, before Mrs. Macgregor came out of her bath. Why hadn’t she thought of that explanation before?

The solution seemed logical and plausible, yet how, Mary Louise asked herself, could she prove her accusations? None of these girls had been caught in the act; probably none of them still possessed the stolen articles, and the money had not been marked in any way or the serial numbers taken.

This fact was dreadfully discouraging. If Mary Louise could not prove the girls’

guilt, she could do nothing about it. She couldn't even assure Mrs. Hilliard that there would be no more robberies at Stoddard House, because she could not know how many members of this gang there were, and the manager could not suspect every transient guest who came to the hotel.

No, she concluded, there was nothing to do but try to catch them in a new crime. If they really made it their business to rob hotels, they would probably carry out some plan here at the Bellevue tonight. Mary Louise's only course was to watch them.

With this determination in mind, she went to the clerk's desk in the lobby.

"Could I see the manager?" she inquired.

The man looked at her quizzingly, wondering whether Mary Louise was a patron of the hotel or a society girl who wanted to collect money for something.

"Are you a guest at the hotel, miss?" he asked. "Or have you an appointment?"

"No to both questions," she replied. "But I am a private detective, and I want to consult him about something."

"O.K.," agreed the clerk. "What name, please?"

"Mary Louise Gay."

The clerk reached for the telephone, and in another minute he told Mary Louise where to find the manager's office. She followed his directions and walked in bravely, hoping that the man would not think she was dreadfully young.

"I am staying at a small hotel for women called Stoddard House," she began, "to investigate a series of robberies which they have had there. The Philadelphia police have my name, and if you wish to identify me, please call Mr. LeStrange."

"I will take your word for it, Miss Gay," replied the man, smiling.

"These robberies have always occurred when there was a transient guest at the hotel," she explained. "The last series, while I was at the place, led me to suspect a certain girl; the series before that led other people to suspect another girl. I find these two girls are living here now at the Bellevue—they seem to go from one

hotel to another, for they were at the Ritz only last Saturday. They evidently use different names. I should like to meet your hotel detective, explain the case to him, and get permission to watch these two young women.”

The manager did not appear as surprised as Mary Louise expected him to be. But she could not know how common hotel robberies were at the present time.

“I will send for our detective,” he said. “You have my permission to go ahead—under his orders, of course.”

“Oh, thank you!” cried Mary Louise, delighted that so far it had been easy.

The manager sent for the detective, a nice-looking man of about thirty. He introduced him as Mr. Hayden, and repeated Mary Louise’s story.

“What would your plan be, Miss Gay?” asked the detective. He treated her respectfully, as if she were indeed a real member of the profession, and Mary Louise felt proud and happy.

“First of all, I want to find these girls’ names on the hotel register and see what names they are using. Then I want, if possible, to engage a room near theirs and listen for them all night. And third, I want you, or one of your assistants, Mr. Hayden, to be right there in readiness, in case they do anything tonight.”

“You haven’t evidence enough to convict them of the robberies at Stoddard House?” asked Mr. Hayden.

“Oh no. I may be entirely mistaken. It is only a clue I am going on. But I believe it is worth following up.”

“What do you say, Hayden?” inquired the manager.

“I’m glad to help,” replied the younger man. “I’ll be on duty tonight, anyhow, and I’d enjoy the investigation. Nothing is lost, even if nothing does happen.”

“Then let’s go have a look at the register,” suggested Mary Louise.

“Better send for it,” said the detective. “Arouse no suspicions.”

The book was brought to them, and Mary Louise looked carefully for the names

of Pauline Brooks and Mary Green. But she did not find them. She did, however, find the name of Mary Jackson, and with it a name of Catherine Smith, both of whom had arrived that day and engaged a room together on the sixth floor.

“Those must be the girls,” she concluded. “Room 607. What’s the nearest room you can give me?”

The manager looked in his records.

“609 is moving out tonight. Would that be time enough—or do you want it now?”

“No, that’s plenty of time. And another thing, can you tell me where Mrs. Weinberger’s room is? I met her at Stoddard House, and she would be a sort of chaperon for me.”

“Her room is on the tenth floor,” was the reply: “1026.”

“Thanks. Then put me down for 609, and I’ll phone Mrs. Weinberger this afternoon. I’ll come back early this evening, and I’ll ask Mrs. Weinberger to meet me in one of the reception rooms. Then, could you come there too, Mr. Hayden?”

The man nodded, smiling. How correct this girl was about everything!

“Then I believe it’s all arranged,” said Mary Louise, rising. “I’ll go back to Stoddard House. And if you have a chance, Mr. Hayden, will you keep your eye on these girls we’re suspecting?”

“But I don’t know them,” he reminded her.

“I’d forgotten that! Well, let me describe them. Maybe if you visit the sixth floor, you will see them go in and out.”

She went on to tell him that Pauline Brooks—or Catherine Smith, as she called herself here—was a striking brunette, and that her companion, Mary Green—or Mary Jackson—was noticeably blond; that both girls were short and slender and wore fur coats and expensive jewelry; that both were as little like the typical sneak thieves as could possibly be imagined.

As Mary Louise walked along the street she decided not to tell Mrs. Hilliard any of the details of her plans or who the girls were that she was watching. If nothing came of her theory, she would feel foolish at having failed the third time. Besides, it wasn't fair to the girls to spread suspicion about them until she had proved them guilty.

She stopped at a jewelry store and purchased a small, cheap watch, which she put into her handbag. Then she went back to the hotel.

Immediately upon her arrival at Stoddard House she called Mrs. Weinberger on the telephone; then, assured of her coöperation, she went to Mrs. Hilliard's office.

"I have decided to spend the night at the Bellevue," she said. "Mrs. Weinberger is going to be my chaperon."

The manager looked doubtful. "But I promised your father I'd keep you right here with me," she objected.

"I know, but this is important. I think I'm on the track of a discovery. And Mrs. Weinberger has promised to look after me."

"Does she know that you suspect her daughter, Mary Louise?"

"No, because I don't suspect her any longer. Or her new husband either. My clues point in another direction. This time I'm not going to say anything about them till I find out how they work out."

"I suppose it will be all right, then," agreed Mrs. Hilliard reluctantly.... "What are your immediate plans, dear?"

"I'm going to sleep now till six o'clock, because it's possible I may be awake most of the night. I'll have my dinner here with you then, or with the Walder girls, and after that I'm going to a show with Max. About nine-thirty I'll get to the Bellevue—Mrs. Weinberger is going to wait up for me and go to my room with me."

"I'm afraid something may happen to you!" protested the good woman.

Mary Louise laughed.

“Mrs. Hilliard, you aren’t a bit like an employer to the detective she has hired. Instead, you treat me like a daughter. And you mustn’t. I shan’t be a bit of use to you if you don’t help me go ahead and work hard.”

“I suppose you’re right, Mary Louise,” sighed Mrs. Hilliard. “But I had no idea what a lovable child you were when I told your father I didn’t mind hiring anybody so young as long as she got results.”

“I only hope I do!” exclaimed Mary Louise fervently.

She went to her own room, packed only her toilet articles in her handbag—for she had no intention of going to bed that night—and lay down for her nap. It was dark when she awakened.

Dressing hurriedly, and taking her hat and coat with her, she met the Walder girls in the lobby and accepted their invitation to eat dinner with them. Immediately afterwards Max arrived at the hotel, and the young couple went directly to a movie.

When it was over, the young man suggested that they go somewhere to eat and dance.

Mary Louise shook her head.

“I’m sorry, Max—I’d like to, but I can’t. This is all I can be with you tonight. I want you to take me to the Bellevue now. I’m spending the night there.”

“What in thunder are you doing that for?” he stormed.

“Please calm down, Max!” she begged. “It’s perfectly all right: Mrs. Weinberger is going to meet me and look after me. But I’d rather you didn’t say anything about it to Mother—I can explain better when I get home.”

“Still, I don’t like it,” he muttered.

Nevertheless, he took her to the hotel and waited with her until Mrs. Weinberger came downstairs.

“Don’t forget to be back home for the dance a week from tonight, Mary Lou!” he said at parting.

Mary Louise turned to Mrs. Weinberger.

“Have you seen the girls—Pauline Brooks and Mary Green?” she asked. She had explained over the telephone why she wanted to stay at the Bellevue.

“No, I haven’t,” replied the older woman. “But then, I have been in my own room.”

“How late do you expect to stay up tonight, Mrs. Weinberger?”

“Till about eleven, I suppose.”

“Will you bring your knitting or your magazine to my room till you’re ready to go to bed?”

“Certainly—I’ll be glad to have your company, my dear.”

Mr. Hayden, the hotel detective, stepped out of the elevator and came to join them.

“There’s a sitting room on the sixth floor,” he said. “Suppose I go there about midnight, Miss Gay? I’m going to have a nap now, but my assistant is in charge, and if you need him, notify the desk, and he’ll be with you immediately. Is that O.K.?”

“Perfectly satisfactory,” agreed Mary Louise.

Taking the key to her room, she and Mrs. Weinberger went up together.

Pauline’s room was apparently dark, but Mary Louise left her own door open so that Mrs. Weinberger could watch for the girls. She herself took up a position where she could not be seen from the doorway. She turned on the room radio, and a couple of hours passed pleasantly.

At eleven o’clock Mrs. Weinberger decided to go to her own room and go to bed. When she had gone, Mary Louise turned off the light and the radio and closed her door. Pulling a comfortable chair close beside the keyhole, she sat down to wait and to listen for Pauline’s and Mary’s return.

The elevators clicked more frequently as midnight approached; more and more

guests returned to their rooms. Mary Louise watched them all until she saw Pauline Brooks and Mary Green come along the passageway. They were in high spirits, laughing and talking noisily without any regard for the sleepers in the hotel. Even through the thick walls, Mary Louise could hear them as they prepared for bed.

But in half an hour all was quiet. Both girls were asleep, no doubt—and Mary Louise believed that she had had all her trouble for nothing. She sighed and dozed in her chair.

However, she was not used to sleeping sitting up, and every little noise in the hall aroused her attention. She heard a man come along at two o'clock, and another at half-past. And a little after three she identified the muffled sound of the door of the next room opening!

Leaning forward tensely, she glued her eye to the keyhole. Two young men emerged from the girls' room and staggered about unsteadily, as if they were drunk. Two very small men, who somehow looked more like masqueraders than real men, although they were correctly dressed, except for the fact that they wore their caps instead of hats and had not taken them off in the hotel.

In spite of their apparently intoxicated condition they walked silently across the hall to room 614. Very cautiously one of them took a key from his pocket, and after a moment or two, he opened the door. Both young men entered the room, but Mary Louise saw that they did not turn on the light as they went in.

“There's something queer about that,” she thought. And then she remembered the burglar who had entered her own room at Stoddard House and had stolen her watch. He was very like these young men—short and slight and wore a cap. Perhaps these were Pauline's accomplices!

Cautiously she moved her chair aside and slipped out of her room. In another moment she had reached the sitting room where Mr. Hayden, the detective, was dozing over a newspaper.

“Come with me!” she said briefly, leading him to room 614. “I saw two young men enter this room a couple of minutes ago.”

The detective knocked gently on the door. There was no reply. He knocked again.

The startled voice of a man called out, "What do you want?"

"I'm the hotel detective," answered Mr. Hayden. "I'm sorry to disturb you, but please open the door."

A light flashed on in the room, and an elderly man, now clad in his dressing gown, admitted Mary Louise and Mr. Hayden.

"This young lady thinks she saw two young men come in here five minutes ago," explained the latter. "Were you asleep, sir?"

"Yes," was the reply. "Your knock waked me up."

"Then, if you don't mind, we'll search the room. Have you anything valuable here?"

"I certainly have! A wallet with five hundred dollars, and a set of diamond shirt studs."

Mr. Hayden went straight to the closet and turned on the light. Feminine giggles greeted his action.

"Don' be mad at us, mishter!" pleaded a girl's voice. "We jus' had a leetle too mush likker, and we wanted to get some shirt studs for our costumes. We're goin' to a nish party, dreshed up like men!"

Mr. Hayden smiled and pulled out the two "young men" from the closet. As he snatched off their caps, Mary Louise recognized them instantly. Pauline Brooks and Mary Green!

"Pauline!" she cried.

"Emmy Lou!" In her surprise, Pauline forgot to act drunk. But the next moment she remembered.

"Pleash let us go, mishter," she pleaded, taking hold of Mr. Hayden's coat collar. "Was only jus' a prank——"

"Prank nothing!" cried Mary Louise. "And these girls aren't intoxicated, either, Mr. Hayden."

“No, I don’t believe they are,” agreed the detective. He turned to the owner of the room. “Suppose you check up on your valuables, sir, while I call the police.”

“You’re not going to send us to jail!” protested Pauline, in a perfectly normal tone. “But we haven’t stolen anything.”

“You stole plenty at Stoddard House,” Mary Louise couldn’t help saying.

Pauline regarded her accuser with hatred in her eyes.

“So you’re the one who’s responsible for this!” she hissed. “Nasty little rat! And I thought you were a friend of mine!”

Mary Louise laughed.

“I’ll be a friend when you and your gang give back all the stolen articles and money,” she replied.

The elderly man who lived in the room interrupted them.

“Two studs are missing,” he announced. “I found the wallet with my money in it on the floor. Yet it was carefully put away last night.”

“Take off your shoes, Pauline!” ordered Mary Louise. “That’s the place to find missing diamonds.”

The girl had to obey, and the studs fell out on the floor.

“It’s enough,” concluded Mr. Hayden. “Here comes my assistant. You girls will come with us till the police arrive.”

“Not in these clothes!” objected Mary Green.

“Yes, just as you are.” He turned to the man. “And now, good-night, sir.”

“Good-night, and thank you a thousand times!” was the reply.

“Thank Miss Gay,” amended Mr. Hayden. “It was her work.”

Tired but satisfied, Mary Louise went back to her own room, and, removing only her shoes and her dress, she slept soundly for the rest of the night.

CHAPTER XI

Bail

Mary Louise did not awaken until nine o'clock the following morning. A pleasant glow of triumph suffused her; she was experiencing her first thrill of professional success. But the occurrence of the preceding night was only a partial victory, she reminded herself; the job was just begun. There were more thieves to be caught, and valuables to be recovered.

She decided to ring for a breakfast tray in her room. She had often seen this luxury pictured in the movies; now was her chance to try it out for herself. While it was being prepared she took a shower and dressed.

Ten minutes later the tempting meal arrived. It was fun, she thought, as she poured the coffee from the silver pot, to play being a wealthy lady, but it would be more enjoyable if Jane were with her.... However, she had no time now to think of Jane or of her friends in Riverside; she must concentrate all her mental powers upon the mystery she was trying to solve.

These were the hypotheses she meant to build her case upon:

1. Pauline Brooks and Mary Green were two members of a secret band of hotel robbers, composed probably of women and girls.
2. Pauline's "aunt," as she called her, must be the leader, since she went from hotel to hotel.
3. The two transient guests who had undoubtedly stolen the silverware and the vase from Stoddard House were members of the same gang.
4. Pauline's "aunt" had a country place where she probably hid the stolen articles until they could be disposed of.

Now, with these facts in mind, Mary Louise had several poignant questions to answer:

1. Was this country place at Center Square, and was that woman whom Mary Louise had seen in the dark Pauline's aunt?
2. Was Margaret Detweiler connected with this gang?

Mary Louise remembered that Mary Green had admitted that she knew Margaret and that Pauline had instantly contradicted her.

It was still rather a muddle, she decided as she finished her breakfast and left the room. She took the elevator to Mrs. Weinberger's floor and hastily told her the story of the previous night's excitement; then, scarcely waiting for the older woman's congratulations, she hurried down to the manager's office.

"The hotel is exceedingly grateful to you for the service you have rendered us, Miss Gay," said the man. "The least we can do is to present you with a receipted bill for your room and breakfast."

Mary Louise gasped out her thanks: she had never dreamed of a reward.

"And what became of the girls?" she inquired.

"They are being held under five hundred dollars bail," was the reply.

"They won't have any trouble raising that, I'm afraid," said Mary Louise. "They'll skip and go right on with their old tricks."

"Perhaps you're right, Miss Gay."

"Is Mr. Hayden here?" she asked.

"No, he has gone home," replied the manager. "But he left this memorandum for you in case you want to visit the girls and see whether you can learn anything more about the case you're working on."

Mary Louise put the paper with the address on it in her handbag and hurried back to Stoddard House. She found Mrs. Hilliard in her office on the first floor, planning her work for the day.

“I’ve great news for you, Mrs. Hilliard!” she cried, carefully closing the door behind her. “I’ve caught two of the thieves, and you’ll never guess who they are!”

“No, I won’t even try,” returned the other. “I’m not much good as a detective. But hurry up and tell me.”

“Pauline Brooks and Mary Green!”

“Pauline Brooks!” repeated Mrs. Hilliard in amazement. “But tell me how you know!”

“The detective at the Bellevue and I caught them in men’s clothing, trying to rob another guest at the hotel. Remember—I thought it was a man who stole my watch, though he did seem awfully small? Well, it was Pauline, and she was dressed up the same way last night!”

“You’re the cleverest girl I ever met, Mary Louise! How did you ever come to suspect those girls?”

“I’ll tell you the whole story later—when I have more time, Mrs. Hilliard. I’ve got to be off now, after some evidence to prove that they were the thieves who did the stealing here. You see, they’re in jail now for what they did at the Bellevue, but I have nothing to prove they were guilty of the robberies at Stoddard House.”

“But what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to try to find the leader of their gang and find the treasure chest. And that reminds me, I want the names of those two transients who were here when you missed the vase and the silverware.”

Mrs. Hilliard searched for them in her book, and Mary Louise copied them, although she had little hope that they would help her. The way these girls changed names with each change of residence made it extremely baffling.

“Where do you expect to look for the leader of this gang?” asked the manager.

“I’m going to drive up to Center Square again, right now. In a hired ‘drive it yourself’ car.”

“Isn’t that where you got that blow on your head?”

“Yes, but you needn’t worry about me this time, Mrs. Hilliard. I’m going to get a policeman to go with me to the empty house.”

“Wise girl.... But I believe you’d be wiser still, Mary Louise, if you just dropped the thing now and went home for Christmas. You’ve certainly earned your pay, and we can feel that our troubles are over. I can give the guests some assurance that they will not be robbed again. Won’t you go, dear? Your family will be wanting you.”

“Oh no, Mrs. Hilliard—thank you just the same. But I couldn’t think of it. I want to recover the stolen goods and get more proof against those two girls. I couldn’t give up now!”

“Well, then, be very careful!”

“I’ll be back in time for supper,” she promised.

Mary Louise went directly to the nearest agency and hired a car. Not a new car, but one which ran smoothly and which she found no difficulty in operating. The day was warm for December, and sunny; the snow was gone; it would be jolly to spend the whole day out-of-doors. Of course, it would have been nicer if Jane or Max were with her, but Mary Louise had so much to think about that she did not mind being alone.

Wasn’t it funny, she mused, that the very first guest she had met at Stoddard House had been the guilty person? How thankful she was that she had not given in to that impulse to make Pauline Brooks her confidante! Perhaps, if she had, Pauline would not have stolen her watch. Yet, without that misfortune, Mary Louise might never have solved the mystery.

She drove along at an even speed, following her map and watching for the landmarks she had noticed on her previous trip. About noon she arrived at the hotel where she and Max had eaten dinner on Sunday evening, and she drew the car to a stop at its entrance.

The same clerk was at the desk; he remembered Mary Louise and asked immediately how her head was.

“It’s almost well,” she replied. “But I want to visit that house again and find out who lives there and what hit me.”

“To collect damages?”

“No, not specially. But there is something mysterious about that house, and I’d like to see it in broad daylight. This time I want to take a policeman with me. Have you any in Center Square?”

“We have a constable. He might be willing to go along.”

“Would you be kind enough to ring him up and ask him to come here while I eat my lunch in the dining room? After all, he has a right to help me find out what hit me.”

“Sure, I will, miss. And he’ll be glad to come. He’s mighty obliging. Besides, he ain’t got much to do.”

Mary Louise was hungry, and she enjoyed her lunch immensely. The food wasn’t dainty like the Stoddard House, or fancy, like the Bellevue, but it was wholesome and well cooked, and the keen air had given her a good appetite.

When she had finished eating and returned to the main room of the little country hotel, she found the officer waiting for her. He was a stout, middle-aged man with a pleasant smile, and he wore a baggy gray suit with a stringy tie. He was very much interested in the story of Mary Louise’s previous visit to Center Square, and of her reason for wanting to see the ugly woman again who was occupying the house.

“Of course, what I’m hoping for,” concluded Mary Louise, “is to catch her with the stolen goods and have her arrested. But she may not be the person I’m looking for at all, because I saw her in the dark with only a lighted candle behind her.”

“What is her name?”

“Mrs. Brooks is the only name I know her by. But I’ve learned that criminals have half a dozen names, so you can’t go by that. There isn’t anybody by that name around here, is there?”

The man shook his head.

“No, there ain’t. But let’s drive to the house you mean, and I can tell you who owns it. And maybe tell you something about the people that live there.”

“I don’t believe anybody really lives there,” replied Mary Louise. “It’s all boarded up.”

They got into Mary Louise’s hired car, and she turned off the main highway into the dirt road which she and Max had explored. Here it was difficult for Mary Louise to find her way, because on the former occasion it had been dark, and snow had covered most of the ground. She drove along slowly, past the empty house they had first visited, until she came to the hill and the place with the steep driveway. She remembered the house now; there was the tree under which Max had parked, and the barn beyond. A huge sign bearing the words “No Trespassing—Private Property” had been erected since her former visit.

“This place belongs to a Mrs. Ferguson of Baltimore,” announced the constable. “She’s a widow with two daughters. They never live here, but once in a while she brings a bunch of girls here for a house party. She’s wealthy—always comes in a car and brings a couple of servants.”

“Ferguson,” repeated Mary Louise, wondering where she had heard that name before. But she had heard so many new names in the past few days that she could not place it. “Could you describe her?” she inquired.

“Can’t say as I could. Never saw her close. She dresses stylish, I know that, and has nothin’ to do with the country folks around here.”

Mary Louise brought the car to a stop and parked it some distance from the house, cautiously avoiding the trees this time. Even though she had a constable with her, she wasn’t taking any chances of being hit again.

“That’s the tree we were parked under,” she pointed out, “where I got hit in the head.”

“Did you see anybody?”

“No. But my friend said afterward he heard somebody laugh. But he couldn’t wait to investigate, because he had to get me to a doctor.”

“Maybe it was just a bad boy. We have some young bums around here once in a while.”

Mary Louise got out of the car, and the constable followed her, making a tour of the outside of the house, examining the boarded windows, trying the locked doors. Apparently it was deserted.

“I’d love to get inside,” remarked Mary Louise. “Couldn’t we break in?”

“Not without a warrant,” replied the officer. “We ain’t got any real evidence against this lady. You can’t tell what hit you, and besides, you was trespassin’ on private property.”

Mary Louise sighed. Evidently there was nothing she could do here. She might as well go back to Philadelphia.

It had been rather a useless waste of time, she thought, as she drove along towards the hotel. She had learned only one fact—the name of the owner of that empty house. “Ferguson,” she kept repeating to herself, wondering where she had heard that name before. And then it came to her—in a flash. Ferguson was the name of the woman who had helped Margaret Detweiler at the department store!

Mary Louise laughed out loud.

“So I’m on the track of the wrong mystery,” she thought. “Oh, well, if I could find Margaret Detweiler I’d be happier than if I got back all that money stolen from Stoddard House. So my day really hasn’t been wasted.”

When she arrived at her hotel she literally smelled Christmas in the air. The windows were hung with wreaths; holly and mistletoe and evergreen decorated the rooms on the first floor. Everybody seemed to be hurrying around with a pleasant holiday air of excitement, carrying packages and making last-minute plans for the great day.

A sudden swift feeling of homesickness took possession of Mary Louise, a violent desire to be back in her own home in Riverside, sharing the happy holiday confusion. For a moment she felt that she would have to go back at any sacrifice. But ambition overcame sentiment. She would not be a quitter, and leave at the most important time. She would see the thing through as she had

planned.

But there was nothing to prevent her wiring to her father to come and spend part of the holiday with her. Especially now that she had something definite to report to him. So she composed a telegram and sent it at once, over the telephone.

“Have caught thieves,” she said, “but cannot recover stolen goods. Leader of band at large. Please come help me. Love—M.L.”

As soon as the message was sent, she felt better and was as jolly as anyone else at supper. She was helping the Walder girls tie up packages and humming Christmas carols when a call came for her on the telephone.

“Maybe it’s Dad,” she said to Mrs. Hilliard as she came into the manager’s office.

But it wasn’t. It was Mr. Hayden, calling from the Bellevue.

“Pauline Brooks has wired to a Mrs. Ferguson, Hotel Phillips, Baltimore, Maryland,” he announced, “asking for five hundred dollars. All she says in her telegram is: ‘Please send \$500 bail,’ and signed it ‘P.B.’ But I thought it might help you to know to whom she wired, Miss Gay.”

“I should say it does!” exclaimed Mary Louise rapturously. “Thank you so much, Mr. Hayden!”

She was so happy that she executed a dance. Oh, how wonderful that piece of news was! Mrs. Ferguson! The woman who had helped—or pretended to help—Margaret Detweiler! The woman who lived at Center Square! Possibly—the same woman whom Pauline had called her aunt, by the name of Mrs. Brooks!

Everything seemed to be coming untangled all at once. If only Mary Louise could catch this Ferguson woman! But of course she could—with her father’s help. Thank heaven he would be coming soon! He could fly straight to Baltimore and accomplish her arrest. And the mystery—perhaps both mysteries—would be solved!

So Mary Louise went happily to sleep that night, little dreaming that the worst part of her experience lay ahead of her.

CHAPTER XII

Detective Gay Arrives

Mary Louise awakened the following morning with a delightful sense of expectancy. It was the day before Christmas! Surely her father would come; he would know how much she wanted him, and her mother would be unselfish enough to urge him to go. He would bring Mary Louise her Christmas presents and take her out to Christmas dinner.

She dressed quickly and hurried down to the lobby to ask the secretary whether there was any message for her. None had arrived as yet, but by the time she had finished her breakfast it came.

“Arrive about noon to stay over Christmas with you. Love—Dad,” were the precious words she read.

Her eyes sparkling with anticipation, Mary Louise ran to Mrs. Hilliard with her good news.

“So you see I don’t need to go home,” she said. “I can hardly wait till he comes!”

“I’m so glad, dear,” replied the manager. “You’ve been an awfully good sport about being away from your family—and now you’re getting your reward.”

“I think I’ll put in my time till he arrives by going over to visit my friend Pauline Brooks,” said Mary Louise. “I’d like to find out whether she obtained her bail yet.”

“You better be careful,” warned Mrs. Hilliard. “That girl probably hates you now, and if she’s free there’s no telling what she might do to you!”

“I know she hates me. But she can’t do a thing. Especially with guards all

around.... And I'll be back before Dad comes. I want to be on the spot to greet him."

She put on her hat and coat and went to the address which Mr. Hayden had written down for her on the paper. She encountered no difficulty in finding her way to the matron who had charge of the women prisoners.

"I am Mary Louise Gay," she said. "A private detective in the employ of the manager of Stoddard House. I believe that two of your prisoners—Pauline Brooks and Mary Green—are guilty of some robberies there, as well as at the Bellevue, where they were caught. But I haven't evidence enough to prove my case. I thought if I might talk to these girls——"

The matron interrupted her. "You can't do that, Miss Gay," she said, "because they have already been released on bail, until their case comes up next month."

"How did they get the money—it was five hundred dollars, wasn't it?—so soon?"

"They wired yesterday to a Mrs. Ferguson in Baltimore. Miss Brooks received a registered letter this morning, and the girls left half an hour ago."

Mary Louise sighed; it seemed as if she were always too late. Why hadn't she come here before breakfast, since she knew from Mr. Hayden last night that the girls had telegraphed a request for the money?

"Where did they go?" was her next question.

"I don't know. They are to report back here on the morning of January second—or forfeit their bail."

"They won't be back," announced Mary Louise. "Five hundred dollars is nothing to them."

The matron turned to read a letter; she had no more time to discuss the subject with the young detective. But Mary Louise lingered.

"I just want to ask one more question," she said; "and then I won't take any more of your time. Was there a letter from this Mrs. Ferguson, or did she merely send the money?"

“There was a letter. I had it copied, because Mr. Hayden told me to keep copies of any correspondence these girls had while they were here.... Wait a minute—yes, here it is. You may read it for yourself.”

Mary Louise took the copy eagerly and read it as quickly as she could. The writing was poor but entirely legible, and the words were spelled right. But the subject matter was so rambling that in certain places she was not sure that she read it correctly. This was the letter which she finally deciphered:

Dear Girls:

You poor girls! Meet your misfortune with this \$500. U.S. justice is terrible! In what other country would they detain innocent girls?

Baltimore is where I am now, but I am leaving immediately for a trip to Florida. Margaret can't go with me on account of school. Will you write to her? Get her address from the phone book.

Treasure Island is playing at the movies, and we liked it a lot. From my observation it is like the book. C.S. enjoyed it thoroughly. And so did I. Bring me back the book if you go home for Christmas. It was mine anyhow.

Tonight I am packing. Baltimore is tiresome, and I'll be glad to leave.

*Love,
Aunt Ethel.*

“May I make another copy of this letter?” Mary Louise asked the matron. Since it was rather peculiar, it would bear studying. Besides, it mentioned Margaret, and that might mean Margaret Detweiler.

The matron agreed.

“Yes, sit down at that desk. Or do you want a typewriter?”

“Well, if you can lend me one,” answered Mary Louise. She had learned typing at school, thinking it would come in handy in her chosen profession.

So she typed the letter carefully and put it into her handbag.

As she stepped out into the open air again she saw by one of the big clocks on the street that it was only a little past ten. Two hours to wait until she saw her father! Two hours, with nothing to do. It seemed rather ridiculous that she should be so idle when everybody else was apparently so busy. The throngs of people on the streets rushed along as if there were not a minute to lose.

“I can go in here and buy some handkerchiefs for Mrs. Hilliard for Christmas,” she thought, as she entered a department store. All the rest of her gifts had been bought and wrapped up long ago; they were piled neatly in a box at home, ready for her mother to distribute to her family and her friends on Christmas morning.

The organ in the store was playing Christmas music; Mary Louise lingered for a while after she made her purchase to listen to it. She felt very happy because her father was coming.

She returned to the hotel about eleven, put Mrs. Hilliard’s gift on her desk and went down to one of the reception rooms to wait for her father. The Walder girls came in—they both had a half holiday so that they might start home early—and they said good-bye to Mary Louise and wished her a merry Christmas.

The slow hands of the clock crept towards twelve. At five minutes of the hour her father came.

Mary Louise saw him the minute he opened the door and rushed to him as if it had been years, and not days, since their parting.

“Oh, Dad, this is grand!” she cried. “I was so afraid you wouldn’t be able to get here. Are you very busy?”

“No, dear,” he replied as he kissed her. “There’s a sort of lull in my work now, and I had expected to be home for several days. But now I am at your service. Your aunt arrived yesterday to be with your mother over the holidays, so they probably won’t miss me much. I want you to tell me everything that has happened so far. Max said your watch was stolen, and you were hit on the head by a stone. How is your head now?”

“It’s all right, Daddy. And I bought a cheap watch, so I can get along without my good one, though of course I was especially fond of it. But come into the dining

room and let's have lunch while we talk. At least, if you don't mind being the only man with a lot of women. Max objected to that."

"No, I don't mind," he said. "And I am hungry."

When they were seated at one of the small tables and had given their orders, Mary Louise began to tell her story.

"I was robbed that very first night," she said. "Of course, it was pretty dark in my room, but not terribly so, for the street lights show up quite well. Anyhow, I could see well enough to distinguish a small man, with a cap and a black mask.

"Well, we had a watchman on guard that night, and the police got here in no time, but nobody saw the burglar get away. I insisted he was hiding in the hotel, but Mrs. Hilliard had it searched thoroughly, and we couldn't find a man in the place. I didn't dream then that it was a girl masquerading as a man. But that is the explanation: a girl named Pauline Brooks, who lived right across the hall from me. Of course, it was the easiest thing in the world for her to slip back into her own room and take off her disguise."

"Did you search for the burglar in her room too?"

“Yes, we went there the very first thing. Pauline made us wait a minute or two— she said she had just gotten in from a dance and was half undressed.”

“And you believed her?”

“Yes, indeed. We had become quite good friends at supper that night.”

Mr. Gay laughed. “But what finally led you to suspect her?”

Mary Louise went on to tell her father in detail about her false suspicions concerning first Miss Stoddard and then Miss Weinberger, and described her visit to the Bellevue and the catching of Pauline Brooks and Mary Green in the very act of stealing.

“But that wasn’t evidence enough to prove them guilty of the robberies at Stoddard House,” objected her father.

“I know,” admitted Mary Louise. “But I figured out that there is a whole band of these secret hotel thieves, for I’m pretty sure two other members stole some silverware and a vase from Stoddard House a while ago. I believe, too, that a woman whom Pauline called her aunt is the leader.... And that’s what I want you to do, Dad. Go after her!”

“But where is she?” he demanded.

“I think she’s in Baltimore now, at the Hotel Phillips, because that’s where the girls got their money for bail. Five hundred dollars. She’s planning to go to Florida, so you have to hurry.”

“What could I do with her if I did find her?” inquired Mr. Gay.

“Couldn’t you arrest her?”

“Not unless I had some evidence against her.”

Mary Louise sighed: it was dreadful, she thought, to know that somebody was guilty and not be able to prove it. But she could see that her father was right.

Mr. Gay was enjoying his lunch. He praised the food and the service to Mary

Louise and exclaimed in surprise that the hotel was not well filled.

“It’s partly because of these robberies,” explained Mary Louise. “Several people have moved out just since I came. No wonder Mrs. Hilliard is worried.”

“But she feels encouraged since you found two of the thieves, doesn’t she?”

“Oh, yes, she’s tremendously pleased. She told me I had earned my money, and I could go home. But of course I’m not satisfied. The job’s only half done.”

The waitress approached the table, and offered a menu.

“I’ll take plum pudding,” announced Mr. Gay, “in celebration of the season. How about you, Mary Lou?”

“Chocolate sundae,” was her inevitable choice.

“Where,” inquired Mr. Gay, turning to his daughter, “did this aunt of Pauline’s live when she was in Philadelphia?”

“She stayed at the Ritz.”

“Never at Stoddard House?”

“Oh no.”

“Then we’ll make a visit to the Ritz after lunch. And I think I will take the two o’clock train to Baltimore to see what I can find out about the woman. What does she call herself?”

“Mrs. Ferguson—and sometimes Mrs. Brooks. Possibly there are two different women, but I don’t believe so.... But what will you do at the Ritz, Daddy?”

“Just make inquiries as to whether anything was stolen while the woman stayed there, and if so, what. That would give me a reason for going after her in Baltimore.”

“That’s a great idea, Dad!” exclaimed Mary Louise joyfully. “May I go to the hotel with you?”

“Of course. Now, you run along and get your hat and coat and tell Mrs. Hilliard

where you are going, while I order a taxi.”

It was not until they were in the cab that Mr. Gay remembered to ask how Mary Louise had received the cut on her head. Max had not told him much, he explained, because he wanted to keep it secret from Mary Louise’s mother, to save her unnecessary worry.

“It was part of my investigation about Margaret Detweiler,” replied the girl, and she hurriedly told her father the reason for her visit to Center Square and its consequences. “But I feel that in some way the two cases are tied up together,” she added, “for the woman who owns the place is named Mrs. Ferguson, and a face which I saw at the window reminded me of the woman Pauline called her aunt. But it’s all very confusing.”

The taxi pulled up at the Ritz, and Mr. Gay and his daughter got out. With his badge, the former had no difficulty in interviewing the hotel detective immediately. He asked whether any money or valuables had been lost at the Ritz during the past week.

“Yes,” replied the other, “some money and a valuable bag containing two pearl rings were stolen last Friday. But we suspected a chap who called himself a traveling salesman, and we’re on his track.”

“Was a Mrs. Brooks staying here at the time?”

“Yes. I remember her well. With two nieces.”

“Please describe her,” urged Mary Louise.

“She is tall and stout—weighs around a hundred and eighty, I should judge. About fifty years old, with black hair done very severely—looks like a wig. Dresses well and wears jewelry. Has false teeth and an ugly mouth, but seems a great favorite with young people.... That’s about all.”

“That’s enough,” said Mr. Gay. “Now, can you tell me just what was stolen?”

The detective wrote down the articles on a slip of paper. “A bag containing two pearl rings, and two hundred dollars.” The bag was valuable in itself, being made of gold mesh, he told them.

“Thank you very much,” said Mr. Gay as he pocketed the list. “I’ll let you know if I have any success.”

The taxi was waiting outside the hotel, and Mary Louise jumped into it first.

“I’ll ride to the station with you, Daddy,” she said. “Do you think you’ll be back tonight?”

“Maybe,” he answered. “But we’ll have a fine Christmas together tomorrow.”

He was just in time to catch his train. Mary Louise watched it pull out of the station and wondered what in the world she would do to pass the afternoon. Slowly she walked out to the street and looked at the Christmas displays in the shop windows.

She had gone about two blocks when she stopped to examine a particularly attractive display, featuring a small, real Christmas tree, when she noticed that the shop into whose window she was gazing was a tea room. A cup of hot chocolate ought to taste good, she decided—rich and hot, with whipped cream on the top! So she opened the door and went inside.

Little did she realize at that moment how thankful she was to be later on for that one cup of chocolate and the plate of little cakes that she ordered!

CHAPTER XIII

A Prisoner in the Dark

While Mary Louise waited for her chocolate to be served, she took the copy of the letter from her handbag and read it again. The woman said she was going to Florida. Oh, suppose her father should be too late to catch her!

“But if Mrs. Ferguson really is a crook, why should she write all her plans to a prisoner, when she would know that the letter would be censored?” Mary Louise asked herself.

Her eyes narrowed. The woman had written the letter on purpose to deceive them! She probably had no intention of going to Florida! Perhaps it was a code letter.

Mary Louise recalled the Lindbergh case, in which the kidnaper had written a letter to a prisoner in which the second word of every sentence was a key, thus forming a message. She decided to try to discover something like that for herself. She read the letter again:

Dear Girls:

You poor girls! Meet your misfortune with this \$500. U.S. justice is terrible! In what other country would they detain innocent girls?

Baltimore is where I am now, but I am leaving immediately for a trip to Florida. Margaret can't go with me on account of school. Will you write to her? Get her address from the phone book.

Treasure Island is playing at the movies, and we liked it a lot. From my observation it is like the book. C. S. enjoyed it thoroughly. And so did I. Bring me back the book if you go home for Christmas. It was mine anyhow.

Tonight I am packing. Baltimore is tiresome, and I'll be glad to leave.

*Love,
Aunt Ethel.*

On a page of her notebook Mary Louise wrote down each second word and read the result to herself:

“Poor—your—courts—what—is—can’t—her—island——”

“Shucks! That doesn’t mean a thing!” she muttered in disgust. “I guess I was crazy. But just the same, it does seem like a dumb sort of letter if it hasn’t some underlying meaning.”

The waitress brought her chocolate in a lovely little blue pot, and the whipped cream in a bowl. On a plate of the same set, dainty pink and white cakes were piled.

“It’s a good thing I’m not dieting,” thought Mary Louise, as she poured out a steaming cup of chocolate. “This certainly looks delicious!”

She wondered idly, as she finished her refreshments, whether she should go to a picture show, just to put in her time. She wasn’t exactly in the mood for that kind of entertainment; her own life was too exciting at the present moment to allow her to feel the need for fiction. So, while she waited for her bill, she glanced again at the letter in her handbag.

“I might try the first word of each sentence,” she thought. “To see whether I could form a message that way. Though I should think that would be too obvious.... Still, I’ll see what happens.”

She jotted down the opening word of each sentence on another page of her notebook.

“You—meet—us—in—Baltimore—Margaret—will—get—treasure—from—C.S.—and—bring—it—to—Baltimore.”

It was all Mary Louise could do to keep from crying out in her joy. Of course that was the answer! Pauline and Mary were to go to Baltimore. The treasure, the

stolen goods, must be in that house at C.S.—Center Square. And “Margaret” would go there to get it!

Mary Louise no longer had any difficulty in deciding what to do with her afternoon. She’d drive to Center Square as fast as she could—in order to beat “Margaret” there. Oh, how she hoped that the “Margaret” referred to was Margaret Detweiler!

Her hands actually trembled as she paid the bill, she was in such haste to be off. She hadn’t time to go back to the hotel and inform Mrs. Hilliard of her plan. Later on she was to wish desperately that she had taken that precaution.

Instead, she hurried to the agency and hired the same car she had driven the previous day. Then she set off on the road which was by this time becoming familiar.

It was after five o’clock when Mary Louise reached Center Square. The twilight was deepening; already the short winter day was almost at a close.

“I’ll need a flashlight,” she decided and she stopped in at a country store to buy one.

When she came out of the store she drove directly to the abandoned house. This time she did not want to take the constable with her, for he would forbid her breaking into the place. Yet that was exactly what Mary Louise meant to do, if she could not be admitted by knocking at the door!

She turned into the driveway, past the “No Trespassing” sign, mounted the steep incline, and parked her car in an inconspicuous spot behind the house and at the side of the barn.

“Here’s hoping I don’t get hit with a rock!” she thought recklessly, as she jumped out of the car. The darkness was becoming deeper; the silence was broken only by the moaning of the tree branches in the wind. The place seemed completely deserted.

With her heart beating fast, Mary Louise ran to the back door of the house and tried it. As she had anticipated, it was securely locked. A moment later she encountered the same condition at the front door. At both entrances she knocked loudly; at neither was there any response.

“Just the same, I’m going to get in!” she muttered resolutely. “If I have to climb over the porch to a second-story window!”

She walked around the house again, more slowly this time, examining each window as she passed it. Everywhere she found boards nailed over the glass. On only one window at the side did she discover a partial opening. It was the window through which she had seen the face of the young girl with the ugly woman beside her.

Mary Louise’s heart leaped up in joy. She could break through that glass and get in!

The window which she was examining was at least three feet from the ground, and two boards were nailed across the lower sash. But by standing on a log which she dragged to the spot she was able to reach the upper sash. With the aid of a stone she smashed the glass into bits.

It would have been easier to climb through the opening without her fur coat, but Mary Louise felt sure that she would need its protection in the damp, cold house. How thankful she was later on that she had not yielded to her first impulse!

She accomplished the feat successfully, however, without even tearing her clothing or breaking her flashlight, and stood on the floor of a room which she soon identified as the dining room.

It was horribly cold and damp inside the house, but Mary Louise scarcely noticed it at first. A thrill of excitement sent a pleasant glow through her body. She was going to search for the treasure!

Keeping her flashlight turned on, she gave a quick glance about the room. A table, half a dozen chairs, a sideboard of beautiful mahogany, and a china-closet filled with lovely dishes comprised its furnishings.

“A good place to begin my search!” she decided, going straight to the attractive sideboard and opening the drawer nearest the top. A luncheon set of exquisite design greeted her eyes.

“Rather grand for a country place,” she silently commented. “Let’s see what else we can find!”

A second drawer was entirely empty, but a third contained a full set of silverware. Seizing a spoon in one hand, Mary Louise turned the flashlight on it with the other. A wild cry of joy escaped her lips; the spoon was decorated with an ivy-leaf pattern! Yes, and there were the initials, too—S.H. (for Stoddard House, Mrs. Hilliard had said)—engraved on the stem!

“So I know that I’m in the right place!” she couldn’t help exclaiming aloud in her triumph.

The sound of her own voice in the silent, dark house was strange; Mary Louise found herself trembling. But only for a moment: courage and common sense came to her rescue. Hastily she gathered all the silver together and put it in a pile on the dining-room table.

“I may have to go out through the window again,” she figured, “so I’ll leave my stuff here. But first I’ll try the doors from the inside.”

There, however, she met disappointment. There were no dead latches on the doors; they were both locked securely, and the keys had been removed.

Now that she had familiarized herself with the plan of the house, she decided to make a systematic search, beginning with the upstairs and working her way down. Cautiously she ascended the wide stairway in the hall to the second floor.

There were four bedrooms, she saw by the aid of her flashlight, and a bathroom. A narrow staircase led to an attic above.

“I might as well begin with the attic,” she thought, “and do the thing thoroughly. That would be a natural place to hide things—especially if there’s a closet.”

There was a huge closet, she soon discovered, besides two trunks, and all sorts of odds and ends of furniture piled about the room. Naturally, Mary Louise began her search with the trunks: to her delight she found them unlocked.

“If I only have the same luck that I had in the dining room!” she wished as she began to examine the trays.

Things had apparently been stuffed in hit-or-miss fashion: ribbons, scarves, odd bits of costumes were all entangled together. Off in a corner of the tray she found a heavy box which looked especially inviting. Opening it excitedly she let out a

wild whoop of joy. There was jewelry inside!

But when she examined the articles one by one she experienced only disappointment. There was nothing valuable in the whole collection; it was merely “five-and-ten-store” stuff, which nobody would wear except to a costume party.

“I might have expected that,” she mused as she put the box back into the tray. “If this trunk had had anything valuable in it, it would have been locked.”

Nevertheless, she resolved to make her search thorough and went through both trunks, without any success. Then she directed her attention to the closet.

This occupied a large space—almost as big as a small room—so that Mary Louise found that she could easily enter it herself. It was horribly chilly and damp; she shivered, and drew her coat more tightly around her as she continued her task.

She was peering into a hat box when she suddenly heard a pounding on a wall. She stopped what she was doing and listened intently. Where was the noise coming from? Had someone come in? Was “Margaret” here, or had the police come to arrest Mary Louise for housebreaking? Her hands shook and she turned off her flashlight, waiting tensely in the darkness, while the pounding continued. But she did not hear any footsteps.

The noise finally ceased, and, reassured at last, Mary Louise turned on her flashlight and resumed her search. But the attic revealed nothing of any importance, not even any loose boards in the walls or floor underneath which the treasure might have been stored.

With a sigh of disappointment, Mary Louise descended the attic steps.

Entering the bedrooms one after the other and searching them carefully, she encountered no better results. The bureaus were practically empty; the beds contained only a blanket spread over each mattress, and though Mary Louise felt around them with her hands for hard objects which might be concealed, she found nothing.

Looking at her watch, she saw to her surprise that it was almost eight o’clock. Supper hour was long past; because of her excitement, and on account of her

refreshments in the Philadelphia tea shop, she had not felt hungry. But she was thirsty and was delighted to find running water in the bathroom.

“I’m glad I don’t have to climb out of that window to get a drink at the pump!” she congratulated herself. And while she was there she methodically searched the bathroom, again without any success.

“Why, here’s an electric light button!” she exclaimed in surprise. “These people must be rich—they have all the modern improvements. And I’ve been using up my battery!”

But the light did not turn on; no doubt the current was cut off while the people were away, and Mary Louise had to resort to her flashlight again.

“Because I started in the attic, the treasure will probably be in the cellar,” she concluded. “I hope my battery doesn’t give out before I get to it.”

Nevertheless, she meant to proceed with the downstairs first, just as she had planned. She would rather be there if “Margaret” arrived. Oh, how she wished the girl would come! Especially if she proved to be Margaret Detweiler.

The kitchen consumed a great deal of time, for she had to look in every possible can and dish in the various closets. As she examined everything, she was conscious of increasing hunger; she sincerely hoped that she would find something she could eat. But her search revealed nothing except some dry groceries: tea, sugar, salt, and spices. Moreover, the stove was an electric one, useless without current. She could not even heat water to make herself a cup of tea!

She was debating whether she should crawl out of the window and go to a store for something to eat, or whether she should wait until she had completed her task. It was just nine o’clock now; if she left the house she might miss seeing Margaret and lose all chance of finding either the girl or the treasure. But as she passed through the dining room from the kitchen she saw immediately that her decision had been made for her. The window through which she had crawled into the house had been boarded up tightly! She was a helpless prisoner in this dark, lonely house!

So that was the explanation of the pounding which she had heard from the attic closet! Oh, why hadn’t she rushed down to see who was doing it? Now what in

the world could she do? If Margaret didn't come, she would have to spend the night here—alone! And tomorrow was Christmas!

But suppose nobody came tomorrow—or the next day—or the next week! Starvation, death from pneumonia, loneliness that would drive her insane—all these grim horrors stared Mary Louise in the face.

Shivering with cold, she stood motionless in the dining room and tried to think of some way out. It would be impossible for her to break down those heavy wooden doors, and she knew nothing about picking locks. There wasn't an unboarded window on the whole first floor, and even the windows over the porch on the second floor were tightly nailed shut. Oh, what on earth could she do?

“If only Max and Norman would come along now and give that familiar signal!” she wished. But no sound disturbed the silence of the night; even the wind had died, leaving a stillness like death all about her. She felt buried alive in a doorless tomb.

“Nobody knows I'm here,” she moaned. “Not even Mrs. Hilliard.

“I'll have to think of something,” she decided, with a supreme effort to keep herself in control. “In the meanwhile, I might as well finish my search.”

But even that satisfaction was denied to Mary Louise. In the doorway between the dining room and the living room her flashlight went out. At the most critical moment, when her courage was at the lowest ebb, the battery had died!

A groan of agonized dismay escaped from her lips. In utter despair she groped for a chair and sank down in it, miserable and defeated.

The impenetrable blackness of the room was overpowering, for she was used to the lights of the streets in Philadelphia and in Riverside. A strange, physical fear took possession of her, paralyzing her limbs; for several minutes she sat still in the darkness, not even attempting to move.

A shiver ran through her; she was becoming colder and colder in this damp, icy house. Her need for warmth stirred her to action. She rose cautiously to her feet and groped her way to the hall, where she remembered the stairway to be located, and without encountering any serious knocks, she slowly ascended to

one of the bedrooms.

Here the inky blackness still confronted her, but it was not so deep as that of the first floor, for there was an unboarded window in the room. Gradually, as she made her way towards it, Mary Louise could perceive its outline. Most of the window was covered by the tree branches, but here and there through the limbs she could distinguish patches of sky. Yes—far off, and dim, but real, nevertheless—was one shining star!

“The Christmas star,” she murmured. “Or at least—my Christmas star. For it’s the only one I’ll see tonight.”

There was something immensely comforting in its presence. The star reassured her, it reminded her that God was still in His heaven, and she was not forsaken. Tomorrow, Christmas morning, rescue would surely come!

So, after collecting all the blankets in the house on one bed, she took off her coat and her hat and her shoes and lay down, drawing the squirrel coat over her on top of the blankets. Cold and hunger and her dark prison were forgotten in a blissful maze of unconsciousness. Mary Louise slept until the sun of the strangest Christmas of her experience awakened her.

CHAPTER XIV

The Secret Band

Mr. Gay settled back in his seat in the train with a sense of comfort. He liked traveling; no matter how hard he was working or how difficult the case he was trying to solve, he could always rest on a journey.

“I might have brought Mary Lou with me,” he thought. “She would have liked the experience.” But perhaps, he decided, she had wanted to remain on the spot at Stoddard House in case anything new developed. Little did he think as he was speeding along towards Baltimore that his daughter was driving as fast as she could in the opposite direction. Into a new danger which he had not dreamed of!

Mary Louise, in her systematic way, had given her father a list of all the valuables to be recovered. Now, at his leisure, he took the paper from his pocket and went over it carefully.

“Set of silverware, ivy-leaf pattern, initials S.H.
Chinese vase.
5 watches, including one set with diamonds and my own.
\$550 in cash.
Painting by Whistler.
Pair of diamond earrings.”

Mr. Gay let out a low whistle. What a list that was! No wonder Mrs. Hilliard was worried!

He took from his pocket the other slip of paper, which the detective at the Ritz had just given to him.

“Gold-mesh handbag containing \$200.
2 pearl rings....”

“If this woman, this Mrs. Ferguson, is responsible for all this, she certainly ought to be kept behind prison bars for the rest of her life,” he thought. “But we’ll see—we’ll see...”

His train passed through a small town, and from his window Mr. Gay could see the Christmas decorations in the houses. How he wished that he and Mary Louise could both be at home, taking part in the happy celebrations! Trimming the tree, filling the stockings, eating the turkey dinner together! But there would be more Christmases, he reminded himself, and the whole family would be together on New Year’s Day.

It was dusk when he arrived in Baltimore and he took a taxi straight to the Hotel Phillips. He engaged a room for he meant to take a shower and have his dinner there, even if he did not remain all night.

A few minutes later he was interviewing the hotel detective in his private office.

“Is there a Mrs. Ferguson staying here?” he asked, after he had shown his badge.

“Yes, there is,” replied the other man. “She came two days ago with two daughters and four other girls as guests. They have a suite of rooms on the ninth floor and are planning to stay over Christmas.”

“Has anything been stolen since their arrival?” questioned Mr. Gay.

The other detective’s eyes opened wide in surprise.

“Yes. A roll of bills, two hundred dollars, I believe it amounted to, and a valuable stamp collection. Last night. But surely——”

“I have reasons to suspect Mrs. Ferguson and her accomplices,” stated Mr. Gay. “Other hotel robberies lead us to believe she is the leader of a band of hotel thieves.”

“But we are on the track of another suspect. A man we found wandering into the wrong room last night and excusing himself by the old gag of saying he was drunk.”

“Maybe he was drunk!”

“Possibly. We couldn’t get any sense out of him. But I believe that he was just a darned good actor. Another fellow got away—an accomplice, I think, who is known to be a stamp collector. We’re on his trail.”

“I’d like to search the Ferguson woman’s rooms,” announced Mr. Gay. “Can I have your help?”

The man hesitated. He hated to antagonize wealthy guests who were bringing so much money into the hotel; yet when he recalled the expression of Mrs. Ferguson’s eyes he remembered that he had distrusted her. So he reluctantly consented to the other detective’s request.

Taking one of his assistants with him, the hotel detective led Mr. Gay to the ninth floor and knocked at Mrs. Ferguson’s door. From within sounds of laughter and gay music could be heard. As the door opened, the three men saw the girls playing cards in the sitting room of the luxurious suite. A radio was grinding out jazz.

With a shrewd glance at the girls, Mr. Gay realized immediately that they were not the same type as his daughter’s friends at Riverside. They were older, too, although they were painted and lipsticked to appear young.

“Mrs. Ferguson,” began the hotel detective, “I must apologize for interrupting your card game, but I have to go through with a routine. Last night some valuables were stolen from one of our guests, and I have promised him to make a thorough search of each room. You understand, of course, that no slight is meant to you or to your guests. The girls can go on with their game, if you will just permit us to look around.”

Mrs. Ferguson, who was, Mr. Gay thought, one of the ugliest women he had ever seen, drew herself up proudly.

“I very much resent it,” she replied haughtily. “In fact I forbid it!”

“You can’t do that,” answered the detective coolly. “For even if you decide to leave the hotel, your things will be searched before you go. But please don’t be unreasonable, Mrs. Ferguson! Suppose that you, for instance, had been robbed of that beautiful diamond ring you are wearing. Wouldn’t you want us to do everything in our power to get it back for you?”

“I wouldn’t want guests—especially women and girls—subjected to such insults as you were offering me and my young friends and relatives! Besides, I thought you were already pretty sure of your thief.”

“We’re not sure of anything. Will you submit peacefully, Mrs. Ferguson, or must we call in the police?”

The woman looked sullen and did not answer; the detective stepped across the room and locked the door. Mrs. Ferguson turned her back and wandered indifferently towards the bare Christmas tree in the corner. It was standing upright in a box of green, but it had not been trimmed. A pile of boxes beside it indicated the ornaments with which it would probably soon be decorated.

Mr. Gay, always the keenest observer, sensed that fact that Mrs. Ferguson had some special interest in those boxes, and his first shrewd surmise was that valuables were somehow concealed within them. Therefore, he kept his eye glued on that corner of the room.

“I guess you’ll have to stop your games, girls,” said Mrs. Ferguson, “since these men mean to be objectionable. Of course, we’ll move to another hotel immediately, so you can all go and get your things packed... Pauline, you take care of these balls for the tree. Men like this wouldn’t care whether they were smashed or not! They have no Christmas spirit.”

“Some hotel!” muttered Pauline, with an oath under her breath. But she got up and went towards the Christmas tree.

“Wait a minute!” ordered Mr. Gay. “I’m looking into those boxes.”

Mrs. Ferguson laughed scornfully.

“They just came from the ‘Five and Ten,’” she said. “They haven’t even been unwrapped. And I warn you men, if you break them, you can replace them! It’s not easy to get through the crowds now, either.”

Detective Gay smiled. “I’ll take the responsibility,” he promised as he untied the string of the top package. As Mrs. Ferguson had stated, it contained nothing but bright new Christmas-tree balls.

But when he lifted the second box in the pile—a huge package as big as a hat

box—he knew immediately that it was too heavy to contain Christmas-tree ornaments. Nevertheless, his countenance was expressionless as he untied the string.

A great quantity of tissue paper covered the top of the box; this Mr. Gay removed, and from beneath it he drew forth a shabby blue book.

“Is this the stamp album?” he asked the hotel detective.

The other man gasped and rushed to Mr. Gay’s side.

“Yes! Yes!” he cried. “That’s it! See if the stamps are still in it.”

With a quick movement Pauline Brooks took two steps forward and snatched the book from the detective’s hands.

“That’s my album!” she exclaimed. “If you don’t believe it, look at the name in the front.” Triumphantly she turned to the first page and displayed the inscription:

*Pauline Brooks,
Christmas, 1931.
From Aunt Ethel.*

Detective Gay laughed scornfully.

“You can’t fool us that easily, Miss Brooks,” he said. “Examine the ink in the handwriting for yourself! It’s fresh.... You can’t pass that off for three years old.”

Pauline looked calmly into her accuser’s eyes.

“Maybe it is,” she retorted. “But I don’t have to write my name in my books the minute I get them, do I?”

“Hand it over!” commanded the hotel detective, while Mr. Gay continued his search of the Christmas boxes. At the bottom of the pile he found the gold-mesh handbag with two pearl rings inside it. But he did not discover any of the lost money.

“Call the police,” ordered the hotel detective, turning to his assistant. “Gay and I

will make a thorough search of this room. And on your way downstairs get hold of Mr. Jones, in room 710. He can come up here and identify his stamp album.”

Mrs. Ferguson by this time had slipped into her bedroom, and one by one the girls were following her. Detective Gay, suddenly aware of the fact that the criminals meant to escape by another door, dashed out into the hall just in time to stop them.

“Must we use handcuffs?” he demanded, pushing Mrs. Ferguson back into her room and locking the door.

The woman did not reply, but she looked at him with an expression of hatred in her eyes.

Mr. Gay called into the next room to the hotel detective, who was still making a systematic search. “Can you get me a photographer?” he asked.

“O.K.,” was the reply, and the detective put the message through, using the room telephone.

“Now, what do you want a photographer for?” demanded Pauline impudently. “Because we’re such pretty girls?”

“I want to send your picture to my daughter,” replied Mr. Gay. “I understand that you and she used to be friends.”

“Who is your daughter?”

“Mary Louise Gay.”

“The little rat! If I’d ever realized——”

“How smart she is,” supplied Mr. Gay proudly, “you’d have been more careful! Well, Miss Brooks, you’ve been pretty clever, but not quite clever enough. This is the end of your dangerous career.”

“I guess we can get out on bail!” she boasted.

“I guess you can’t! Not this time, young lady!”

The photographer and the police arrived at the same time; Mrs. Ferguson and her band of six had to submit to having their pictures taken and were allowed, under supervision, to pack a few necessary articles of clothing into their suitcases. Then, under the escort of four policemen and the assistant hotel detective, they rode downstairs to the waiting patrol car.

Mr. Gay and the hotel detective went on with their methodical search.

“Suppose we stop and eat,” suggested the latter. “We can lock up these rooms.”

“O.K.,” agreed Mr. Gay.

A knock sounded at the door.

“I’m Jones—the man who lost the album,” announced the visitor. “Did you fellows really get it?” His question held all the eagerness of the collector.

“This it?” queried the hotel detective, holding the worn blue book up to view.

“Oh, boy! Is it? I’ll say so! Let’s see it!” He grasped the book affectionately.

“We are still hoping to find your money, too,” added Mr. Gay. But the man was hardly listening; his stamps meant far more to him than his roll of bills.

“Whom do I thank for this?” he inquired finally, as he opened the door.

“My daughter,” returned Mr. Gay. “But she isn’t here, and I’ll have to tell you the story some other time.”

During their supper together, Mr. Gay told the hotel detective about Mary Louise and the discoveries she had made which led her to suspect Mrs. Ferguson and Pauline Brooks. He brought the list out of his pocket and crossed off the articles that had been recovered: the gold-mesh bag and the two pearl rings.

“Except for the money which was stolen here last night, we probably shan’t find anything else in the rooms,” he concluded. “Mrs. Ferguson has no doubt hidden or disposed of everything which her gang stole from Stoddard House.”

Nevertheless, the two men resumed their search after dinner. Deeply hidden in the artificial grass which filled the Christmas-tree box, they found four hundred

dollars—the exact amount which had been taken from the Hotel Ritz in Philadelphia and the Hotel Phillips there in Baltimore. But two hours' more searching revealed nothing else. At ten o'clock the two men decided to quit.

Mr. Gay went directly to his room and called Stoddard House on the telephone, asking to speak to Mary Louise.

To his surprise it was Mrs. Hilliard who answered him.

“Mary Louise did not come home for supper,” she said. “I concluded that she had gone to Baltimore with you, Mr. Gay.”

“No, she didn't. Could she have gone to the movies with any of the girls, do you think?”

“Possibly. But she usually tells me where she is going. Of course she may have gone home with the Walder girls, and I know their folks haven't a phone.”

Mr. Gay seemed reassured; after all, he decided, nothing could happen to his daughter now that the criminals were under lock and key.

“Well, tell her I'll take the first train home tomorrow,” he concluded, “and that I have good news for her.”

“I will, Mr. Gay,” promised the hotel manager.

Disappointed but not worried, he replaced the receiver and went down to the desk to inquire for the picture of Mrs. Ferguson's band of thieves. Several copies had been struck off, and they were surprisingly good. Mr. Gay chuckled when he thought how pleased Mary Louise would be to see all the criminals lined up together.

Taking the pictures with him, he went straight to the offices of Baltimore's leading newspapers. In a short time he had given the editors the important facts of the capture of the dangerous band, giving the credit to Mary Louise. To one of these newspapers he gave his daughter's picture—a snapshot which he always carried in his pocket.

“Wait till Riverside sees that!” he exulted. “Won't our family be proud of our Mary Lou!”

Mr. Gay slept soundly that night, believing that everything was all right with Mary Louise. Had he but known the agony of spirit his daughter was experiencing he would have returned posthaste to Philadelphia.

Mrs. Hilliard, however, was more concerned and spent a restless night. She felt sure that something had happened to Mary Louise, for she was not the sort of girl to go off without mentioning her plans. Even if she had gone to the country with the Walder girls, she would have found a way to telephone. Mary Louise was never thoughtless or selfish.

In her worried condition, Mrs. Hilliard awakened twice during the night and went down and looked into the girl's empty room. At six o'clock she could stand the anxiety no longer, and she called Mr. Gay on the long distance telephone.

He was in bed, asleep, but the first ring at his bedside awakened him. He listened to Mrs. Hilliard's news with a sinking heart, remembering the dreadful thing which had happened to his daughter the previous summer, while she was investigating a mystery of crime.

"I'll take the seven o'clock train to Philadelphia!" he cried, already snatching his clothing from the chair beside his bed.

In his haste and his deep concern for his daughter he forgot entirely that this was Christmas morning. When the waiter in the dining car greeted him with a respectful "Merry Christmas, sir," Mr. Gay stared at him blankly. Then he remembered and made the correct reply.

One look at Mrs. Hilliard's face as he entered Stoddard House told him that there was no news of his girl. Mary Louise had not returned.

"The only place I can think of," said Mrs. Hilliard, "for I've already gotten in touch with the Walder girls, is that empty house out in Center Square, where she was hit on the head the night she went there with Max Miller."

"I'll drive right out there," announced Mr. Gay immediately. "I guess I can make inquiries at the hotel.... And in the meantime I'll notify the Philadelphia police, but I'll warn them not to give out the news on the radio till I get back.... I don't want to alarm Mary Lou's mother until it is necessary."

Ten minutes later he was in a taxicab, directing the driver to speed as fast as the

law allowed to Center Square.

CHAPTER XV

Christmas Morning

Christmas morning!

Mary Louise laughed out loud when she wakened amid the bleakness of her surroundings in that empty house near Center Square. Oh, how different it was from every other Christmas of her experience! No lovely fragrance of evergreen, no warm fire, no cheery hot breakfast—no presents! But this last fact worried her least of all. At the moment she believed she would give up all the Christmas presents in the world for a plate of sausage and hot cakes.

She felt a little stiff from sleeping in her clothing, but underneath the blankets and her fur coat she had not suffered from the cold. And, oh, how good it was to see the sun! To be able to walk around in a light house—or a dimly lighted one, for even some of the second-story windows were boarded up.

She shuddered at the fear that no one might come that day to rescue her, that she might be subjected to another black night in this dismal place. But with daylight to aid her perhaps she could find a way out for herself, if no one came. She would try not to lose hope.

She got up and washed, thankful at least for the water in the house, and she took a long drink. Then she remembered that there was tea in the kitchen, and even though there was no way of heating the water, she could make cold tea and add sugar. Perhaps the sugar would supply a little energy.

With her fur coat buttoned up to her neck she cautiously descended the stairway in the hall. Downstairs it was so dark that she could not even see the outlines of the furniture until her eyes became accustomed to the dimness.

“There must be candles in the kitchen,” she surmised. “But I’m afraid it will be

too dark to find them.”

She groped her way out to the kitchen, and fumbled around until she touched the dresser.

“I’d never be able to tell which is sugar and which is salt,” she thought. “Except that I can taste anything I happen to find.”

However, that proceeding might not prove to be so good, she decided, for she had no desire to taste kitchen cleanser or rat poison, for instance. No, it would be better to do without than to take any risks, just for the sake of a cup of cold tea!

As she cautiously ran her hand along the bottom shelf of the dresser, her fingers encountered something decidedly rough. For a moment she was puzzled, until she could identify the object. But in a moment she recognized it. Sandpaper, of course! Sandpaper on the outside of a box of matches.

Her pulse quickened as she picked up the box, and found that it was full. This was luck indeed! She struck a match at once, and began to hunt feverishly for candles. But she wasted three matches without finding a single one.

“I can have my cold tea, anyway,” she thought, and with the aid of a single match she located tea and sugar and a cup. The sink was right beside the dresser, and she ran cold water over the tea leaves.

“Merry Christmas, Mary Lou!” she finally said aloud, as she drank the cold tea through closed teeth, to avoid swallowing the leaves.

She felt chillier than ever after she had finished it, but not quite so weak and empty. Lighting another match she made her way into the living room.

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if there were an open fireplace all piled up with wood!” she mused, as she entered the room.

There was a fireplace, she found, but it was totally empty. On a shelf over it, however, she came upon a discovery which she had overlooked the previous night. There, right in the middle of the mantelpiece, stood a Chinese vase of the very design which Mrs. Hilliard had described!

“Maybe if I look around I’ll find Miss Granger’s painting,” was her next hope.

She examined the picture over the fireplace—a cheap hunting scene—and was just about to turn away when she made another find which brought a whoop of joy to her lips. In plain view, at each end of the shelf, stood two tall, red candles!

When Mary Louise had lighted one of these she felt suddenly like a different girl. It was amazing what a change one steady little gleam of light could make. But she was frugal enough to burn only one of them; if she had to spend another night in this house she would not need to be in complete darkness.

There was an upright piano at the other side of the room; Mary Louise stepped over and sat down on the stool in front of it.

“I’ll play a Christmas carol, just to celebrate!” she decided, and struck the opening chords of “O come all ye faithful.”

She stopped abruptly. “What a terrible rattle!” she exclaimed. “These people must throw their tin cans into the piano when they finish with them!”

She stood up and examined the top with her candle. Lifting up the hinged half, she peered down into the space beneath. Instantly she perceived a gray flannel bag hanging on the end of one of the keys as if someone had deliberately hidden it there.

She snatched it off excitedly, delighted to find that it was heavy. No doubt it contained something metallic, which had been the cause of the jangling of the piano keys. With trembling fingers she pulled open the string and dumped the contents of the bag upon a chair.

Diamond rings, bracelets, earrings, watches, and gold necklaces dropped out before her astonished eyes. A fabulous treasure, such as one reads about in fairy tales or sometimes dreams of finding! Color came to Mary Louise’s cheeks, and her heart raced wildly as she examined the articles one by one to make sure that they were genuine.

Mrs. Weinberger’s old-fashioned timepiece ornamented with diamonds was there—and Mary Louise’s own dainty little wrist watch, engraved with her name in the back of it. Oh, what a joy it was to have it again! She clasped it affectionately about her wrist.

Leaving the jewelry on the chair, she peered into the piano again to see what else

she could find. She was rewarded with another discovery. Down in a corner, in a remote spot, she saw a small package wrapped in brown paper. She encountered some difficulty in prying it loose, but at last she had it free. Stripped of its brown-paper wrapping, she found that she held a fat wad of bills in her hand!

“Mrs. Macgregor’s money!” she thought immediately. “And Miss Granger’s—and my own five dollars!”

How wonderful it all was! To be able to return the possessions to the rightful owners at Stoddard House! To have proof enough now to convict Mrs. Ferguson and her band of thieves! To collect her salary from Mrs. Hilliard and go home—in time for Max’s senior dance!

If—only—she could get out of this house!

A feverish sense of impatience took possession of Mary Louise. It was cruel, she stormed, that in her hour of triumph she should be imprisoned alone in a dark house. Wouldn’t somebody miss her and come to her rescue? Where was her father? Why hadn’t he driven out here to Center Square when he returned to Stoddard House last night—and had found her missing?

But suppose—awful thought—that he had not returned! Suppose he had missed finding Mrs. Ferguson and had been deceived by that letter of hers into pursuing the woman to Florida! Mrs. Hilliard would conclude that he had taken her—Mary Louise—with him, when neither returned!

A trip to Florida, Mary Louise figured, might consume almost a week. While she waited alone in this dark, cold house, each day itself an eternity of hunger and loneliness and suffering!

A hollow laugh escaped her lips as she glanced at the money and the valuables heaped on the chair beside her. They were as little use to her now as Midas’s gold. They would neither feed her nor keep her warm.

“There’s no use hoping for release by somebody else,” she told herself. “I’ll have to work out a way by myself. I’ll have to be a modern Count of Monte Cristo!”

She stood up and gathered her treasure together again into the bag and took the Chinese vase from the mantelpiece. Another tour of the room revealed the

Whistler picture in a dark corner. With the aid of her half-burnt candle, she carried everything to the dining room and placed it all in a pile beside the silverware.

“I’ll hide the money inside my dress and the jewelry in my coat pocket. These other things I’ll drop into that wood-basket I saw in the kitchen.”

When she had finally completed her packing she sat down in the dining room to think.

“I believe I’ll try to get out the same way I got in,” she decided. “Because the glass is already broken in that window. All I’ll have to do will be to cut my way through the new boards which that caretaker—or whoever he was—hammered on last night.”

With this purpose in view, Mary Louise carried her candle into the kitchen. The drawer in the dresser revealed a poor selection of knives; it might take days to cut through a board with only these as tools. Nevertheless, she meant to try. Anything was better than idleness.

Selecting what appeared to be the sharpest in the collection, she returned to the window in the dining room. But she realized immediately that her scheme would not work. The boards were too close together; it would be impossible to insert a knife between them at any place.

“I guess I’ll have to smash that bedroom window and jump out,” she thought gloomily. “It would probably mean a broken neck, but that’s better than a slow, lingering death.”

She pulled the dresser drawer farther out, looking idly for some other implement to facilitate her escape. Suddenly her eyes lighted upon a hammer. Not a very large hammer, but adequate enough for the task. Why hadn’t she thought of that plan before? It would be lots easier to hammer those boards loose than to try to cut through them with a knife.

She picked it up out of the drawer and paused abruptly. There was a slight sound in the front of the house, like the click of a key in a lock. Extinguishing her candle, she waited breathlessly till she heard the front door open. Someone stepped cautiously into the hall!

Mary Louise's heart stood still in her excitement. Who was the intruder? Was it the Margaret whom Mrs. Ferguson had mentioned in her letter, or was it the woman herself? Whoever it was, was he or she armed with a revolver?

Much as Mary Louise longed to find Margaret Detweiler, she dared not take a chance now of coming face to face with an unknown person in this dark house, since all the valuables were in her possession. Her only desire at the moment was for escape. Silently she moved towards the door of the kitchen which led directly into the hall.

She heard the newcomer go into the living room, and as Mary Louise crept past the doorway she saw the gleam of a flashlight. But the person, whoever it was, was hidden from her view, and Mary Louise did not wait to find out who it was. She reached the front door in safety and found the key still reposing in the lock.

A second later she removed the key and slipped out of the door into the clear, cold sunshine. She was free at last!

And with a chuckle of triumph she inserted the key on the outside of the door and turned it, imprisoning the intruder, just as she herself had been imprisoned for the last sixteen hours!

CHAPTER XVI

Two Captures

For one ecstatic moment Mary Louise stood motionless on the front porch, breathing the cold, delicious air of freedom. Then she ran around the side of the house to the rear to look for her car.

At first she thought it was gone, for she could not see it, huddled up close to the barn. But a few steps more revealed it to her view, and, weak as she was, she darted forward eagerly.

She decided that she would drive directly to the hotel and have some breakfast; afterwards she would inquire her way to the constable's house. He could take charge of the valuables in her possession and go back with her to meet the intruder. For Mary Louise had no intention of returning to Philadelphia without first learning that person's identity.

Besides, she had forgotten to bring out with her the basket containing the vase and the picture and the silverware. No use going back to Stoddard House without the entire loot!

She climbed into the car and put her foot on the starter—without any success. She pulled out the choke and tried again and again. Five minutes passed. She made one final effort, in vain. The car was frozen!

Despair seized her; she did not know what she could do. In her weakened condition, cold and hungry as she was, she did not believe herself physically capable of walking to the hotel. The distance must be at least a mile, although it had seemed so short by automobile.

She got out of the car and silently walked back to the front porch of the house, listening for sounds from the prisoner locked within its walls. But she heard

nothing until she reached the driveway. Then a young man stepped from behind a tree and almost frightened her to death.

He was a tough-looking fellow of about nineteen or twenty, she judged, in slovenly corduroy trousers, a dirty lumber jacket, and cap. He eyed her suspiciously; Mary Louise forced herself to meet his gaze, although she was trembling so that she had to keep her hand on the jewelry in her pocket to prevent its rattling.

The young man edged up nearer to her.

“You one of Mrs. Ferguson’s girls?” he demanded.

“Yes, I know her,” replied Mary Louise. “I——”

“You been in the house now?”

“Yes,” admitted Mary Louise.

“Anything gone?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“That’s lucky,” remarked the young man. “I come around last night about six o’clock, same as I do every night, and I seen a window was broke on the side of the house. But I didn’t see nobody prowlin’ around, so I just nailed a board across it. I’m still watchin’ fer that guy that come in a car. You kin tell Mrs. Ferguson he ain’t come back yet.”

“What guy?” inquired Mary Louise, feeling more at ease now, since this young man evidently regarded her as one of Mrs. Ferguson’s gang of girls.

“That fellow that drove up here last Sunday night,” was the reply. “Didn’t Mrs. Ferguson tell you?”

“I haven’t seen Mrs. Ferguson to talk to,” she stammered, hardly able to keep from laughing.

“Well, this guy meant trouble, I’m a-thinkin’. He drove up here in a car with a dame alongside of him. I hid in a tree when I heard the car comin’, and when it

was under the tree I dropped a rock on the dame's head. Knocked her out, and the guy had to rush her off to a doctor."

"Suppose you had killed her!" exclaimed Mary Louise solemnly.

"I ain't supposin'. Besides, nobody knows I done it except Mrs. Ferguson and you girls, and if any of you dames tell on me, I've got plenty to tell on you!"

"No doubt about that," agreed Mary Louise. "Well, I must be getting on. I'm going to the hotel for breakfast."

"How about my money?" demanded the young man. "Mrs. Ferguson wrote me you'd be along today and said you'd pay me. She promised me ten bucks."

This announcement scared Mary Louise; she didn't know whether she should pay the man or not, in order to keep up the pretence that she was a member of the secret band. If she refused, mightn't he knock her down? Yet if she complied with his demand and let him see the roll of bills, what would prevent his stealing them all at once?

However, a solution came to her mind, and she decided to risk it.

"I haven't more than five dollars in my purse," she said, opening it and showing him the contents. "I'll have to pay you when I get back, after I have something to eat. I'm starved—I didn't have any supper last night."

"O.K.," agreed the young man, to Mary Louise's surprise. "Meet me here in an hour?"

"Yes, just about," returned Mary Louise, hurrying down the driveway.

The minute she reached the road, out of sight of the house, Mary Louise started to run, and she kept on running for perhaps a couple of minutes. Then she stopped abruptly, dropping down on the cold, hard ground. She was so faint, she did not believe that she could take another step.

"Oh, I must get there!" she panted. "I must—must—must——"

But the main highway was not even in sight: only the long, desolate country road before her, without a sign of a person or a house.

She staggered somehow to her feet and took two or three steps forward. Utterly exhausted, she sank again to the ground.

“A lot of good all my discoveries will do me or the people of Stoddard House,” she mused bitterly, “if I pass out here on the road!”

She made another effort to rise, but she was growing colder and weaker every minute. In utter dismay she buried her head in her arms.

A sense of numbness began to creep over her as she sat there; she was losing consciousness of where she was when the sharp sound of a motor horn aroused her to her senses.

A car stopped opposite her; for one tense second she was afraid to look up for fear the occupants were some of Mrs. Ferguson’s gang. When a pleasant masculine voice addressed her, she felt the tears rush to her eyes in relief.

“What is the trouble, my girl?” inquired the man. “Can I help you?”

Reassurance and an overwhelming sense of gratitude almost prevented Mary Louise from answering. The man with the kind voice was someone she could trust: she saw by his manner of dressing that he was a Catholic priest.

“Oh, yes!” she replied. “Can you take me to the constable? Do you know where he lives?”

“Yes, of course I can.” It was an odd request, but the good man asked no questions. He merely got out of his car and lifted Mary Louise in beside him.

“I’d tell you the story—only I’m so cold and hungry,” she said. “Maybe—later _____”

“That’s all right, my child,” he replied soothingly.

In less than five minutes he stopped his car in front of a plain brick house and helped Mary Louise to the doorway.

“Merry Christmas, Hodge!” he said, when the door was opened to his knock. “This young lady——”

“Merry Christmas, Father,” returned the constable, gazing at Mary Louise. Almost instantly he recalled who she was. “Come in, Miss Gay,” he said.

“Oh, how can I ever thank you enough?” said Mary Louise, fervently to the priest. But the good man only smiled and departed as quickly as he had appeared.

The smell of coffee, of breakfast—for it was only a little after nine o’clock—was overpowering to the hungry, exhausted girl. She sank into a chair with only one cry on her lips: “Coffee!”

Before the constable could even ask her a question, his wife hurried from the dining room with a steaming cup in her hands. She was a motherly woman of about forty-five; three children immediately followed her into the living room to see who the stranger was who had arrived so mysteriously.

“Drink this, dear,” said Mrs. Hodge, holding the cup to Mary Louise’s lips. “I put cream and sugar in it, so it won’t burn you.”

Nothing in her life had ever tasted half so good to the cold, hungry girl as that fragrant cup of coffee. She finished it to the last drop, and a smile broke over her face.

“Was that good!” she exclaimed. “Oh, how much better I feel!”

“You must have some breakfast now,” urged Mrs. Hodge. “Don’t crowd around Miss Gay so closely, children! She needs room to breathe.”

“I’m all right now—really,” said Mary Louise. The warmth of the room was working its magic spell; for the first time now she noticed the Christmas tree and the toys around the floor.

“I’ve been locked up alone in that empty house of Mrs. Ferguson’s since five o’clock last night——” she began. But Mrs. Hodge refused to let her talk until she had eaten her breakfast.

Mary Louise ate everything that was on the table: a steaming bowl of oatmeal, an orange, half a dozen hot-cakes, two pieces of sausage, a glass of milk, and another cup of coffee. When she had finally finished she said that she believed she had enjoyed that breakfast more than any meal she had ever had.

The whole family listened while she briefly told her story. Beginning with the code letter which had directed her to Center Square, she explained how she had broken into the empty house and how she had been imprisoned by a man who was evidently in Mrs. Ferguson's employ.

"He admitted hitting me—only of course he didn't know it was I—over the head last Sunday. He thinks I'm one of Mrs. Ferguson's gang. So will you go back with me and arrest him, Constable Hodge?" she asked.

"I sure will," agreed the man, and he told one of his children to run across the yard to get a neighbor to help him.

“I found the stolen goods,” concluded Mary Louise, reaching into her dress and producing the roll of bills and taking the bag of jewelry from her pocket. “Will you take charge of it till I can bring my father up to get it? He’s a detective too, you see.”

Everyone gasped in amazement at the heap of valuables which Mary Louise displayed before their eyes. The children rushed forward excitedly, and the young detective saw no reason why they should not examine them to their hearts’ content. One of the boys even wanted to count the money.

“But how did you get out of that house?” demanded the constable. “Did that man open the door for you?”

“Oh no,” replied Mary Louise. “A member of Mrs. Ferguson’s gang came with a key. I slipped out and locked her inside. That’s why we must hurry back, to catch her before she escapes.”

Mary Louise rose from her chair.

“Can we go now, Constable?” she asked.

“Certainly. Yep, here comes my neighbor, who often helps me make arrests. We’ll take him along in case your man or your prisoner gets uppish.”

“Could we take a mechanic to fix my car, too?” she asked. “It’s frozen.”

“One of the kids will phone to the garage right now to send somebody out.”

They gathered up the treasure, and, leaving it in Mrs. Hodge’s care, Mary Louise, the constable, and the neighbor—a husky six-foot fellow—got into the car. The distance which had seemed so long to the girl an hour ago was covered in less than five minutes.

At the turn into the driveway, Mary Louise saw the man who was waiting for her. Recognizing the constable at once, he made a quick dash to get away. But he was not fast enough: the constable was out of the car in a second, commanding him to stop and displaying his revolver. With an oath on his lips he surrendered.

The constable’s big friend took charge of him while Mary Louise and the officer

entered the dark, cold house. The moment they opened the door they heard a girl's terrified sobs from the living room.

“Who—are—you?” she called, in a voice choking with fear and misery.

“The Constable of Center Square and Mary Louise Gay!” replied the young detective.

The prisoner jumped to her feet and ran out to the open door.

“Mary—Louise—Gay!” she repeated incredulously, bursting afresh into tears.

But Mary Louise had identified her immediately. She was Margaret Detweiler!

CHAPTER XVII

A Sad Story

Mary Louise thought she had never seen anyone change so much in the short space of two years as Margaret Detweiler had changed. How much older she looked, how much sadder, in spite of her expensive clothes! What a strange, trapped expression there was in her eyes, like that of an animal caught in a cage!

“You—are—going to arrest me?” the girl stammered, directing her question to the constable.

“I am doing just what Miss Gay says, at the present time,” replied the man. “So far, I don’t know that you’re guilty of any crime.”

“No, no, don’t arrest Margaret!” protested Mary Louise. “I just can’t believe that she is a member of Mrs. Ferguson’s gang. Why, it’s too impossible!”

“No, it isn’t impossible,” said Margaret, more calmly now. “Mrs. Ferguson is a special kind of criminal who makes young girls do her stealing for her. She picks up country girls who don’t know anybody in the city and trains them.... Oh, it’s a long story—and a sad one!”

“Do you mean to say that you did steal, Margaret?” demanded Mary Louise incredulously, for she had never believed that story of Margaret’s theft at the department store. “You must tell me the truth! For the sake of your grandparents.”

“I can honestly say that I have never stolen anything in my life,” replied the other girl steadfastly. “Mrs. Ferguson soon found out that I was no good for that, so she made me guardian of the treasure. I felt almost as wicked. But I never stole.”

“Thank heaven for that!” exclaimed Mary Louise.

“But now I’ve lost her valuables, and she’ll send me to prison,” whimpered Margaret. “Oh, Mary Lou, did you take them?”

“Yes, I took them. They’re at the constable’s home now, and most of them belong to the guests at Stoddard House in Philadelphia. But you shan’t suffer, Margaret, unless you’re really guilty.”

“The young lady is very cold,” remarked the constable. “Hadn’t we better go back to my house, where it’s warm, till your car is fixed, Miss Gay?”

“Oh yes, if you will let us!” agreed Mary Louise enthusiastically. She could see that Margaret’s teeth were chattering, and she remembered how cold she herself had been after an hour or so in that empty house.

“Wait until I get my other things,” she said, running back into the kitchen for the basket which she had packed early that morning. “I’ll put them into the car and see how soon the mechanic thinks he will have it ready.”

She returned in a couple of minutes and found the others already seated in the constable’s sedan. Mary Louise was glad to find that the officer had put Margaret Detweiler in front with him, not beside the tough young man with his huge guardian in the rear seat. She squeezed in next to Margaret, and the car started.

“The mechanic is going to drive my car to your place in about half an hour,” announced Mary Louise. “And then we’ll start for Philadelphia.”

“Fine!” exclaimed the constable. “That’ll give you girls a chance to get warm. And maybe have a cup of coffee.”

“It’s marvelous coffee,” commented Mary Louise. “It just about saved my life.”

Not another word was said about the crimes or the secret band. Margaret Detweiler was introduced to Mrs. Hodge as a friend of Mary Louise’s from Riverside, and the two girls spent a pleasant half hour in the constable’s home, sipping their freshly made coffee and looking at the children’s Christmas toys.

The constable, who had taken the young thug away, returned just as Mary Louise’s hired car drove up to the door.

Mary Louise jumped up and reached for her coat.

“Wait a minute!” cautioned the constable. “Company’s comin’ here to see you, Miss Gay! I just met somebody askin’ for you at the hotel.... So don’t be in too much of a rush!”

From the obvious twinkle in the man’s eyes, Mary Louise believed that Max Miller must have driven down to Philadelphia again and, missing her there, had naturally traced her to Center Square. But at that same moment a yellow taxi stopped at the constable’s gate, thereby dispelling any such illusion. Max would never ride in a taxicab on his limited allowance!

The door of the cab opened, and a tall, handsome man stepped out, paid the driver, and dismissed the cab. It was Mary Louise’s father.

Flinging open the door, the girl shouted at him in delight, so loud that Mr. Gay heard her in spite of the noise of the departing cab. In another moment he entered the open door of the house and held Mary Louise tightly in his arms.

“Mary Lou!” he cried in delight. “Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine,” she replied, ushering him into the constable’s house. “Merry Christmas, Daddy!”

“The same to you, dear.” He gazed at her fondly. “I believe it will be—now. You certainly look happy, Daughter.”

“I am, Daddy. These people have treated me royally!” She turned around and introduced her father to Mrs. Hodge and the children, for he had already met the constable. “And, oh, Dad, here is Margaret Detweiler,” she added. “You remember her, don’t you?”

“I certainly do,” replied Mr. Gay, extending his hand cordially. “My, but your grandparents are going to be glad to see you, Margaret!”

The girl blushed and looked down at the floor in embarrassment. Wisely, Mr. Gay asked no questions.

“I have all the stolen valuables, Dad,” continued Mary Louise. “Every single thing that was taken from Stoddard House, and even the money!”

Mr. Gay gazed at his daughter in speechless admiration: she had excelled his

fondest hopes!

“Mary Lou, that’s—wonderful!” he said after a moment.... “I have good news too. I caught your thieves. Seven of ’em. They are in a Baltimore jail now.”

Both girls exclaimed aloud in amazement and delight. Margaret Detweiler started forward and clutched the detective’s arm.

“It’s really true, Mr. Gay?” she demanded breathlessly. “Mrs. Ferguson—is she in jail too?”

“Locked up without any chance of getting out on bail!” he said authoritatively.

“Oh, I’m so glad!” murmured the girl thankfully.

“Now we’ll be able to take the valuables right back to their owners at Stoddard House, Constable Hodge,” announced Mary Louise. “I’m not afraid to carry them, with Dad beside me.”

Mrs. Hodge brought the jewelry and the money from its hiding place and gave it all to Detective Gay. Both he and Mary Louise tried to thank the Hodges for their help and their hospitality; Mr. Gay wanted to give the constable some sort of recompense, but the good man refused. Only after a great deal of persuasion would he accept a five-dollar bill as a Christmas present for his children.

“Ready, Daddy?” inquired Mary Louise as she slipped on her coat.

“Just a minute,” replied her father. “I want to telephone to Mrs. Hilliard to let her know that you are safe. She’s been terribly worried, Mary Lou.... And shall I tell her that we’ll eat Christmas dinner with her at Stoddard House?”

“Oh, yes! I’ve heard about the menu. There won’t be a sweller dinner anywhere in Philadelphia than at Stoddard House. But shall we be in time?”

Mr. Gay consulted his watch. “It’s only a little after eleven,” he said. “We ought to make it by one o’clock.”

As soon as the telephone call was completed, the three people got into the little car. Mary Louise herself took the wheel, for, as she explained, she was familiar with it by this time.

“Now tell me about your experiences, Mary Lou,” urged her father, as soon as they were well under way.

Mary Louise explained, for Margaret’s benefit as well as for her father’s, about deciphering the code letter and coming up to Center Square and breaking into the empty house in search of the valuables. But she made light of the coldness and desolation of the dark house and of her own hunger. She concluded with the statement that Margaret had come that morning and let her out with a key.

“But how did you happen to have the key, Margaret?” demanded Mr. Gay.

“I will have to tell you my whole story from the beginning,” answered the girl. There was a tragic note in her voice, which drew out her listeners’ sympathy, but neither made any comment.

“Then you can decide what to do with me,” she continued. “I guess I deserve to go to prison, but when I assure you that I have never done anything wrong except under compulsion, maybe you will not be so angry with me.”

“We’re not angry with you, Margaret,” Mary Louise told her. “Only terribly sorry. So please tell us everything. You remember that your grandparents have never heard anything from you since last Christmas.... So begin your story there.”

“All right.... Let me see—I was working in that department store in Philadelphia, and doing pretty well, for I got commissions besides my salary on everything I sold. I started in the cheap jewelry department and was promoted to the expensive kind. Christmas brought me in a lot of business, but I guess I overworked, for I got sick the week before and had to stay home and have the doctor. I’d already spent a good deal of money on presents, and when my doctor’s bill was paid I found my salary was all gone. So I went back to the store before I should—on the twenty-third of December, I remember.”

“The twenty-third of December!” repeated Mary Louise. “That was the day Mrs. Ferguson registered at the Benjamin Franklin Hotel.”

“How did you know, Mary Lou?” demanded Margaret.

“I went to the hotel and looked through the old register,” she explained. “But go on, Margaret. What happened then?”

“I found that a ring, an expensive diamond ring, had been stolen from our department,” continued the girl. “They insisted that it was taken before I was away, but they couldn’t prove anything. Just the same, I know the store detective had his eye on me.... Well, that very day something else disappeared: a link bracelet. This time they accused me immediately.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know, except that I was the newest salesgirl in the department—in fact, the only girl. The store detective stepped behind my counter and leaned down to the floor. *And he picked that bracelet right out of my shoe!*”

“How dreadful!” cried Mary Louise. “Somebody had ‘planted’ it there?”

“Of course. Mrs. Ferguson had, as I later learned. But at the time I hadn’t a suspicion. She was standing right near the counter, examining some rings. When she heard me accused and told to leave the store, she stepped forward, saying that she was sorry for me. She asked me whether I had any family, and I told her they were too far away for me to go to, without any money.

“‘But you’ll have trouble getting a job without a reference,’ she said. ‘So perhaps I had better help you.’”

“The sly cat!” cried Mary Louise.

Margaret nodded. “But I didn’t know it then. I simply asked her whether she could get me a job, and she told me to come to the Benjamin Franklin Hotel that afternoon and ask for Mrs. Ferguson.

“Of course, I went—I had nothing else to do. She engaged me at once as her secretary. We went out to Center Square for a few days, and I met a lot of other girls. Two daughters, two nieces, and a couple of friends. We had a good time, but I didn’t do any work, for she had two servants and a chauffeur, and I felt as if I didn’t earn my pay.”

“Did she give you a salary?” asked Mary Louise.

“Yes,” replied Margaret. “For the first couple of weeks. But I had to send it to my landlady in Philadelphia. After that, Mrs. Ferguson bought my clothes and paid my hotel bills, but she never gave me any cash.”

“So you couldn’t get away!” observed Mr. Gay.

“Exactly. Gradually I began to suspect that there was something crooked about this bunch, and then one day I found the diamond ring which had been stolen from the store: among Mrs. Ferguson’s stuff at Center Square!”

“What did you do?” demanded Mary Louise.

“I showed it to her and said I was going to take it right back to the store, and she stood there and laughed at me. She said it would only prove my own guilt!

“The next day we all went to Washington and stayed in different hotels. Mrs. Ferguson kept me with her, but I soon saw through her tricks. Her girls were all skilled hotel thieves. She tried to teach me the business, as she called it, but I refused to learn. So she made me take charge of the stuff they stole. The girls would bring their loot to her, and she’d send me with it to Center Square. Every once in a while she would dispose of it all to a crooked dealer who asked no questions.”

“Were you out at Center Square last Sunday, Margaret?” interrupted Mary Louise.

“Yes. Mrs. Ferguson and I both went. We had intended to get the place ready to spend Christmas there, but for some reason, Mrs. Ferguson got scared. She said that Mary Green talked too much, and she thought we ought to clear out. She made plans to dispose of everything in Baltimore, and then we were all going to sail to Bermuda.... But why did you ask that, Mary Lou?”

“Because I was in that car that drove up to the house then. I saw you and then Mrs. Ferguson. I wouldn’t have thought of its being you, only Mary Green admitted that she knew you. That made me suspicious.”

“You disappeared pretty quickly!”

“Rather,” laughed Mary Louise, and she told the story of being hit over the head by a rock and of catching the young man and having him arrested that very morning.

“That was clever!” approved her father. “Who was he, Margaret?”

“A neighborhood bum that Mrs. Ferguson employs to watch the place and keep the people away,” replied the girl.

“But I’m afraid I interrupted you, Margaret,” apologized Mary Louise. “Please go on with your story.”

“There isn’t much left to tell. I was too far away from home to run away, without any money, and I hadn’t a single friend I could go to. All the store people thought I was a thief, so I knew there was no use asking their help. I just kept on, from day to day, not knowing how it would ever end and never expecting to see my grandparents or my Riverside friends again. Oh, you can’t imagine how unhappy I have been!”

She stopped talking, for emotion had overcome her; tears were rolling down her cheeks. Mary Louise laid her hand over Margaret’s reassuringly.

“It’s all right now, isn’t it, Daddy?” she said. “We’ll take you home to your grandparents.”

“But I can’t go back to them!” protested the other girl. “How can I tell them what has happened? They’d be disgraced for life.”

“You can tell them you have been working for a queer woman who wouldn’t allow you to write home,” said Mr. Gay. “A woman whose mind was affected, for that is the truth. There is no doubt that Mrs. Ferguson is the victim of a diseased mind.”

“Wouldn’t you ever tell on me?” questioned Margaret.

“No, of course not. It was in no way your fault, child.... And now try to be happy. I think I can find you a job in Herman’s Hardware store, right in Riverside. And you can live with your grandparents. They need you.”

“It seems almost too good to be true,” breathed the grateful girl.

Mary Louise turned to her father.

“Now for your story, Dad,” she begged. “About capturing the thieves.”

“I think that had better be kept till dinner time,” replied Mr. Gay. “This traffic

we're approaching will require all your attention, Mary Lou. And besides, Mrs. Hilliard will want to hear it too."

CHAPTER XVIII

Conclusion

Mary Louise brought the car to a stop at Stoddard House at a quarter to one. Carrying the money and the jewels in her father's briefcase, and the other articles in the basket, she and Margaret went into the hotel to get ready for dinner while Mr. Gay returned the hired car to the garage.

"I'll notify the police that you're found, Mary Lou," he said. "Then I'll call your mother. I think it will be best if she goes over to your grandparents, Margaret, and tells them about you herself. They haven't a telephone, and I don't like to frighten elderly people with telegrams."

Both girls nodded their approval to these suggestions and hurried into the hotel. Mrs. Hilliard was waiting for Mary Louise with open arms; she loved the young detective like a daughter.

"Now, run along, girls, and get ready for dinner," she said finally. "We are going to have one big table, instead of all the little ones in the dining room. With a tree in the center, and place cards, just like a jolly family party."

"That's swell!" exclaimed Mary Louise. "It'll be real Christmas after all."

"And thank you so much for the lovely handkerchiefs, dear," added the manager. "It was sweet of you to think of me.... That reminds me, you haven't had your presents yet."

"Put them at my place at the table," suggested Mary Louise. "And I'll have presents for some of the guests," she added, with a significant glance at the briefcase and basket.

When the girls returned to the first floor, after washing their faces and powdering their noses, they found Mr. Gay waiting for them. For a moment he did not see

them, so intent was he in the newspaper he was reading.

“Want to see the gang’s picture?” he asked when Mary Louise came to his side.

“Oh yes! Please!”

In spite of the fact that it was Christmas Day, a large photograph of Mrs. Ferguson and her six accomplices occupied much of the front page of this Philadelphia paper. In an inset above the picture of the crooks was Mary Louise’s smiling face!

“Daddy!” cried the girl in amazement. “Are you responsible for this?”

“I am,” replied her father proudly. “I want everybody to know that the credit belongs to you, Daughter.”

Other guests, who had not yet read their newspapers, crowded about Mr. Gay eager for the exciting news. They all remembered Pauline Brooks, and Mary Green; several of them identified the two transients who had stolen the other things from Stoddard House.

A loud gong sounded from the dining room, and Mrs. Hilliard threw open the doors. The room was beautifully decorated with greens and holly; a long table stretched out before them, covered with a lovely lace cloth and bearing a small Christmas tree as its centerpiece. Bright red ribbons had been stretched from the tree to each guest’s place, adding brilliancy to the spectacle.

“Hello, Mary Louise!” said a voice behind the young detective, and, turning around, Mary Louise saw Mrs. Weinberger behind her.

“Merry Christmas, Mrs. Weinberger!” she replied. “It’s nice to see you back here.”

“I’ve come back to stay,” announced the older woman. “I got lonely at the Bellevue. And Mrs. Macgregor is here too, for Christmas dinner.”

It was a happy group who finally found their places around the beautiful table and sat down. Mrs. Hilliard was at one end, and Miss Stoddard was honored with the seat at the other end. Mr. Gay was the only man present, but he did not seem in the least embarrassed.

Mary Louise found her pile of presents at her place, and Margaret Detweiler discovered a bunch of violets and a box of candy at hers. Even in his haste, Mr. Gay had remembered the lonely girl.

The guests ate their oyster cocktails and their mushroom soup before any formal announcement concerning the valuables was made. Then Mrs. Hilliard rose from her chair.

“As you all know from the papers, our criminals have been caught by Mary Louise Gay and her father, and are now in prison. But even better news than that is coming. I’ll introduce Mr. Gay, whom some of you know already, and he’ll tell you more about it.”

Everybody clapped as the famous detective stood up.

“I’m not going to make a speech,” he said, “and keep you waiting for the turkey we’re all looking forward to. I just thought that maybe some of you would enjoy this wonderful dinner even more if you knew that you are going to get everything back again which was stolen. My daughter found all the valuables and the money this morning in Mrs. Ferguson’s house at Center Square, and she will now return them to their rightful owners.”

As the newspaper had not mentioned anything about the stolen goods, the guests were not prepared for this pleasant surprise. A loud burst of applause greeted Mary Louise as she smilingly rose to her feet and opened the briefcase and drew out the basket from under the table where she had hidden it.

“I’ll begin at the beginning,” she said. “With the vase and the silverware belonging to Stoddard House.” She carried these articles to Mrs. Hilliard, amid appreciative hand-clapping.

“Next, Miss Granger’s picture and her fifty dollars,” she continued.

Tears actually came to the artist’s eyes as she took the painting from Mary Louise’s hands.

“You keep the fifty dollars, Miss Gay,” she said. “My picture is what I care for most.”

“No, Miss Granger, no, thank you,” replied the girl solemnly. “I am being paid a

salary for my work by Mrs. Hilliard, but I can't accept rewards for doing my duty."

She picked up the watches next: Mrs. Weinberger's and Mrs. Hilliard's. The Walder girls would get theirs when they returned from their holidays.

"And, last of all, Mrs. Macgregor's diamond earrings and her five hundred dollars," she concluded, restoring the jewelry and the bills to the delighted woman. "I believe that is all, for I am wearing my own wrist-watch, and I have my purse with its five dollars contents."

Loud cheering accompanied the applause which followed. When it had at last quieted down, both Mrs. Weinberger and Mrs. Macgregor tried in vain to give Mary Louise a reward, but she remained firm in her refusal. Then the turkeys were brought to the dining room, and everything else was temporarily forgotten in the enjoyment of Christmas dinner.

When it was all over, Mr. Gay told Mary Louise to pack her clothing and her presents while he returned the remaining valuables to the Ritz and to the police. "For I hope we can make the three-thirty train," he explained.

"But with that change at the Junction, we'd have to wait all night, shouldn't we, Daddy?" inquired Mary Louise. Anxious as she was to get back to Riverside, she had no desire to spend the night in a cheerless railway station.

"No," replied her father. "Because there's going to be a surprise waiting for you at the Junction."

"Max and Norman?" guessed Mary Louise instantly. "You mean that they'll drive down for us?"

Mr. Gay nodded. "That isn't all," he said.

Mary Louise did not guess the rest of the answer until the train pulled into the Junction shortly after eight o'clock that night. Then a war whoop that could come from no one else but her small brother greeted her ears, and she knew that her mother must be there too. Yes, and there was her chum, Jane Patterson, grinning at her from the boys' car! And her little dog, Silky!

In another minute Mary Louise was clasping her arms around Mrs. Gay and

hugging Freckles and Jane and Silky all at once. Max, at her side, had to be content with pressing her arm affectionately.

Questions, Christmas greetings, words of joy and congratulation poured so fast upon Mary Louise's ears that she could scarcely understand them.

"You're home to stay, darling?" This from her mother.

"You'll go to the senior prom with me?" demanded Max.

"You're the most famous girl detective in the world!" shouted Norman Wilder.

"You were a lemon to duck my party, but I'll give another one just in your honor," promised Jane.

"Did you get your salary—your twenty-five bucks?" asked Freckles.

Mary Louise nodded, smiling, to everything. Then she got into Max's car beside him, with Jane and Norman in the rumble seat. Mr. Gay took the wheel of his sedan, with his wife beside him; Margaret Detweiler, who was quietly watching everything, sat behind with Freckles.

The drivers of the two cars did not stop for any food on the way; they sped along as fast as they dared towards Riverside. Old Mr. and Mrs. Detweiler were waiting up for their precious granddaughter, their lost Margaret.

A little before midnight the cars pulled up in front of the old couple's home, and everybody in the party went inside for a moment. The greeting between Margaret and her grandparents was touching to see. Even Norman Wilder, who prided himself on being "hard-boiled," admitted afterwards that the tears came to his eyes.

Mrs. Gay discreetly drew her own party away, back to her home, where a feast was waiting for the travelers. This, Mary Louise felt, was her real Christmas celebration—with her family and her three dearest friends. Now she could tell her story and listen to the praises which meant so much to her.

"But the best part of it all," she concluded, "is that I'm a real professional detective at last!"

Transcriber's Note

- Retained publication and copyright information from the printed exemplar (this book is public-domain in the U.S.).
- Obvious typographical errors were corrected without comment. Possibly intentional spelling variations were not changed.
- A Table of Contents and a list of the series books were prepared for the convenience of the reader.
- The table of characters was reformatted to accomodate variable-width devices.

***END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE MYSTERY OF
THE SECRET BAND***

***** This file should be named 43584-h.txt or 43584-h.zip *****

This and all associated files of various formats will be found in:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/4/3/5/8/43584>

Updated editions will replace the previous one--the old editions will be renamed.

Creating the works from public domain print editions means that no one owns a United States copyright in these works, so the Foundation (and you!) can copy and distribute it in the United States without permission and without paying

copyright royalties. Special rules, set forth in the General Terms of Use part of this license, apply to copying and distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works to protect the PROJECT GUTENBERG-tm concept and trademark. Project Gutenberg is a registered trademark, and may not be used if you charge for the eBooks, unless you receive specific permission. If you do not charge anything for copies of this eBook, complying with the rules is very easy. You may use this eBook for nearly any purpose such as creation of derivative works, reports, performances and research. They may be modified and printed and given away--you may do practically ANYTHING with public domain eBooks. Redistribution is subject to the trademark license, especially commercial redistribution.

***** START: FULL LICENSE *****
THE FULL PROJECT GUTENBERG LICENSE
PLEASE READ THIS BEFORE YOU DISTRIBUTE
OR USE THIS WORK

To protect the Project Gutenberg-tm mission of promoting the free distribution of electronic works, by using or distributing this work (or any other work associated in any way with the phrase "Project Gutenberg"), you agree to comply with all the terms of the Full Project Gutenberg-tm License available with this file or online at www.gutenberg.org/license.

**Section 1. General Terms of Use and Redistributing Project
Gutenberg-tm electronic works**

1.A. By reading or using any part of this Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work, you indicate that you have read, understand, agree to and accept all the terms of this license and intellectual property (trademark/copyright) agreement. If you do not agree to abide by all the terms of this agreement, you must cease using and return or destroy all copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in your possession. If you paid a fee for obtaining a copy of or access to a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work and you do not agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement, you may obtain a refund from the person or entity to whom you paid the fee as set forth in paragraph 1.E.8.

1.B. "Project Gutenberg" is a registered trademark. It may only be used on or associated in any way with an electronic work by people who agree to be bound by the terms of this agreement. There are a few things that you can do with most

Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works even without complying with the full terms of this agreement. See paragraph 1.C below. There are a lot of things you can do with Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works if you follow the terms of this agreement and help preserve free future access to Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. See paragraph 1.E below.

1.C. The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation ("the Foundation" or PGLAF), owns a compilation copyright in the collection of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works. Nearly all the individual works in the collection are in the public domain in the United States. If an individual work is in the public domain in the United States and you are located in the United States, we do not claim a right to prevent you from copying, distributing, performing, displaying or creating derivative works based on the work as long as all references to Project Gutenberg are removed. Of course, we hope that you will support the Project Gutenberg-tm mission of promoting free access to electronic works by freely sharing Project Gutenberg-tm works in compliance with the terms of this agreement for keeping the Project Gutenberg-tm name associated with the work. You can easily comply with the terms of this agreement by keeping this work in the same format with its attached full Project Gutenberg-tm License when you share it without charge with others.

1.D. The copyright laws of the place where you are located also govern what you can do with this work. Copyright laws in most countries are in a constant state of change. If you are outside the United States, check the laws of your country in addition to the terms of this agreement before downloading, copying, displaying, performing, distributing or creating derivative works based on this work or any other Project Gutenberg-tm work. The Foundation makes no representations concerning the copyright status of any work in any country outside the United States.

1.E. Unless you have removed all references to Project Gutenberg:

1.E.1. The following sentence, with active links to, or other immediate access to, the full Project Gutenberg-tm License must appear prominently whenever any copy of a Project Gutenberg-tm work (any work on which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" appears, or with which the phrase "Project Gutenberg" is associated) is accessed, displayed, performed, viewed, copied or distributed:

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no

restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org

1.E.2. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is derived from the public domain (does not contain a notice indicating that it is posted with permission of the copyright holder), the work can be copied and distributed to anyone in the United States without paying any fees or charges. If you are redistributing or providing access to a work with the phrase "Project Gutenberg" associated with or appearing on the work, you must comply either with the requirements of paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 or obtain permission for the use of the work and the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark as set forth in paragraphs 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.3. If an individual Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work is posted with the permission of the copyright holder, your use and distribution must comply with both paragraphs 1.E.1 through 1.E.7 and any additional terms imposed by the copyright holder. Additional terms will be linked to the Project Gutenberg-tm License for all works posted with the permission of the copyright holder found at the beginning of this work.

1.E.4. Do not unlink or detach or remove the full Project Gutenberg-tm License terms from this work, or any files containing a part of this work or any other work associated with Project Gutenberg-tm.

1.E.5. Do not copy, display, perform, distribute or redistribute this electronic work, or any part of this electronic work, without prominently displaying the sentence set forth in paragraph 1.E.1 with active links or immediate access to the full terms of the Project Gutenberg-tm License.

1.E.6. You may convert to and distribute this work in any binary, compressed, marked up, nonproprietary or proprietary form, including any word processing or hypertext form. However, if you provide access to or distribute copies of a Project Gutenberg-tm work in a format other than "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other format used in the official version posted on the official Project Gutenberg-tm web site (www.gutenberg.org), you must, at no additional cost, fee or expense to the user, provide a copy, a means of exporting a copy, or a means of obtaining a copy upon request, of the work in its original "Plain Vanilla ASCII" or other form. Any alternate format must include the full Project Gutenberg-tm License

as specified in paragraph 1.E.1.

1.E.7. Do not charge a fee for access to, viewing, displaying, performing, copying or distributing any Project Gutenberg-tm works unless you comply with paragraph 1.E.8 or 1.E.9.

1.E.8. You may charge a reasonable fee for copies of or providing access to or distributing Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works provided that

- You pay a royalty fee of 20% of the gross profits you derive from the use of Project Gutenberg-tm works calculated using the method you already use to calculate your applicable taxes. The fee is owed to the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, but he has agreed to donate royalties under this paragraph to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation. Royalty payments must be paid within 60 days following each date on which you prepare (or are legally required to prepare) your periodic tax returns. Royalty payments should be clearly marked as such and sent to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation at the address specified in Section 4, "Information about donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation."
- You provide a full refund of any money paid by a user who notifies you in writing (or by e-mail) within 30 days of receipt that s/he does not agree to the terms of the full Project Gutenberg-tm License. You must require such a user to return or destroy all copies of the works possessed in a physical medium and discontinue all use of and all access to other copies of Project Gutenberg-tm works.
- You provide, in accordance with paragraph 1.F.3, a full refund of any money paid for a work or a replacement copy, if a defect in the electronic work is discovered and reported to you within 90 days of receipt of the work.
- You comply with all other terms of this agreement for free distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm works.

1.E.9. If you wish to charge a fee or distribute a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work or group of works on different terms than are set forth in this agreement, you must obtain permission in writing from both the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and Michael Hart, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark. Contact the Foundation as set forth in Section 3 below.

1.F.

1.F.1. Project Gutenberg volunteers and employees expend considerable effort to identify, do copyright research on, transcribe and proofread public domain works in creating the Project Gutenberg-tm collection. Despite these efforts, Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, and the medium on which they may be stored, may contain "Defects," such as, but not limited to, incomplete, inaccurate or corrupt data, transcription errors, a copyright or other intellectual property infringement, a defective or damaged disk or other medium, a computer virus, or computer codes that damage or cannot be read by your equipment.

1.F.2. LIMITED WARRANTY, DISCLAIMER OF DAMAGES - Except for the "Right of Replacement or Refund" described in paragraph 1.F.3, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, the owner of the Project Gutenberg-tm trademark, and any other party distributing a Project Gutenberg-tm electronic work under this agreement, disclaim all liability to you for damages, costs and expenses, including legal fees. YOU AGREE THAT YOU HAVE NO REMEDIES FOR NEGLIGENCE, STRICT LIABILITY, BREACH OF WARRANTY OR BREACH OF CONTRACT EXCEPT THOSE PROVIDED IN PARAGRAPH 1.F.3. YOU AGREE THAT THE FOUNDATION, THE TRADEMARK OWNER, AND ANY DISTRIBUTOR UNDER THIS AGREEMENT WILL NOT BE LIABLE TO YOU FOR ACTUAL, DIRECT, INDIRECT, CONSEQUENTIAL, PUNITIVE OR INCIDENTAL DAMAGES EVEN IF YOU GIVE NOTICE OF THE POSSIBILITY OF SUCH DAMAGE.

1.F.3. LIMITED RIGHT OF REPLACEMENT OR REFUND - If you discover a defect in this electronic work within 90 days of receiving it, you can receive a refund of the money (if any) you paid for it by sending a written explanation to the person you received the work from. If you received the work on a physical medium, you must return the medium with your written explanation. The person or entity that provided you with the defective work may elect to provide a replacement copy in lieu of a refund. If you received the work electronically, the person or entity providing it to you may choose to give you a second opportunity to receive the work electronically in lieu of a refund. If the second copy is also defective, you may demand a refund in writing without further opportunities to fix the problem.

1.F.4. Except for the limited right of replacement or refund set forth in paragraph 1.F.3, this work is provided to you 'AS-IS', WITH NO OTHER WARRANTIES

OF ANY KIND, EXPRESS OR IMPLIED, INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO WARRANTIES OF MERCHANTABILITY OR FITNESS FOR ANY PURPOSE.

1.F.5. Some states do not allow disclaimers of certain implied warranties or the exclusion or limitation of certain types of damages. If any disclaimer or limitation set forth in this agreement violates the law of the state applicable to this agreement, the agreement shall be interpreted to make the maximum disclaimer or limitation permitted by the applicable state law. The invalidity or unenforceability of any provision of this agreement shall not void the remaining provisions.

1.F.6. INDEMNITY - You agree to indemnify and hold the Foundation, the trademark owner, any agent or employee of the Foundation, anyone providing copies of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works in accordance with this agreement, and any volunteers associated with the production, promotion and distribution of Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works, harmless from all liability, costs and expenses, including legal fees, that arise directly or indirectly from any of the following which you do or cause to occur: (a) distribution of this or any Project Gutenberg-tm work, (b) alteration, modification, or additions or deletions to any Project Gutenberg-tm work, and (c) any Defect you cause.

Section 2. Information about the Mission of Project Gutenberg-tm

Project Gutenberg-tm is synonymous with the free distribution of electronic works in formats readable by the widest variety of computers including obsolete, old, middle-aged and new computers. It exists because of the efforts of hundreds of volunteers and donations from people in all walks of life.

Volunteers and financial support to provide volunteers with the assistance they need are critical to reaching Project Gutenberg-tm's goals and ensuring that the Project Gutenberg-tm collection will remain freely available for generations to come. In 2001, the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation was created to provide a secure and permanent future for Project Gutenberg-tm and future generations. To learn more about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation and how your efforts and donations can help, see Sections 3 and 4

and the Foundation information page at www.gutenberg.org

Section 3. Information about the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

The Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation is a non profit 501(c)(3) educational corporation organized under the laws of the state of Mississippi and granted tax exempt status by the Internal Revenue Service. The Foundation's EIN or federal tax identification number is 64-6221541. Contributions to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation are tax deductible to the full extent permitted by U.S. federal laws and your state's laws.

The Foundation's principal office is located at 4557 Melan Dr. S. Fairbanks, AK, 99712., but its volunteers and employees are scattered throughout numerous locations. Its business office is located at 809 North 1500 West, Salt Lake City, UT 84116, (801) 596-1887. Email contact links and up to date contact information can be found at the Foundation's web site and official page at www.gutenberg.org/contact

For additional contact information:

Dr. Gregory B. Newby
Chief Executive and Director
gnewby@pglaf.org

Section 4. Information about Donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation

Project Gutenberg-tm depends upon and cannot survive without wide spread public support and donations to carry out its mission of increasing the number of public domain and licensed works that can be freely distributed in machine readable form accessible by the widest array of equipment including outdated equipment. Many small donations (\$1 to \$5,000) are particularly important to

maintaining tax exempt status with the IRS.

The Foundation is committed to complying with the laws regulating charities and charitable donations in all 50 states of the United States. Compliance requirements are not uniform and it takes a considerable effort, much paperwork and many fees to meet and keep up with these requirements. We do not solicit donations in locations where we have not received written confirmation of compliance. To SEND DONATIONS or determine the status of compliance for any particular state visit www.gutenberg.org/donate

While we cannot and do not solicit contributions from states where we have not met the solicitation requirements, we know of no prohibition against accepting unsolicited donations from donors in such states who approach us with offers to donate.

International donations are gratefully accepted, but we cannot make any statements concerning tax treatment of donations received from outside the United States. U.S. laws alone swamp our small staff.

Please check the Project Gutenberg Web pages for current donation methods and addresses. Donations are accepted in a number of other ways including checks, online payments and credit card donations. To donate, please visit: www.gutenberg.org/donate

Section 5. General Information About Project Gutenberg-tm electronic works.

Professor Michael S. Hart was the originator of the Project Gutenberg-tm concept of a library of electronic works that could be freely shared with anyone. For forty years, he produced and distributed Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks with only a loose network of volunteer support.

Project Gutenberg-tm eBooks are often created from several printed editions, all of which are confirmed as Public Domain in the U.S. unless a copyright notice is included. Thus, we do not necessarily keep eBooks in compliance with any particular paper edition.

Most people start at our Web site which has the main PG search facility:
www.gutenberg.org

This Web site includes information about Project Gutenberg-tm, including how to make donations to the Project Gutenberg Literary Archive Foundation, how to help produce our new eBooks, and how to subscribe to our email newsletter to hear about new eBooks.