



THE
HERMIT OF
PROUD HILL

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Title: The Hermit of Proud Hill

Date of first publication: 1940

Author: Lillian Garis

Date first posted: Mar. 30, 2016

Date last updated: Mar. 30, 2016

Faded Page eBook #20160328

This eBook was produced by: Dave Morgan, Stephen Hutcheson & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at <http://www.pgdpCanada.net>



THE
HERMIT OF
PROUD HILL



“YES, THIS IS WHERE THE FIRE STARTED,” CECY SAID, “AND—I—SMELL—KEROSENE!” ([Page 179](#))

MELODY LANE MYSTERY STORIES

THE HERMIT OF PROUD HILL

BY
LILIAN GARIS

Author of
THE MYSTERY OF STINGYMAN'S ALLEY
SECRET OF THE KASHMIR SHAWL
ETC.

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GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS NEW YORK

BOOKS BY LILIAN GARIS MELODY LANE MYSTERY STORIES

THE GHOST OF MELODY LANE

THE FORBIDDEN TRAIL

THE TOWER SECRET

THE WILD WARNING

TERROR AT MOANING CLIFF

THE DRAGON OF THE HILLS
MYSTERY OF STINGYMAN'S ALLEY
THE SECRET OF THE KASHMIR SHAWL
THE HERMIT OF PROUD HILL

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TO JERRY, WHO CLAIMS SHE STILL LIKES MY BOOKS.
MAY SHE WRITE HER OWN IN DUE TIME.

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THE HERMIT OF PROUD HILL

CHAPTER I MEET KAY FINDLEY

Kay Findley, breathless and excited, tossed her library book down on her mother's busy-looking desk, gave her battered hat a twirl that landed it on the Boston rocker.

"Oh, I'm so glad they came. Now we can do things."

"Who are they?" asked her mother.

"Carol and Cecy Duncan. You know, Mums. The girls who used to live in Melody Lane. Don't you remember? They're back this summer."

"Should I remember? Why, Kay?"

"Oh, Mums. You're just terrible. Why do you have to be so—so up to date and smart? If you had lovely silver hair and delphinium blue eyes and wore dripping laces——"

Mrs. Findley touched her offending chestnut hair and pretended to rub reprovably her fine brown eyes.

“Would you really like me better, dear?”

“Silly. Of course I wouldn’t but it would be easier to
_____”

2

“Fool me?”

“See? That’s how it is. You always get ahead of me.” Kay was showing, in this round about way, her own concern about something she was about to propose. But she need not have worried about her mother’s interference. Mrs. Findley was not like that. She trusted her daughter and tried to guide her prudently.

“You were saying something about the Duncan girls? I do remember, of course. They used to live on the old Becker estate, and their father, Felix Duncan, was one of our town’s best citizens.”

“That’s it, Mums; and the girls are that way too. They’re best citizens and not a bit queer, either. Just girls like the rest of us. I met Cecy for just a few minutes and I could only tell her a few things.” The last remark was intended to inspire confidence. Mrs. Findley tapped her fountain pen a little impatiently. She had a lot of business to attend to and even Kay should not interrupt her needlessly.

“There you are at those old bills, and you’ll be off to your other desk down in the Center as soon as you finish,” grumbled Kay. “You work hard and I just—play around and wait for school to reopen.”

“But Nannie has a lot to do, Kay, and she is not as strong as

you are. But I know, housework has no thrills,” admitted Kay’s mother with a little sigh. She was once again trying to show her daughter, gently but firmly, that to help Nannie, their reliable housekeeper and friendly maid, might be a nobler aim than that of earning a few vacation dollars.

“What is it you want to do now, dear? I really must finish these monthly reports for Mr. Burke. That’s why I brought them home last night.” The mother waited, and the daughter straightened up “all ready to go.”

3

“Jane Halliday has closed up her real estate office; right in the middle of the best part of the season,” announced Kay, sharply.

“It probably didn’t pay to keep it open,” her mother replied calmly.

“She probably didn’t know how to make it pay,” snapped back Kay.

“And you would know how?”

“Well, I wouldn’t be too nice to go out with people and show them places for sale. Jane just sat in that ducky little office behind a vase of stale flowers and watched the telephone. I guess it got so sick of her staring at it, it wouldn’t ring for spite.”

“That wasn’t it at all, dear,” her mother told her. “The ducky little office, as you call it, was set up there to take care of the new development, Cedar Set. When most of those pretty places were sold of course the business got very slow. It takes new attractions to entice people away out here, you know.” Again

Mrs. Findley poised her pen over a sheet of figures on her desk.

“But there are lots of good places still unsold, aren’t there? Just because they were built maybe twenty years ago, doesn’t put them out of the market,” said Kay. This statement, so business-like and wisely spoken, put Kay right where she was aiming to go—into the real estate field.

4

“I see,” smiled her mother. “You have it all fixed up. The real estate business here in Melody Lane is as good as booming. You, Kay Findley, have the sign on Jane’s deserted office all dusted off and swinging gaily in the breeze.”

“Now, Mother!”

“And the Duncan girls? You were just going to say something about them, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was,” drawled Kay. “I was going to say that Carol Duncan is assistant director of the children’s camp out at Beaverbreak, and her sister Cecy, she’s the one I know, we went to school together in the sixth grade, helps her sister with the camp work there. Her father, he’s the one you know, has taken the Dawson House for the summer. It’s right at the station and he commutes to his newspaper office in Newkirk.”

“So you girls could all work together selling the old places you just spoke of? Don’t mind if I rush, dear, I just have to.” Mrs. Findley was picking up her papers and slipping them into her brief case. “I see what you mean. You would have the Duncan girls to help you as that camp is not too far from the Cedar Set office. Is that it, dear?”

“No wonder they think you’re smart down at the brokerage office, Mums,” said Kay, retrieving her hat from the old rocker but not bothering about the library book Mrs.

Findley had put over on the end table. “You know what I think before I know myself. Yes, that’s exactly it. Cecy and Carol have lots of time to ramble; their camp is right in the woods. We all have bicycles and I’m going down to old Spike Johnson and tell him *I’ll* take over Jane’s leavin’s.”

“Spike Johnson? His name is *Thomas*, isn’t it?”

“Used to be before he grew up. Now he’s so tall they call him Spike and it suits him, too. But, I had better be careful if I want to do business with him. Perhaps I had better forget the Spike part,” Kay decided.

“But, really, Kay, why should he turn his business over to a couple of girls?” There was a hint of warning in Mrs. Findley’s voice.

“Because I already have a prospective purchaser for a big place and if I can sell one place, I’ll bet my brand new tennis racket, Spike will let me try some more. Don’t you think that’s a good business approach, Mums?”

“Couldn’t be better. But who and what is the prospect? For a big place? Do I see the catch in this new plan of you girls? There is a big place that never holds its tenants; could it be the Morgan Manor?”

“Oh, Mums,” sighed Kay, “there you go again. As if anyone believed in haunted houses these days.”

“Nevertheless, folks like to sleep nights, same as ever, even these days,” laughed Mrs. Findley. “But I don’t like Tom Johnson. When your father and I had a piece of land in the Cedars when we were first married, he managed to get it away from us. Well, he certainly is not an example of the honest business man,” Mrs. Findley sighed, and Kay saw her bite her lips to restrain that memory.

Kay turned her head away so her mother would not notice how this remark affected her. If her mother suspected why Kay was determined to get the best of Tom Johnson in a deal she might not let her go into it.

6

But Mrs. Findley, too, seemed lost in thought for the moment. Finally she said a little wearily: “All right, dear. You made out well last summer. Sold a piano and actually got a commission _____”

“Oh, well, Regans wanted a piano. I knew they did and I only told Ogden’s salesman. He was a good sport to give me a commission. He didn’t have to, you know.”

“I know,” her mother agreed proudly. “Well, Kay darling, I’ve always been a business woman so I can’t blame you. Not that I want to. Good bye, Bunnie. And watch out for spooks. They may exist. No one has ever been able to prove that they don’t, you know, and those woods over by Proud Hill were always supposed to be thick with them.”

“It isn’t the spooks, Mummy dear, but the spookers. Melody Lane girls have been after them for a long time, you know.”

Scarcely had Mrs. Findley’s little car moved out onto the

road than Kay was on her bicycle pedaling away in the opposite direction. First, she must see that old fellow they called Spike Johnson. He was known to be “an old crab with a lot of money,” and it was also said he now owned half of Melody Lane. He had sold enough land for the Cedar Set development, and it was for that transaction “the ducky little office,” with all the tricky rustic trellises and silly arbors leading like a tunnel from the old road to the right spot in the lovely wooded place, had been built. That’s where Jane Halliday took the orders and sent some out, and that was where Kay Findley hoped to do something just as interesting if not more so.

Kay Findley was a big girl; she looked much older than her high school years; tall, square shouldered, robust and even good looking. One could not call her pretty, she was a little too much on the athletic side to be pretty, but she was certainly going to be a handsome young woman when she grew up. Her good-natured, generous mouth was especially attractive, and she had one playful dimple that just pinched itself every time she smiled. Her eyes were blue and her hair true brown. She liked a short bob and didn’t care a thing about the little curls that got away both from the bob and being short.

Kay loved business; she liked to accomplish things, and she also liked to earn money. But what really stirred her the most was the daring to do things that most girls would be afraid to undertake.

The afternoon was going and Kay had little time to spare, so she swung on her wheel and started merrily off to find Spike Johnson, the man who owned half of Melody Lane, which

included the little real estate office set just far enough in the woods to give Cedar Set development an alluring perspective.

“I’ve got to be smart with him,” the girl was bolstering up her own resolve. “The one important thing is to convince him I really have a prospective buyer for that lovely big place, and at the same time not give him the slightest idea as to who that buyer might be. A delicate situation—” So delicate that she herself did not care to dwell upon it. What might that passing remark in the hotel lobby amount to? The handsome stranger, who said to the clerk, Win Vernon, that “he liked it out here and if he could find the right place, quiet and away from things, he might buy it and come out here to write.” That was all, except that she, Kay, who had been at the hotel collecting the last of her charity money from a recent cake sale, jumped at the idea. Maybe a buyer for that big Morgan place! And maybe—oh, it was too wonderful even to think about.

8

Turning in now to where the path became dangerously narrow, Kay guided her wheel expertly, humming a tune defiantly. She was expecting to meet Tom Johnson on any of these paths that led to the old farm place. The same paths went to the pretentious Morgan estate but the properties were as different as if miles separated them. Kay could see the Morgan house now, a fine, squarish brick place with beautiful oak trees towering above it. She could also glimpse beyond that bare spot in the landscape the shabby red barns and the old gray house that marked the Johnson home. But over and above all this loomed Proud Hill.

“That’s where the hermit lives, all alone,” she was reflecting. “But he minds his own business so I’ll mind mine, as far as he

is concerned.”

Clutching her handle bars, Kay gave a push to her pedals to get over something in the road.

9

“Oh!” she screamed the next moment. “Oh! What—was that?”

The words were as broken as her precious bicycle seemed to be, for at that moment Kay was tangled in the spokes of her front wheel, and was feeling a sharp pain, like a knife jabbing her some place.

“Help! Help!” she cried out, realizing that the slightest move would make that wire go deeper into the flesh. “Here, in the path.”

“Stay where—you are. I’ll send—help,” came a deep voice, hidden somewhere. “Wait, wait a minute.”

“Oh, thank goodness,” breathed Kay, “someone heard—me.”

Then she knew why she had called out. There had been a stirring in the thick bushes near the white birches a short distance from where she had fallen.

The girl, so suddenly tangled up in the spokes of her wheel, was feeling about the ground with her hands, while she tried to lift the weight of the wheel without stirring that jabbing spoke in deeper.

“There, that’s it,” she said aloud. “I fell over a log, and it’s—why, it’s half buried in a little trench and covered with leaves! Looks like a trap just set to trip a person. Here! Here I am!”

she called again, as now she knew someone was coming to her. The leaves and sticks were crackling as two strong, young feet were beating their way to her rescue.

CHAPTER II

A BOY NAMED HENRI

“Take it easy. Take it easy.”

“I am, of course,” grumbled Kay, as the boy tried to pull the spokes apart so she could slip her foot out. “However did I jab that in there?”

“They spring,” the boy said crisply. “Good thing it didn’t cut any deeper. There, now just—wait a minute,” he ordered, as she cringed and cried out again. “Oh!” He was trying to hold the main shaft of the bicycle steady with his foot upon it while he pulled open the spokes of the wheel into which Kay’s foot, with its silly sock and her tennis sneaker, had plunged so precipitately.

“It’s only a scratch,” the girl said finally, “but it felt as if it were cutting to the bone. Thanks. I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t come along. How did you hear me?” she asked, just realizing he seemed to have dropped from nowhere.

“Hear you? I didn’t hear *you*,” the boy replied.

“You didn’t? But I called and I heard an answer.”

“It wasn’t me. I didn’t answer you, I answered him.”

“Him? Who was that?”

“The Voice, I guess,” the boy said, lowering his own voice and glancing around furtively.

“The Voice! What do you mean?” demanded Kay.

“Take it easy, take it easy,” the boy almost whispered. “What do you care? You’re all right, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I suppose I am,” Kay said slowly. She was on her feet now and even the scratch didn’t hurt as much as she had expected it would. She looked at the boy critically. Just a regular rough and tumble boy with accent on the rough, she was thinking. His thick, tangled dark hair marked him as an urchin who might live far away from a barber shop; across the track likely. But his eyes were full of merriment and he knew how to square his shoulders if he didn’t know how to darn his sweater.

“What’s your name?” Kay asked cautiously.

“I’m Henri Gros,” he replied. “I’d better spell it. Mother’s fussy about that Henri. It’s H-E-N-R-I and G-R-O-S. French, you know,” he finished.

“I see,” said Kay. “Well, Henri, you did me a good turn; wait, don’t run away,” for he was darting off before he heard what she was trying to say to him.

“You’re all right? Don’t need me any more. You can ride your wheel——”

“Yes, I can. But, Henri, listen.” She wanted to detain him but he wanted to get away. “What’s your hurry? Wait just a minute,” she begged. If he got away now she might not easily find him

again.

“I gotta go,” he grumbled. But he did tramp back a few steps through the tall grass. “What do you want?” he asked.

12

“Who told you to help me? Who saw me fall,” Kay demanded quickly.

“Just—just—Why nobody told me. It was just the Voice,” he answered.

“The Voice? What voice?”

“I knew you’d ask me that; that’s why I was goin’; because I can’t answer. When the Voice calls and I hear it I do what it asks. That’s all I have to do,” he said vaguely. “Your wheel O.K.?”

“I guess so.” Kay was stalling for time. She must not scare the boy off. “But see, here’s why I fell. See this neat little dug-out, covered up and hiding a nice big log to trip a fellow up? Wonder who put that there?”

“Oh, there’s traps all over these fields. I often tumble over them myself. But don’t worry. There’s no bear traps nor things like that,” the boy scoffed. “He doesn’t know how to set real traps.” There was scorn in his voice as he said that.

“Do you mean Tom Johnson? He owns most of this land, doesn’t he?” Kay shot out suddenly, hoping to take the boy by surprise and so get an answer.

“Spike?” Henri shifted about and stuck his hand in the hole in his sweater by the pocket, making it bigger. “Oh, I don’t know anything about Spike nor his business either. And what’s more, I don’t care,” he snapped. “And it isn’t healthy for girls to go buttin’ in either,” he warned. “I’m goin’ this time. S’long!” he called starting off on a run which defied even Kay’s trick of delaying him.

The accident, so obviously planned to stop whoever might try to go to the Morgan house by the path commonly used for that direction, only served to increase the girl’s determination.

13

“When they resort to tricks,” she was telling herself, “it’s because they’ve got a lot to hide. I wish that mere scratch on my left leg didn’t feel like a cut to the bone, but it does. I’ll have to push the wheel back, I guess.”

As she prepared to do the pushing she heard her name called, and she knew this time to whom the voice belonged. It was Cecy Duncan, loping like a wild deer down over the hill.

“Oh, Kay! Kay!” she called. “Wait, I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“Hel-low, Cecy!” greeted Kay, “and am I glad to see you! You haven’t, by any chance, an old ambulance out on the road, have you?”

“What happened? Your leg is bleeding,” exclaimed Cecy, as Kay tried to tie a clean handkerchief over the scratch.

“You’re telling me,” joked Kay. “I just fell off my wheel and

put my foot through the front spokes. It still hurts but it isn't bad. You know how a scratch can sting. But, Cecy, I've got to hurry. There are things to do. Let's get back to a clearing somewhere and I'll tell you."

"About your real estate plan? Have you done something about it?"

"You bet I have. And I was just on my way to see old Johnson, you know, the man I told you owns all this land that must have been left to him when Noah swam out of the ark, for I'm sure he never bought it."

"Let me push the wheel?"

14

"Go ahead. I'm off wheels today. Here, let's sit down. This is a good place to size up the layout. And listen, Cece. Here's what happened up to now."

What had happened lost none of its importance in Kay's telling of it. She just couldn't get over the evasive boy who was too smart for her. She made that plain to Cecy.

"Oh, maybe he was just making things up," Cecy commented. "Boys like to be smart."

"And are," Kay assured her. "He didn't make up the rich, ringing voice that called out to me when I got tangled up in the wheel. And he didn't imagine the gutter that is dug out straight across the path, either. If I'd been walking it wouldn't have mattered, but a bicycle doesn't hop across barriers."

"Is that the big house on the hillside over there?" Cecy asked.

“I can just see the bricks through the trees.”

“Yes, that was called Morgan Manor once, Mother says. It isn’t really old, perhaps twenty-five or thirty years. Not old for a house.”

“But it would be for a girl,” chirped Cecy. “And you believe you can actually sell that place and get a commission on it? Carol says commission business in real estate has to go through a lot of red tape,” Cecy suggested cautiously.

“I know. But, you see, Mother is in a brokerage office that handles all sorts of financial matters. They have bonds and business transfers and settle real estate deals, too. Since the bank had to give it up the Stanley Burke Company took it on,” said Kay, again being very expert.

15

“But look, Kay,” confided Cecy, “what’s the big idea back of this? I know you’re not doing it just for the business, although it does look very good to me; a big house like that on a five percent commission would bring a whole lot of money.”

“Now who’s being businesslike?” joked Kay. “Yes, you’re right, Cecy. There is something else. I’ve lived here since I was born and I claim to know the place from treetop to——”

“The earth’s depths?”

“Just about,” agreed Kay. “But this old Morgan place has been growing more mysterious for a long time. Every once in a while someone wants to buy it; they even go so far as to pay a deposit, Mother says, then they give it up without any explanation.”

“But it’s only a house or at least a big estate,” Cecy argued.

“Why do you care what happens to it?”

“It’s more than an estate, Cecy. It’s the missing link in the one big tragedy of Melody Lane. And it has all the dramatic angles — Well, listen, Cecy, it’s a long story, and the old scratch on the ‘busted’ leg is stinging.” Kay very cautiously smoothed out the handkerchief bandage. “Let’s move along. I’ll have to give up looking for old Johnson today, I suppose,” she complained. “But we can go along to the little office I was telling you about. It’s just over there in the group of maples. Won’t it be sweet for you and me and your sister Carol if she can spare time, to actually have a telephone and a typewriter there?” Kay speculated. “I’ve always longed for a nice little office—just like playing house.”

“Yeah,” drawled Cecy. “But if you start out to sell the Morgan place from that office, when you know, as you have just said, that buyers run for their lives, isn’t it a bit risky to take up quarters away out here in the woods?”

16

“You ask me that!” derided Kay. “When you girls for years formed the famous Melody Lane braves, afraid of nothing and up to everything? Cecy Duncan, if we have to have guns on our polished desk and keep the bullets in Jane Halliday’s cracked vase, I mean to get into that office.”

“Looking for something in an old safe, maybe?”

“No old safe in that office. But I might be looking for something, Cecy. You’re quite smart yourself. How’s Carol? Did she get her children all moved out from the city safely?”

The girls, who had lately been separated because Cecy and Carol had been away from Melody Lane, had plenty to talk about and many confidences to exchange. The stories of Melody Lane, the Mystery of Stingyman's Alley and the Secret of the Kashmir Shawl were the most recent of the "Braves'" adventures and had been important enough to make two new volumes in this series. Kay demanded more details than even Cecy could so quickly give her, but being assured that Carol and Cecy would surely join in working out the present summer's mysteries, had to satisfy Kay for the time being.

"There's our office," Kay announced as they turned into a newly made road and the little white cottage came into view. Isn't it cute?"

17

"Oh, isn't it, darling?" Cecy exclaimed. "I don't blame you for wanting to play house in that."

"We can look in the windows, anyway. Jane forgot to draw the shades," mocked Kay as the two girls laughingly went toward the little window that looked out of the model office toward the West.

18

CHAPTER III

WILD AND TIGERISH

They paid no attention to the wilted geraniums that used to look so pretty outside the latticed windows, but walked boldly up and tried to peer inside.

No sooner had their forms shadowed the window they were both trying to see through, than something banged against the pane from the inside.

“Oh, goodness! What’s that?” Cecy cried, springing back to the path.

“Something soft, like an animal,” Kay said quickly. “I’ll bet a cat has been locked in there and maybe is mad from hunger.”

“Or a wildcat,” breathed Cecy. “Let’s get away. There’s a little chimney, it could climb out of that.”

“But we must try to see what it is first,” Kay insisted.

“Probably just a poor cat— Oh!” she called out in new alarm.

“There it is again!”

This time the lunge against the window, which all but wrecked the shade, was certainly that of a furry animal, as Kay had said, very likely mad with hunger.

“It is a cat,” she declared. “Poor thing; starved, of course. We have got to get it out of there.”

Cecy Duncan was not really afraid of such animals as might inhabit these woods, but any animal “mad with hunger” could be dangerous, she realized. Kay, however, seemed to think only of getting “the thing” out of there, and had no thought of personal danger.

“Yes, it is a cat,” Cecy agreed. “See, it’s got its paws on the sill. But, Kay, look out. It might dash through that window. Oh, see its eyes!”

Kay was not watching the cat’s eyes, however. She was scurrying around the little place looking for some possible way to let that cat out.

“Everything is nailed down,” she complained, again coming up to the window where, alternately the cat would lunge and the shade would snap in and out. “Only thing to do is to break a window——”

“Oh, you wouldn’t do that,” Cecy protested.

“We’ll have to. Can’t let an animal starve, can we? Whoever could be careless enough to go away and leave it locked in there?”

“It may have tunneled in some way,” Cecy suggested. “Look, there it is. A big gray tiger.”

“Big enough to look like a tiger, too,” Kay added. “See, he’s quieting down now. He hears our voices, poor thing. I wonder if I can break that glass with a club.”

Cecy did not like the idea; at the same time she agreed with

Kay that they would have to release the animal. He poked his big gray striped head up on the low window sill hopefully now, and the girls started to call out to him, coaxingly.

“He’s got a collar on,” Kay said, as now the head of the frightened animal remained still, long enough for the collar to be seen. “Somebody’s pet, trapped in there and starving,” she declared, now looking about for a club strong enough to break the glass.

20

“Better get a long one,” Cecy cautioned. “You ought to stand back at the side so he won’t jump at you when you do break it.”

“I guess you’re right,” Kay agreed. “Even a nice tame cat might scratch or bite if someone got in its way. Here, this looks strong enough,” and she tested a stout stick by whacking it against a tree. It swung back with such force it stung Kay’s hand. “That ought to do,” she declared, and crept up to the side of the window preparing for the attack on the glass.

Taking the club in both her hands the girl aimed a blow. Crash! Glass splintered and the cat disappeared—on the inside!

“He couldn’t get through that opening,” Cecy said. “Here, let me try a stone. That ought to settle it. The glass is smashed and it might as well all go,” she decided. Then Cecy took aim with a stone that certainly did send the rest of the glass into the little cottage, and plentifully splintered it all about the outside, as well.

The destruction was complete. The girls stood breathlessly looking at it. The cat did not dash out as they thought he would. In fact, he seemed to have dashed in.

“We’re criminals,” said Kay dryly. “Breaking if not entering. And we are the girls who aim to be honest and brave.”

“We really could get in trouble for this,” Cecy said seriously. “Let’s get away and leave the old cat to his fate. I suppose we had better hunt up the owner and report the window.”

21

“Yes, that’s what I think,” Kay answered. “The cat will smell the air and can come out when he feels like it. Old Spike Johnson will have something to hold over me now, I suppose.”

They were anything but cheerful as they made their way through the shallow woods that edged the old road. Kay didn’t know where she could find Tom Johnson, to confess to him that she had smashed his nice little window.

The bushes lined the path closely and caught in the girls’ skirts as they left the place, and Cecy soon discovered she had lost her camp neckerchief.

“But no matter; I can easily get another,” she decided. “I probably dropped it when we were pegging stones at that window.”

“We’ll leave the wheel home and then go down to the village to ask someone where Johnson might be,” Kay suggested to Cecy. “This is a fine way to welcome you back to Melody Lane,” she went on, “practically putting you in jail first thing.”

“It wouldn’t be the first time I went to jail,” Cecy laughed that off. “If I wasn’t actually behind bars I went to see folks who were,” she explained, referring to some of her wild adventures

as related in other volumes of this series.

It was at the Post Office that the girls found out Tom Johnson was away, had been away for two weeks past.

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Kay learned, too, that as far as the clerk knew, Johnson had no one attending to his business. He also told the girls that an old woman called once in a while for the mail. Out where Johnson lived, the post office clerk explained critically, there was rural delivery but Johnson would not put up a box on the street line to have his mail left there.

“But I must find someone to fix up that damage with,” Kay told Cecy. “Is it too late for you to go out to the old farm with me? Mother wouldn’t like to have her only daughter going ’round bustin’ windows; I know that.”

“Couldn’t we get a glazier to put one in?” Cecy ventured.

“No, I couldn’t touch anything there without permission. We have got to find someone who will give us that permission or let me pay for the window,” Kay decided. And even Kay’s general good humor seemed shattered with that demolished half window in the woods.

“Cheer up!” Cecy chirped, as she always did when she said something unimportant, “we’ve made a good start: a scratched leg and a broken window. And even that old cat didn’t come out to applaud.”

“Yeah,” drawled Kay. “But where does old Johnson hide, I wonder? I prided myself I knew this place from treetops to toadstools, but I guess I was just bragging.”

They were hurrying along the dirt road that they hoped would lead them to the Johnson farm. Anyone there surely ought to be willing to listen to their story.

“Too bad your smart boy doesn’t come running along to meet us. I’ll bet he knows about the Johnsons,” Cecy said, just to make talk.

23

“I’ll bet he does too,” Kay agreed. “But boys rarely show up when they’re wanted most. Hey! Listen a minute! Isn’t that someone singing?”

A voice was coming through the shadowy trees, and it was a deep, rich, male singing voice.

“From the hill!” Kay exclaimed. “I’ll bet that’s the Hermit of Proud Hill. I heard he was sort of a woodsman singer, like the Swiss Alps men, you know.”

“Whoever he is, he certainly can sing,” Cecy agreed. “You mean there’s a hermit on the hill?”

“Oh, I forgot you’ve been away so long, Cecy,” said Kay, “you don’t know about our hermit. He lives in a cabin up there and is very mysterious. Mother says she thinks perhaps he’s a writer or maybe some one crossed in love,” Kay tittered at the idea. “At any rate, very few people claim to see him around, and no one really knows him, or admits it, if they do.”

“Have you ever seen him?”

“Oh, yes. I haunt these woods, you know. In fact maybe I’m the very ghost people talk about.”

“Let’s go up on the hill and ask him about the Johnson people?”

“Why not? It will only be asking.” Kay agreed. “But it’s a pity to stop his song, isn’t it?”

They did not have to stop it, for as soon as they turned into the strip of path that led to stone steps in front of the queer bungalow, the voice stopped suddenly.

24

“H’m’m!” breathed Kay. “He knows we’re coming.”

Then Cecy grabbed her arm and they both saw it. The tiger cat, with the leather collar, the cat they had broken the window to release, was seated on the top step at the doorsill of the shack, calmly washing behind his ears, with tongue licked paws.

Both girls at that moment were thinking exactly the same thing. Here was the rescued cat. Inside the queer house a man had been singing a moment before. This gave the girls just the chance they needed. They would ask the man whose cat they had saved and where they might find Tom Johnson.

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CHAPTER IV

THE HERMIT

It seemed to the girls, standing there in the lonely wood, that the silence which followed the lusty singing was more pronounced by contrast with the ringing tones just ended.

“Let’s hurry,” said Kay, crisply, as they went up the three short steps. Everything rose to a peak on Proud Hill and the hermit’s house was on top of that peak.

The door was strongly framed in a rough split tree binding, but the plain, unpainted panels were properly fitted with smooth new boards. It was evident that the maker was a skilled craftsman.

Kay knocked, and on the smooth board the sound was so loud and clear it seemed to reverberate over the whole surface. The two girls instinctively grasped each others hands. They waited. Not a sound, not even a step could they hear from the inside. A nosey little chipmunk streaked along the overhanging roof and sat up straight, like a sentinel, over the door frame, making faces at them.

Cecy knocked the second time. Tiger, the prisoner cat, brushed against the door and meowed his call to be let inside.

“We saved your cat! Here he is!” called out Kay, in sudden inspiration.

That did bring an answer. A step, then the door opened. A man of unusual appearance stood before them. He seemed neither old nor young, but wore a short brown beard and stood very straight; his bare arms crossed in front of him. Distinct blue tattoo marks on his right arm showed the American Eagle in bold emblem, and the girls quickly noticed that his skin was dark, while his eyes which now were focused upon them in a sort of mild surprise, were clear blue.

“My cat,” he said finally, and his deep voice matched his unusual appearance.

“Yes, we saved him. He was shut in the little house where the office used to be.” Kay’s words poured out eagerly; she seemed to be afraid he might disappear again behind the half open door.

“The little house? His office?” The man spoke with sharp indignation. “I thought he had something to do with Sinbad’s being away. Come in, Sinbad,” he ordered the very willing cat. “He is a good cat and would not stay away like that. I—I am much obliged——”

“Oh, you’re welcome,” Cecy hurried to say. “But we got into a lot of trouble saving your cat,” she spoke up quickly.

“Trouble?”

“Yes. We had to break a window to get him out and now we can’t find any of those Johnson people to pay the damage to. Or at least, to tell them we are willing to pay the damage,” Kay declared emphatically.

“The Johnsons? You want to find them? And you broke Tom Johnson’s window? Don’t try to find *him*, and keep away from that tribe. *I’ll* attend to the window,” said the man, whom Kay and Cecy both knew by now was none other than the Hermit of Proud Hill.

“Oh, could you really do that? That would be fine Mr.—Mr. _____”

“You may call me Mr. Thorsen,” he said to Kay, with a restrained smile. “Everyone calls me the hermit, and I don’t mind that. But Mr. Hermit—” He paused to allow the girls their own conclusion on that possible absurdity.

“Oh yes, Mr. Thorsen,” said Cecy, gladly. He was a nice man, this hermit, and whatever was the reason for his peculiar manner of living alone in a cabin on Proud Hill, both girls felt sure it was a good one.

Of course Kay knew the story, and Cecy did not as yet. The two girls meeting after a long period of separation had not been afforded enough time for all that.

“There’s a little bench under that tree,” the man indicated. “Sorry, I can’t say come in.” There was a slightly foreign suavity in his manner as he invited the girls to sit on the bench, but they had no thought of accepting.

A rush of interest in the Morgan House affair almost left Kay tongue-tied. She knew the hermit was said to have had an original claim on the mystery place, and Tom Johnson was usually called the agent who managed it all. But she could hardly blurt out her hope of getting a customer for the mansion

to a perfectly strange man, under these conditions. After all, the girls had only rescued his cat.

But the hermit didn't know the courage of these girls and neither did he know Kay's own secret motive behind her interest in the Morgan place. Tom Johnson had been her family's enemy. He had taken from her mother and father their first home, and her mother had always said the shock had been a contributing cause to Kay's father's death. He had worried and worked harder than his strength allowed after they had lost their precious home. Kay was only a little child when all this happened, but she remembered the trouble, her mother's constant crying and her own change from a happy home to a place of sorrow and shadows, a great loneliness without her beloved daddy.

"And there's another girl a victim to Tom Johnson's dishonesty too," she was thinking, standing a moment at the hermit's door; "a girl who may have deep blue eyes like this man, the hermit, has. He must be some relation to her."

In that flash of thought about the girl who must be some relation to the hermit, Kay had actually touched upon her own hidden motive in all this land turmoil. For there had been a girl, everyone in Melody Lane knew that. She used to live in the Morgan house, a beautiful young girl, who, after the tragic, accidental deaths in that noted family, remained there a while with faithful servants. Then suddenly she disappeared, and the whole town started to whisper suspicions about the Johnsons. Kay was younger then but she too heard the stories of Vivienne, the girl at the Morgan house.

Again the hermit was speaking.

“You girls,” he began very slowly, as if weighing every word, “have saved my cat. I thank you for that. Sinbad is my closest friend—now.” He paused while the big tiger cat pushed in and out against him. Yes, Sinbad could be a real friend to a lonely man; the girls could see that. “But you must not go near that place again,” the man warned solemnly.

“Oh, but I must,” Kay contradicted. “In fact, I hoped Mr. Johnson would give me work there,” she said finally.

“Work there! A girl like you!” he exclaimed.

“But I know a girl who did work there and she said she got a good salary. I have business training and I could do as much as she could,” declared Kay.

“Maybe more,” he admitted. “But you see, Tom Johnson, well, we’ll say he knows her folks,” he tried to finish the threatening argument. “But please, young ladies, I do know. You should not go there. I’ll fix the window and he’ll never know it had been broken.”

He was moving to close the door. Both girls realized it might be a mistake to press him further just then, but Kay knew she must come back here again and ask him about Tom Johnson’s land deals. How did he become owner of so much land in this beautifully wooded place still called by the quaint name of Melody Lane? Once the beautifully outlined rural place was merely an enclosure for some sequestered stately homesteads, but even when great winding thoroughfares had been built from township to township, that enclosure and its

immediate surroundings were still called Melody Lane.

Included also was the much disputed Morgan place and Kay knew that her own father's and mother's first home-land had actually been a part of that estate. Tom Johnson had taken that from them, and now Kay Findley was determined to find out if he had any right to have done so. His reputation was unsavory, but he had been too smart to be caught. People were afraid of him. He went blustering about getting innocent men and boys to do his bidding, giving them a few coins, but really scaring them into submission.

Kay knew he had always been considered "a big bluff, a four flusher, a bully and a crook." Surely such a reputation would have been, and really was, enough to make folks keep their distance, but Kay wasn't afraid of him. She was willing to "beard the lion in his den," and here she was actually looking for him. And she had just broken his window, too.

If only Kay had had time to tell Cecy Duncan a little more of all this old story, perhaps Cecy now might be more helpful in this critical few minutes. Kay was really in a panic trying to find an excuse that would not seem too abrupt.

"Mr. Thorsen," she began, as Cecy edged up closer to her, "I am sure you could help me if you—would——"

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"Help you?"

"Yes. You see, my father—he is dead now—was defrauded by this man Johnson, and I'm determined to dig up all the records and prove that my mother has a right to a small part of the Morgan place." There she had blurted it all out and could feel

her cheeks burning from the effort.

“The Morgan place! Your father’s? What is your name?” the man asked in surprise.

“Kay Findley. My father was Gerald Findley——”

“Gerald Findley?”

“Oh, yes. Did you know him?” Kay asked eagerly.

“Gerald Findley,” the man said again, his eyes seeming to see something in the distance, over by the much disputed and mysterious Morgan place. “And he too was a victim?”

“Come on, come on,” begged Cecy, tugging at Kay’s arm. “Let’s go; he looks—queer,” she whispered.

But Kay only smiled at the man standing before them. She seemed fascinated and had no idea of giving in to Cecy’s alarm. This was her chance and she was not running away from it.

“Yes, Mr. Thorsen,” Kay said slowly, “my father was one of the victims of that deal that gave Tom Johnson half of Melody Lane. And that’s why I’m determined to get at—the records,” she said cautiously. “I’m going to get work in that real estate office in the woods and some day find out what papers are hidden among the books.”

32

“Oh, no, I beg you; don’t try that,” the hermit exclaimed. “It would be—dangerous.”

“But another girl has worked there,” Kay retorted.

“But that other girl’s folks and Johnson’s; weren’t they—related?”

“Oh, yes, that’s so. I hadn’t thought of that,” Kay admitted.

“Besides, do you think he would leave important papers among books in the woods?” scoffed the hermit.

“I had considered that, of course,” Kay replied. “But letters and statements on books——”

“I see what you mean, young lady, but don’t touch it. I beg you.” He stood very erect now and Cecy thought he must surely have been an actor. “I too would like to find some of those papers,” he added after a pause, “but I can assure you, they are not in that office in the woods.”

They had to leave then, but once they both looked back in strange silence for two active, alert girls, like Kay and Cecy.

The hermit was standing on his doorsill, framed in the trees that clustered about the shack. Sinbad, his faithful cat was pressing against him, but the man seemed to be looking past the sunset over to the Morgan place.

CHAPTER V

MESSAGE FROM THE SKY

The girls were now back from the hermit's shack and rather breathlessly talked about the experience, as they sat on the steps of Kay's side porch.

"But what ever possessed you, Kay, to say all that to a perfectly strange man?" Cecy asked her friend in bewilderment.

"All that? You should know all the rest of it that was just seething inside me," Kay replied. "Cecy, I just felt as if I were actually a—a—" She paused hesitatingly.

"Now, listen, Kay," Cecy attempted to caution the excited girl, "Why don't you go carefully about this? You know Mr. Thorsen warned you it was dangerous."

"You mean waste more time? Of course you don't, Cecy. Time enough has been wasted. I'm not afraid of Tom Johnson, and I'm tickled to death to have at last had a chance to speak to the hermit. Everyone said he was so queer, and strange. That he lived upon Proud Hill right back of Morgan Manor and that maybe he had something to do with the wild things that they say happen in the place."

"Wild things? What, for instance?"

"Oh, scratching, and groaning and calling out at all hours.

You know, the kind of stuff they always tack on to places they call haunted,” Kay indifferently explained.

“Well, Mr. Thorsen certainly did not look like one who would go in for that sort of thing,” Cecy answered. “Besides, we heard him singing and he has a good voice, don’t you think so?”

“Indeed, I do,” Kay agreed. “And did you notice how he stands like an actor? Ready to take off——”

“Not the tattooing on his arms,” Cecy interrupted. “He can never take that off. Aren’t they awful? No actor would disfigure himself that way.”

“I noticed that, of course. It’s a funny thing how some young men and boys go in for tattooing,” Kay went on. “But it’s a silly thing. And to think nothing will ever erase it,” she pondered. But only for a second, for the two girls really had more urgent matters to discuss than the why and wherefore of tattooing.

“But you know, Kay, I’m away behind you on the local excitement now,” Cecy reminded her. “I’ve been away from Melody Lane for quite a long time. Suppose you tell me something about the old Morgan place and why you have broken out in favor of hanging the arch conspirator, Tom Johnson.”

“Yeah,” drawled Kay, giving her almost forgotten scratched ankle a feel to see that the handkerchief bandage was not catching on the broken skin. She had flatly refused Cecy’s urgent plea to fix it up properly as soon as they could do so, Kay insisting there was nothing to fix. “I was just

thinking about the little fly trap I fell into,” she said. “No one could expect a thing like that to hurt any one.”

“But it threw you off your wheel,” Cecy said.

“Yes, the old tree limb tangled me up. But the little ditch! What could that have been dug for?”

“Did it drain water from a hill, do you suppose?”

“No, it’s pretty flat just there. And the Henny-Penny boy said ‘he’ whoever he is, has traps all over the fields. Why, they couldn’t catch——”

“But there was barbed wire entangled there, you said,” Cecy interrupted.

“Say, I’ll bet that was put there to catch Mr. Thorsen’s cat,” exclaimed Kay suddenly. “That would injure a cat horribly if it tried to run along that path. The wire was hidden by the branches and piece of log, and the gutter was lined with it.”

“It might be put there to snare other animals as well as a cat,” Cecy argued. “But the point is, why should anyone be so silly, when traps can be bought so cheap and do the work so much better?”

“Cats keep away from traps,” Kay insisted. “And I’ve seen farmers cover rat traps with whole boxes of good cereals, spilled all over them, so the rats could only see and smell the grain. Well, let’s forget that, Cecy. We’ll watch out when we go over there again. However and whenever am I going to get a chance to tell you about the Morgan place mystery? Mother

will be home soon——”

“And Carol expects me to herd the children in from the wilds, today. They’re so crazy about the woods they don’t exactly come running when I blow my police whistle.”

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“Well, you know this much. The old Morgan place is really not very old and it’s a lovely place. I’ll describe it to you later. But it was the estate that had been cut up into a practical development, and sold to a few people around here for homes. My father had bought a lot and built his own home before he and Mother were married. For a few years, after they were married, Mother says, they were happy and everything went fine. But there was a nationwide business break and they couldn’t keep up the interest payments.

“Then old Tom Johnson grabbed the property. But I’ve found out he had changed the government terms and was overcharging both in interest and payments on the principal. That’s how he got the places; he took more than ours. It would be easy enough to prove that he stole the homes, for the legal papers are on file. What *I* have to get is the old contracts to prove payments made to him more than covered the government’s requirements. It’s those seemingly innocent little papers, the personal contracts of the first owners of the land, that I imagine might be left in the office in the woods. There are some old boxes packed up with papers you can see through the windows. I’m just dying to sort them out,” said Kay, significantly.

“Why, Kay, isn’t that a pretty big job for just a girl?” Cecy exclaimed. “Why wouldn’t your mother have done all that investigation and sue for her rights if it really could

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have been done?” Cecy wanted to know, reasonably enough.

“It does look that way, doesn’t it?” Kay replied. “But when the crash broke, losing their home was simply the last straw. Though Mother has never said so actually, she made up her mind to forget it all, sort of live it down, you know.” Kay’s subdued voice betrayed choking emotions.

“Of course,” soothed Cecy. “When it was gone and your father, too, was gone, it is easy to understand why a woman would do that. Which house was theirs? One of those pretty white cottages——?”

“That’s another thing. Mother has never pointed out our home to me. I asked her, but she took me in her arms and cried about it, and begged me never to ask her again. That was a few years ago. But lately when she asked me to file some old papers, I saw a note or something and I know the map number of the property on the old Morgan estate.”

“Look, Kay!” Cecy interrupted. “A boy is coming in here, on a wheel——”

“It’s Henri, the boy who picked me up in the fields when I fell off my wheel. What can he want?”

The boy was pumping up the little hill leading to the side porch where they sat.

“Hello, Henri!” Kay called out. “Want me?”

“Yep,” answered Henri. “Who does this belong to?” He was holding out Cecy’s camp kerchief, waving it like a banner in

the breeze.

“Oh, that’s mine!” Cecy exclaimed. “I lost it over in the woods——”

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“Sure you did.” Henri was off the wheel now and held out the bit of silk to Cecy. “And maybe *I* didn’t have a time getting it.” The boy of few words meant a lot by that; his expression was very eloquent.

“Where did you find it?” Kay asked.

“Well, I found it hanging on a bush but that isn’t where I got it. I got it in a fight with Mamie Johnson and I guess she’s got a swelled jaw.” He rubbed his own jaw as he said that. After all, one jaw was as good as another, perhaps he was thinking.

“Go ahead, tell us about it,” begged Kay. She knew asking him questions would never get a story out of Henri.

“Not much to tell. I was over there and Mamie came sneaking up like she always does. I dived for the handkerchief on the bush and she just lit on me like she had dropped out of a tree. That girl is more like something wild than just a girl,” he tried to explain.

“You mean that tall, thin girl that goes around barefoot?” Kay asked.

“That’s her. Ain’t she a tomboy?” Henri put it up to Kay.

“Yes. She does act like one. But go ahead. You had to fight for the handkerchief? Why?”

“Because she saw that busted window and she said whoever broke it was wearing that handkerchief.”

“Suppose she did? What of it?” pressed Cecy.

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“Don’t you see? She knew it was a camp neck-tie and she was going to prove that the girl who broke the window was from a certain camp. You wouldn’t like that, would you?” he sneered. Girls seemed slow thinkers to Henri.

Kay and Cecy exchanged knowing glances. He was a smart boy, this Henri, and had already helped them out of two dangers. One was the rescue of Kay when she spilled off her wheel, and now by fighting for the neckerchief and getting it away from the wild Mamie Johnson.

“Thanks, Henri,” Cecy said to him. “You’re a good friend, and we both appreciate your help. You see, this Johnson business is new to me, and although my friend Kay thought she knew all about old Melody Lane, even she is not sure of that now. Do *you* know these Johnsons well?”

“I’ll say,” drawled Henri. “If you know them at all you better know them *well* and don’t let them sneak up on you.”

Just then the two girls and the boy stopped talking to look up at an airplane sailing in from the West, and seeming to come in line with Kay’s place.

“That’s a stranger,” Henri said, meaning the plane, his neck still strained back to get a good view. “Wonder what a plane is doing over here so far from the airport?”

Without venturing to guess an answer, the girls watched the noisy airship. Then, just as it was passing over the garage back of Kay's house, still high, too high for the girls to make out its lettering or number, they saw an object come floating down through space.

40

"What's that?" exclaimed Kay excitedly.

"Something falling—" But Cecy's remark was cut short. The object had hit the roof of the garage with a bang, bounced up again, and now was rolling down to the drive.

"A bag!" yelled Henri. "I'll bet there's a message in it!"

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CHAPTER VI

WHEN A GIRL FIGHTS

And Henri was right, there was a message in it. The bag proved to be a muslin container for the “Extras” that passengers always accumulate on a plane and never know how to carry away; a blue, thin denim bag with the airline name in stamped letters, and a draw string at top. It had been stuffed full of crushed newspapers and discarded bits of linen to make a padding for the green thermos bottle they found inside, to save it from smashing on its way down.

It took the girls and Henri quite a few minutes to unwrap it, but finally there it was; a thermos bottle.

“Let’s see,” Cecy was asking breathlessly and needlessly, for that’s what all three of them were doing at once; trying to see.

“A thermos bottle dropped from—the—plane,” Kay murmured, trying to imagine what it might mean. “See, here’s a line of writing pasted on the outside.”

Yes; there was a piece of muced paper, the sort of strip used on paper wrappers, fastened on the green bottle and on this was written:

“Do not read. Deliver at once to the Hermit on Proud Hill,” and beneath was the word: “Desperate.”

“Desperate,” repeated Henri, “whoever tossed that out must

have been in trouble.”

“Yes.” The girls were too surprised to even comment just then. Instead, Kay who held the little green covered bottle, was turning it over and over before opening it.

“We could look in and see what’s inside without reading anything,” Cecy suggested.

“Sure,” agreed Henri, “just unscrew the top.”

“I am,” Kay murmured, “but it is certainly on tight.” So tight that it took a wind of Cecy’s disputed camp kerchief twisted around the metal top to make sufficient “purchase” to finally turn the top. Next, there was the cork and that was down very tight also. But Kay placed the bottle firmly between her knees and, regardless of the small injury that still sported the bandage, she finally pulled the cork. Then they could see what might be inside.

“Yes, there’s a note,” Kay said, holding the opened bottle out for Cecy’s inspection.

“I’ll take it over to the hermit,” offered Henri, eager to follow up the adventure.

“Let’s wait a minute,” Cecy said, thinking of their responsibility in carrying out the request from whoever was “desperate.”

“Yes,” Kay spoke up. “It was surely dropped on our place purposely, so I guess I’m the one to deliver it to the hermit.”

“Let’s all go,” begged Henri. Plainly he did not want to be left out of the excitement. “Besides, you know everyone can’t go to the hermit’s. He won’t answer calls nor knocks——”

“But he did answer us,” Cecy broke in. “We’ve already made his acquaintance.”

“Oh,” said Henri.

“Well, let’s all go as Henri says,” Kay decided. “Come along. It isn’t far at all if we go across the Oldfields. I went away out of the way this afternoon.”

So they started off. But not before Kay had hurried in to tell Nannie she would be back “very shortly,” in case her mother came home first.

Henri pushed his wheel and rode a short ways, intermittently, until they reached the woods. Then he, like the girls, had to walk. Naturally both Kay and Cecy were quietly thinking someone must have been very desperate indeed to drop a message in a thermos bottle from a flying plane.

“Perhaps they could see us there on the steps,” she said to Cecy. No need to be more explicit.

“Yes; I was thinking that. People in planes either have glasses or can borrow them. Certainly, I can’t think of any reason why they should have picked us to drop a message to, otherwise.”

“Hey!” said Henri, who was waiting for them to catch up with him. “See those bushes stirring over there? I’ll bet Mamie

Johnson is behind them.”

“What of it?” scoffed Kay. “We’re not afraid of her.”

“Well, she’s tough,” warned Henri. “We might as well give her plenty of room. Let’s cut through here——”

44

“Smarties! Window-breakers! Stuck-ups!”

The calls came from behind the bushes Henri had suspected, and the next moment as the boy was trying to turn his wheel pushed by hand, into a safer spot, the girl plunged out at him, and threw her weight against the wheel, bringing it smashing down and Henri with it.

“Here you! Stop that! What do you mean?” Kay managed to splutter those useless words. But the girl, Mamie Johnson, wilder looking than Henri’s previous description even hinted at, was busy pounding Henri, while he finally, with a great swing of his light muscular, young body managed to shake off the struggling girl.

“Here! Here! What do you mean, you rowdy?” Cecy was saying while she and Kay, as if at a signal for action, both sprang upon the girl and together managed to hold her while Henri jumped into the circle and got hold of the flaying arms, pinning them to safety.

“That’s enough now,” he said rather quietly. “Three to one is too much, even for you, Mamie Johnson. What’s the matter with you now?”

“I’ll show you, you sneaky feriner,” she hissed. “Think you can

do things to my uncle's property—I'll show you. Give me that silk handkerchief." The girl, her hair hanging all over her angry features, her clothes, half boy's half girl's, and looking like neither, was now struggling to get free. Evidently she believed what Henri had told her; that three to one was too many even for her.

Realizing her intention was to escape, the girls eased their hold on her, and instantly she shot off through the woods like the wild creature she undoubtedly was.

45

For a moment they stood there in silence, glad of the relief. Then Henri called:

"Let's go! I'll leave my wheel here. She's going to the office." Without a word, they rushed after him.

"I was afraid I'd drop the thermos," Kay panted as they got over the briary underbrush as best they could.

"I thought of that too," Cecy said. "Why not let her go? Why do we go after her?"

"I suppose Henri is thinking about the broken window. Maybe she intends to do more damage and blame it on us."

"Oh, yes," breathed Cecy, making sure the silk handkerchief the girl had fought for was deep in her pocket.

In a few more moments of fighting their way through bushes and briars, they were presently on the short strip of road that had been cleared around the real estate office.

“Look!” exclaimed Cecy. “She’s standing there as if she sees something——”

“Henri is doing the same thing and they’re not—fighting,” followed Kay. “They certainly must be seeing something.”

With a rush the two girls reached Henri and Mamie Johnson, who were still standing as if petrified in front of the little office.

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“What—is—it?” But Kay’s question was useless, for they too saw what it was. The window was not broken! There it was, shining as ever in the late rays of a dying sunset.

“It’s—it’s—ain’t broke!” gasped Mamie, in genuine fear. “It was broke; I saw it.”

“That’s what you think,” flung back Henri. “Now will you quit acting like an Indian? Want some of that magic worked out on you?”

“No, no, I don’t,” cowered the girl. “The cat was in there and cats is bewitched. I’m goin’.”

“You better had,” Henri warned her, while Cecy and Kay just stood there, knowing more than they wanted to tell Mamie about that window. Henri, also, it appeared may have shared the secret.

“That tamed her,” laughed Kay.

“Yes; her kind are usually superstitious. Did you notice what she said about cats?” Cecy asked.

“Yeah,” Henri drawled. “I’ll bet she shut that cat in there herself.”

“Has she a key? How could she get in?” Cecy asked.

“Oh, she’s like a cat herself. She can get in any place. But what do you know about that window.” It was an exclamation not a question.

“Certainly that is like something magical,” Kay remarked, not wanting to mention who must have fixed the window so quickly and skillfully.

“I was here a couple of hours ago and it was smashed then. That was when Mamie fought me for the handkerchief,” Henri recounted. “But he’s like that. Can’t tell what he’ll do.”

47

The girls knew, of course, that Henri was talking about the hermit. He had promised them “he would fix it and no one would ever know it had been broken.” Well, it had happened and even Mamie Johnson, who surely *knew* it had been broken, must have her doubts about it now.

“But, Kay, I’ve got to go.” Cecy had glanced at her small wrist watch. “I promised Carol to get the children in and I’ve hardly got time——”

“There’s a bus coming ’round the curve,” the invaluable Henri called out. “If you cut down over Stump Hollow you’ll just get it.”

“But I hate to leave you, Kay——”

“Oh, I’ll go over to the hermit’s with her,” again spoke Henri.
“I haven’t anything to do.”

“That will be fine, Henri,” Cecy praised him. “But be sure you don’t leave her in these woods alone,” she admonished.

“I won’t. Better hustle. There she comes.”

For a moment Kay watched her chum skip over the tree stumps from which the hollow took its name. It was a small clearance where young trees had been systematically cut down every few years, to keep the woodland from becoming too crowded.

“She’ll get it! See, it’s stopping!” Henri said.

“But, Henri, you don’t have to go over to the hermit’s with me,” Kay began. “You must have chores to do——”

“No, I haven’t. Wish I had some to do for someone who might pay me,” the boy explained. “This is a dead vacation; haven’t earned anything except from the hermit.”

48

“Oh, you do things for him, of course,” Kay quickly assured the boy she understood that. “But I can run over there——”

“And maybe have Mamie Johnson fly out at you? Better not. Why don’t you let me take the bottle over? And maybe we ought to hurry. It says ‘desperate,’ you know.”

“Yes, I’ve been thinking about that. All right, Henri. If you carry other messages to the hermit there’s no reason why you shouldn’t take this.” She handed him the thermos bottle that had dropped from the plane. “Of course, I’d like to know what he

says,” Kay faltered. And wouldn’t she just?

“Oh, I’ll run back and tell you.” Henri was ready to dash off at once. “But you better come along with me down to the road. It’s safer,” Henri declared.

As they hurried along to the road from where Henri would go one way and Kay the other, Kay sort of kept her eyes speculatively upon the green thermos bottle, but Henri kept his hands firmly upon it.

What message would it bring to the hermit, both were wondering?

CHAPTER VII

HENRI GROS

Kay expected Henri would be at her door with news about the hermit and the bottle message the first thing in the morning, and he did not disappoint her. This Henri was becoming a strange addition to the Melody Lane girls' group; they who had run down so many unusual mysteries and adventures, from the time Cecy and Carol Duncan unravelled the mystery of *The Ghost of Melody Lane*, all the way down to the later volumes, *Stingyman's Alley* and the *Secret of the Kashmir Shawl*. And Henri was already proving himself to be a valuable little scout, trustworthy and not too sure of himself. This last faculty of restraint was to leave Cecy and Kay to work out the more important turns in this new adventure, while Henri intelligently helped them along.

Kay was around so early this morning that her mother's suspicions were aroused, and Kay had no little trouble in reassuring her that she and Cecy Duncan "were really law abiding citizens and would do nothing to disgrace their respective families."

"But, Mums," said Kay suddenly, noticing the deeper look of anxiety on her mother's face, "what's wrong with you? You don't seem just exactly happy."

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"Oh, I'm like thousands of other women today, I suppose, dear," the mother answered. "I can't help noticing the long lists of young men's names coming into even our little office. Men

need the jobs and we women have to watch our step to hold on to them,” she finished lightly.

“Your job! Mums, they couldn’t do without you!” Kay was aghast at the very thought.

“Oh, indeed they could, my dear. Few people are indispensable, especially when some young man in the firm’s family needs a job to get married on. And you can’t blame them for that, either. But don’t worry, Bunnie, I’ve still got that job, and may I ask what are you up to? You seem rather jumpy for you,” her mother remarked casually.

“Oh, I’m all right. Going to help Nannie with house cleaning today. I’ve promised to work after I come back from a visit to the children’s camp.”

“That’s fine. Nannie needs help and company too. She’s a good soul and very loyal to you and me, dear. Anything you can do to help Nannie will be worth doing.” And Kay’s mother was off for another day in the brokerage office.

“She’s a rare mother,” Kay told herself. “Never asks silly questions.”

Then Henri came; Kay heard his wheel grinding on the drive and hurried out to meet him.

“What happened?” she demanded, before the boy had propped his bicycle against the rail.

“Well, he’s gone!” Henri answered.

“Where?” There was no need of extra words in this contest, she knew well whom Henri referred to.

“Don’t know. Haven’t an idea. But he went on the five o’clock bus this morning. First time I ever knew him to get on a bus too. Call him a hermit! You should have seen him. All toggged out like a regular business man. Gray suit, gray hat; I’ll tell you he looked swell,” Henri declared with some pride in the declaration.

“He doesn’t seem much like a hermit to me even when he isn’t dressed up,” Kay put in. “Why do they call him that, anyway?”

“Oh, I guess because he came here without giving away where he came from and what his business is. You know how country folks are, if they get left out on anything.”

“Yes, I do,” said Kay. “But tell me, what did he say when you gave him the message? Did you see him open the bottle and take the note out?”

“Yep. I just stood there,” the boy admitted. “He read the outside first, you know that ‘Desperate’ label was pasted on the outside? Then he unscrewed the top, drew the cork— Then he read it,” declared Henri.

“Did he seem surprised?”

“Thunderstruck! He seemed to forget I was standing there with my mouth open. Then, when he did happen to see me, he just said ‘Oh, yes, Henri, you brought me this. Where did you say you got it?’”

“What did he say when you told him it came down here,” Kay pressed. Henri was trying to tell her all about the hermit and the message from the plane, but he couldn’t really guess what was in the message or what the hermit thought about it. Nothing less than that seemed to satisfy Kay.

“But would you tell me just this?” Kay persisted. “Where do you *think* he went on the bus?”

“To find her.”

“Who?”

“The girl, Vivienne. She’s all *he* cares about. Everyone knows that.”

“You mean the girl who used to live in the Morgan house, don’t you? I’ve heard about her but I never saw her,” Kay said, tempting him.

“No wonder. No one could ever see her. She was just like a prisoner there.” The boy’s eyes blazed with indignation at that thought.

“A prisoner? But the hermit didn’t keep her there.” This was not a question.

“The hermit? I should say not. It was he who got her loose. That is, she was gone a little while after he came here. But, say, I’m talking too much. If my mother heard me I’d be skinned _____”

“I know, Henri,” said Kay guiltily, feeling she was taking

advantage of a good natured boy, “but I’m not going into this just for gossip. I think I see a way to help the hermit and the girl, too.”

“You do? Say, that would be swell,” the boy exclaimed. “People around here don’t know anything about that man. He’s no more of a hermit than I am.”

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“But he’s up there all alone——”

“What of it? I’ve seen writers and artists come up here and dig in, live in the old quarry even, and folks just think they’re smart. But Mr. Thorsen, why, he’s a hermit.”

“You like him, don’t you, Henri?”

“You bet I do. But say, I’ve got a job today and I’ve got to be goin’. I suppose you are going over to the camp with the other girl——”

“Cecy? Yes, she goes to help her sister at Camp Beaverbreak. I’m going over there today. I’m glad you’ve got something to do,” Kay added politely. “What is it to be today?”

“Just cutting grass; the dry weather didn’t leave much to cut lately.” He was about to start off on his wheel now.

“Well, you’ve done your good turn today already,” Kay assured him.

“Yeah. I’m a scout too,” Henri said proudly, and then Kay realized that it might have been the scout training that had given this boy such dependability.

But where was the hermit going? To see this girl somewhere, of course. If Kay could only find out a little more from Henri? But she knew better than to scare him off completely with her questioning.

Today she would have to go down to the hotel and find out about the writer who had said he would like to buy a quiet place out in the woods. She had been down at the hotel finishing collecting after the cake sale when this handsome stranger had asked Win Vernon, the clerk, to let him know if he, personally, heard of any good private place for him, but warned Win not to turn the agents loose on him. He had no time for agents.

54

It was then that Kay got her chance to talk with Win. She waited until the stranger had left the hotel office, then, knowing Win, who himself was only a few years out of high school, she quickly enlisted his confidence. Kay spoke of the Morgan place and really got the hotel clerk interested.

Certainly it would be a fine thing if he, Win Vernon, and she Kay Findley, could get the writer, Mr. Hadley, interested in buying the old mansion; and why couldn't they?

It was this possibility that lurked in the background, vague, even slim, but, as Kay kept telling herself, stranger things have happened.

It was not long after Henri left for his job at grass cutting that Kay swung onto her own wheel and streaked down to the Center. There would hardly be any one around the hotel office so early, and Kay knew that Win, whose tongue rolling name

was really Winthrop, would have time to talk to her about the big deal. And he might even know something about the hermit's mysterious trip out of town, for often bus changes were made at the hotel cross drive, right at the entrance.

She found the hotel as quiet as she had expected it to be, and Win Vernon was glad to see her. In fact, he promptly told her, he was just about to call her up.

55

“I’ve got a letter from Mr. Hadley,” the clerk hurried to tell her, “and he’s coming out again to spend the weekend. And he asked—just listen to this Kay—he asked if I had found a place out here for him.”

“Oh, Win!” exclaimed Kay, “things are shaping up. Of course we have found a place for him.”

56

CHAPTER VIII

LOST LITTLE JEANIE

Kay and the hotel clerk at once plunged into consideration of the possible real estate deal. Kay was only supposed to be interested in the actual sale and its big commission, which Kay felt sure could be legally arranged through her mother's brokerage office. But there was much more than the business end to all this. There was the girl Vivienne, she, whom Henri had said, was once a prisoner in the Morgan house, and it was very likely this girl had dropped the message from the plane.

"And the hermit has gone off to find her some place," Kay was secretly thinking, while she was trying desperately hard to follow the hotel clerk's, Win Vernon's, figures about possible value, and even the surveying costs and such complicated matters regarding the hoped-for sale.

"But we can't go into all that yet," she finally objected. "We don't even know how we can get around old Spike Johnson. They say he has full charge of it," Kay cut in through Win's penciled figures and map drawings on his hotel counter.

"I thought you said *you* could do all that," charged Win, in surprise.

"Maybe I can, but not at a single stroke. I'm counting on help from the hermit. I am sure *he* has an honest interest in the place, but somehow, old Johnson seems to have some secret hold even over the hermit," Kay tried to defend herself.

“What kind of a hold?” Win was scornful now. The prospect of the split commission if he and Kay could negotiate the sale was all he cared about.

“Well, you’ve heard all the mystery stories about that place, haven’t you?” Kay asked.

“Oh, that stuff! I’ve heard about ghosts being out there ever since I took this job. People talk a lot going in and out of this hotel,” he admitted. “Guess they don’t have much else to do.”

“But there were goings on out there,” Kay insisted. “Mother said different persons wanted to buy the place at different times, and they were always scared off. That’s a swell place; one of the finest out here. There aren’t many modern brick places in Melody Lane, and that has such wonderful grounds,” Kay declared, almost as an agent would have made a sales talk.

“I know. That’s what got this writer, Mr. Hadley, interested. Those grounds are just laid out for a writer, he says.”

“Oh, he has seen the place?” Kay asked in surprise.

“Yes, he remembered it from driving by. You see, he asked me about a place some time ago and was just sort of looking over the territory himself.”

“Oh!” Kay felt better to hear that. “Then *you* had not told him about it?”

“No, not yet——”

“And I hope no one else has,” Kay interrupted, “because in selling, it is the first one who offers a place who is really entitled to the commission. That is, of course, if they have a right to claim a commission.”

At that instant the telephone rang shrilly. Win immediately answered it.

“Lost!” Kay heard him call out. “Little Jeanie Davis? What was she doing at the girls’ camp?”

“Girls’ camp!” exclaimed Kay. “You mean out at Beaverbreak? That’s Carol and Cecy’s camp,” she said in strained anxiety, while Win kept talking on the phone.

“Kidnapped! That’s ridiculous——”

“Oh, please tell me, Win,” Kay begged. “What has happened at the camp?”

Win finally turned from the phone. His face was very serious.

“There’s a little child lost, little Jeanie Davis. She’s only five years old——”

“But they don’t have such tots at Beaverbreak,” Kay interrupted.

“I know. She was only there for the night because her mother was taken to the hospital suddenly. Jeanie was all right last night, they say, they put her to bed all right but this morning, she’s gone.”

“Probably wandered off looking for her mother,” Kay said quickly.

“But they’ve searched everywhere. Look at those cars coming!” the young man exclaimed. “They’re organizing a searching party. They said they were going to start from here.”

“Oh, I must get to Cecy and Carol,” Kay cried. “Perhaps I can help them. It will be dreadful if a child is lost from their camp.”

59

“Here comes Ted Clayton and his sister Jennie. You can ride out in their car. Stick your wheel under the shed. I wish I could leave this office and go out myself,” Win declared. “But that phone will certainly keep right on ringing. Hello!” he was calling back into the phone again as the ringing began in earnest.

Like the raging of a forest fire or the onrush of a hurricane, ran the cry through Melody Lane “Child Lost! Little Jeanie Davis is gone.” Instantly everything else was forgotten, work stopped, men and women ran out from their stores, shops and homes, and, together, seemed to unite in that great human tragedy of a little lost girl.

Kay quickly got out to the girls’ camp, and found Carol and her sister Cecy trying to calm the excited crowds that could have, or at least might have, been able to help in the search, if only they would “keep their heads.”

“Oh, please tell me, Cecy,” begged Kay. “How did it happen? Why are they all so terribly excited? She must have wandered away.”

“Yes, that’s what we think. But just look at poor Carol. Because she happens to be the assistant camp director everyone seems to blame her.”

Carol was standing in the camp’s doorway in her white uniform, her dark hair brushed back but its curls escaping to frame her lovely but very serious young face. The crowds that had gathered foolishly around the camp ground, fired one question after another at her, until the senior camp director, Miss Evans, finally appealed to the police officer, who had just come up from the village.

60

“Here now!” Mr. Reardon the officer called out to them, “just lay off. If you can’t go out in the woods and do some searching, at least have the decency to get away from here. These young women have enough to do without trying to answer your silly questions.”

“Poor Carol!” Kay said to Cecy. “I hope the child——”

“No, she was not in Carol’s care, thank goodness,” Carol’s sister interrupted. “She had been put to bed in a little cot in Miss Evans’s tent. Miss Evans is in full charge, you know. And when she woke before daylight and looked over to Jeanie’s cot, it was empty!”

“How awful!” breathed Kay. “I suppose there’s no use in my offering to search; you have so many out now, Win Vernon, down at the hotel told me. Yet, I feel I should like to try, just to feel I was helping,” said Kay forlornly.

“All right, Kay, I feel I’ll have to get away from here myself. You know the whole thing just flared up like—like an

explosion when that girl Mamie Johnson went tearing around _____”

“Mamie Johnson!” repeated Kay.

“Yes, and I almost hate to tell you what she said.”

“What, Cecy?”

“She said the hermit was gone from his cabin and she hinted *he* might have kidnapped Jeanie!”

“Oh, Cecy! She didn’t! How dreadful!”

61

“Wasn’t it terrible? And it seems people around here would believe almost anything about anyone who lives up around the Morgan place. They even talked of witches spiriting Jeanie away—” Cecy stopped, choked beyond words, and all but crying out against such cruel scandalmongers.

“But to even use the hermit’s name in a case like this! Isn’t that girl dreadful,” Kay gasped.

“I don’t think she has her right senses, but that does not stop people from listening to her. Well, come on. I’ll just say a word to Carol before we go,” Cecy finished.

It was a relief to both girls to get away from the curiosity seekers who seemed more interested in peering in the children’s tents than in finding the lost baby.

“Everybody around here seems to know little Jeanie,” Cecy explained. “She’s such a darling. Two of the older girls brought

her up to the camp the other day. That was why her mother asked Miss Evans if she could take care of her last night. She knew Jeanie wouldn't be strange with us."

"But, Cecy," Kay stopped her, "what could have happened to her?"

"Kay, I'm so tired trying to get some idea that I just can't think any more," replied the disconsolate Cecy. "We haven't told her mother yet, of course, and her father is a traveling man and cannot be reached. Is there anything worse than losing a child and not knowing what might have happened——"

"Cecy, listen!" Kay interrupted. "There's someone hollering down there in that gully by the tracks."

62

"That's a girl's voice——"

"Yes, and I know what girl's voice it is," Kay exclaimed. "It's Mamie Johnson's."

63

CHAPTER IX

TAMING MAMIE

Cecy and Kay dashed through the rough briary thicket that lined the freight railroad tracks, and almost instantly they stood upon the track itself, listening to those shrieks and cries.

“Mamie Johnson’s, sure enough,” breathed Cecy. “She must be back of that coal car.”

Both girls crept under the car.

“There! Look! There she is! And Henri is holding her, Henri!” shrieked Kay, “what’s the matter?”

They ran along the track to where Henri Gros was holding Mamie Johnson, and trying at the same time to put a rope around her ankles. The girl was kicking, shouting and trying to bite Henri, but in spite of her violence he was holding her.

“She’s got to tell!” he cried out to the girls. “She knows where Jeanie is, and she’s not going to get away—until she tells.”

“Oh, that’s it,” said Cecy. “Let’s help Henri. If she knows, he is right; she has got to tell.”

But when the two girls tried to get hold of the wild Mamie Johnson, she seemed to become even more powerful than before, and they could not even touch her, she kicked and fought so violently.

“You don’t dare tech me!” she yelled. “You’re them smarties that breaks winders and has them fixed by ghosts and witches.” She was referring to the broken window in the little office that had been fixed by “ghosts and witches” according to Mamie.

“Just swing this rope around her ankles,” Henri was ordering the girls. “If she won’t go with me I’ll make her go.”

“Wait a minute, Henri,” Cecy ordered. “Give her a chance _____”

“I gave her plenty of chance——”

“He did not. I don’t know where the kid is,” Mamie spluttered. “I ain’t seen her at all.”

“Then why did you say you saw her?” Henri demanded. “You made those people think you saw her with the hermit.”

“I didn’t either,” protested Mamie, who seemed to be changing her mind under the boy’s threats. “You jest let me go and—and—I’ll tell you all I know,” she promised, weakly.

“I’m not trusting you, Mamie Johnson,” flung back Henri. “I’ve got you now and I’m going to keep hold of you till you tell the truth.”

“Oh, let’s give her a chance,” pleaded Cecy, relying on the girls’ club principle of “being kind whenever you can.” This creature was indeed hard to deal with, they all knew that, but she was entitled to a chance.

“*He* never did; nobody ever give me a chance,” Mamie

declared, managing such a kick at Henri that he dropped the rope with which he had been trying to tie her. "But you all better jest wait till my Uncle Tom comes back. He'll show you you can't treat me like a—like—a——"

"Now wait a minute, Mamie," Kay said firmly. "We have got to find that baby. Nothing else matters, and if you can help us, don't you see it would be wonderful for you?"

"For me! Humph! Nothin's ever any good for me," and the girl ran a dirty hand across her face to push back the tangled hair that made her look so hideously unkempt.

"You just try us," begged Kay. She was thinking about the Morgan place as well as about little lost Jeanie. "Come on. Tell us quick as you can. Do you know anything about little Jeanie Davis?"

"No," snapped Mamie.

"When did you see her last?" coaxed Cecy.

"Yestidday. Before her mother went to the horspital."

"Where?" Kay asked that, and put out her hand to stop Henri from further molesting Mamie.

"Up 'round the camp. That old woman with the specks they call Evans; she was taggin' along with her. It's all her fault," declared Mamie unexpectedly.

"I don't believe she knows a thing," Cecy said. "And we can't spend any more time. Come along, Kay, you wanted to go over

to Jeanie's house. It's just beyond that gas station."

"Here comes a cop!" cried Mamie, at once so frightened she jerked away and only Henri's strong hold on her kept her from running off.

"If you run he'll suspect you," Cecy told her. "Just you stay here with us. We'll see he won't hurt you."

"But a cop!" cried the girl. "Lemme go." Her curious gray eyes were blazing with terror, and she seemed to be trembling.

"Yeah," Henri said under his breath so that Mamie might not hear him. "She is afraid of cops, she has to be." Kay then remembered that Mamie had been in a girls' state school for discipline, and that, of course, was what Henri meant.

"Listen, Mamie," Cecy begged. "He is right here and you can't run. Just stand your ground and tell the truth."

Mamie dropped her arms as if surrendering. "All right," she sighed, "but I don't know nothin' about that kid!"

"What's all this? What's goin' on here?" Officer Reardon wanted to know. "You, Mamie Johnson, I've been lookin' for you."

"But she says she doesn't know anything about little Jeanie, Officer," Kay hurried to intervene.

"What are you doin' with that rope, Henri?" the policeman turned quickly to Henri.

“Nothing, now. I guess she doesn’t know. But I was going to make sure. She can run, you know, Mr. Reardon.”

“You’re right there, boy. She can do that,” and the man of the law smiled at Henri. “But I’ve got to make sure myself.” Cecy looked imploringly at Kay. How could they all stand there talking while little Jeanie was still in danger? 67

“You’ll come along with me now, Mamie,” said Mr. Reardon, not unkindly.

“Oh, no!” screamed the girl, not able even to attempt to escape now with the officer’s firm grip on her bare arm.

“Couldn’t you trust her if we all promised to keep track of her?” begged Cecy. “She will do what we ask her, won’t you, Mamie?” Cecy pleaded. The look in that poor girl’s eyes was impossible to resist.

“Besides, she doesn’t know where Jeanie is or she sure would tell,” Henri added. “She knows it would do a lot for her if she could help find her, don’t you, Mamie?”

“Well,” the officer was smiling, “you kids can surely set up a fine little court of your own, and I know Henri, at least, is to be trusted. Not that you girls are not just as reliable——”

“We understand, officer,” Cecy helped out. “You just don’t know us as well as you know Henri.”

The girls were impatient to get on with the search. With some more pleading from Kay and Cecy, backed up with Henri’s strong support, that “he would keep a look-out,” the officer

finally decided to let Mamie go, for the time being, at least.

“But take care you keep that tongue of yours from hurting honest people,” he warned her. “You had no right to mention the hermit’s name at all. He’s an honest man, and minds his own business. I ought to know that,” wound up the policeman, twirling his stick in official emphasis.

68

“Yes sir, I will,” promised Mamie, willingly enough now. But it was hard to be sure what the “I will” referred to. It must have been to “that tongue of hers.”

“Come on, come on,” Cecy begged Kay. “I can hear the searchers threshing down the bushes in old Melody Lane,” she shuddered.

“But we’ve been over every inch of it,” Mr. Reardon shook his head despairingly. “Whatever could have happened to that child?”

Kay and Cecy started off to search the little cottage where Jeanie lived. Mamie was actually walking, not running this time, as she went in the other direction. Henri had joined Officer Reardon and they started back toward the camp.

“Maybe we could tame Mamie,” Kay said, as much to cheer up the despondent Cecy as to make sense.

“Maybe,” Cecy sighed. “We cross here. The little Davis house is just around the corner,” she directed.

“And the child’s father is out of town?”

“Yes, he travels. Mrs. Davis was stricken with appendicitis and had to be rushed to the hospital last evening. It was our Miss Evans’ idea to take care of Jeanie at Beaverbreak, until relatives could come from Esterbury.”

“Of course they have searched all around the Davis home,” Kay remarked, as the girls came near to the small house Cecy had pointed out. “But, as you say, we might find some clue.”

69

They fell silent as they entered the little wire gate. The stillness around the place told of the sad circumstance so lately befallen the Davis family. The mother was ill in a hospital, the father traveling and perhaps not even reached yet by anxious friends, and little Jeanie was gone.

Kay walked up the few front steps, looked around carefully, tried the door, turned over the door mat, then shaking her head sadly, joined her friend.

“Let’s look around back,” she suggested.

As they passed along they saw the neat flower beds and the newly made kitchen garden, but made no comment. They were looking for Jeanie; seemingly a hopeless quest.

But at the back door there were signs of disturbance.

“See here,” Cecy called, “this door mat is out of place.”

“Yes, and here’s the rim of a wet milk bottle,” added Kay.

“It may have been stolen——”

“Try the door——”

And amazingly the door opened as Cecy’s hand touched the knob.

“Could it have been left open?” asked Kay in surprise.

“Not and have escaped our searchers. Miss Evans and Carol came here first, very early this morning.”

The girls walked timidly through the kitchen, into a small hall, then very quietly opened a door.

70

“Look! Look!” which one said that did not matter for they were both looking at the baby in her crib, her cheeks as pink as dew-touched flowers, her eyes closed in happy slumber.

And there was a milk bottle spilled beside the crib, like a little river running right over to the blue and white rug.

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CHAPTER X

A BABY'S WAY

The darling little Jeanie was asleep in her crib! The girls could not believe their own eyes.

“Oh, Cecy!” Kay whispered, as the two chums put their arms around each other.

“Kay, Kay!” murmured Cecy. “How wonderful.”

The two girls stepped back so as not to disturb Jeanie.

“Although it was not Carol’s fault in any way,” Cecy whispered, “she would have felt it dreadfully if——”

“I know, dear. Taking care of strange babies is no simple task.”

What must have happened, as Kay and Cecy figured it out, was that the child slipped out of the cot in Miss Evans’s tent just about daylight. When her loss was discovered, Miss Evans called Carol from her home, and together they went directly to the Davis house, thinking Jeanie might have made her way home. But she had not got there yet. She probably had gone by some roundabout path, and perhaps got to her house just after the milkman had left his bottle, and the searchers had gone on to look elsewhere.

“Jeanie found key,” the baby chirped prettily to Kay and Cecy, when she awoke and found the two happy girls smiling down at her. “See!” she exclaimed, and there in her

chubby fist, sure enough was the back door key. She had known where her mother always hid it, got it there, opened the door, and tugged in the milk bottle. Then the door closed on its spring, and after the child had drunk her milk, right out of the bottle this time, she climbed into her crib to finish her sleep and wait for her mummy.

“We will just keep her right here,” Cecy declared to Kay as they took Jeanie up. “She is safe at home and someone can come here to take care of her until her own folks come. If only there was a phone——”

“I’ll run to that gas station at the corner,” Kay offered. “And let the camp know. Oh what a happy relief!”

She was dashing along to get the phone call in when, as usual out of nowhere, Mamie Johnson popped right out in front of her.

“Didja find her?” called the girl, at once suspecting the reason for Kay’s haste.

“Yes, we did. Right home, safe and sound——”

“Oh, swell!” yelled Mamie. “Then I’m—I’m safe too——”

“Safe? Of course you are. But I’m in a hurry——”

“I know. But I want to tell you. The hermit’s back.”

“Well, what of it?” Kay was calling out as she kept right on toward the gas station.

“Oh, nuthin’ only I thought you might want to know. Don’t tell on me, will you?”

“Oh, I have to hurry, Mamie,” called Kay impatiently. “I’ll talk to you afterward,” and she rushed into the telephone booth.

When Kay came out again, the gas station attendant was following her and asking questions about the finding of Jeanie. Such excitement as had surged through the place in those few hours would not be easily quelled, Kay understood that. So she just advanced her hurried steps into a brisk run to reach the Davis house before anyone else should stop her.

But again, there was Mamie Johnson, just inside the gate and coming out from behind a flowering bush.

“What do you want now, Mamie?” Kay asked before the girl could speak.

“I jest want to tell you—somethin’. I got to be careful——”

“Go ahead, there’s no one around here yet,” Kay reassured her.

“Well, you know why Johnson’s away?”

“No, why?”

“He can’t find that deed to sell the place,” the girl whispered. She had come so close to Kay, that Kay instinctively drew back.

“The Morgan place?” Kay asked in surprise.

“Sure. Didn’t you know? I’ll be skinned alive or sent back to that—that school,” the girl fairly hissed this, “if they ever find out I told you. But you saved me today, and I’m no—squealer.”

“Don’t worry, Mamie. We are your friends. You can depend on us,” Kay assured her as again the girl disappeared.

It was much later, after Miss Evans had herself taken charge of Jeanie, that the girls, Cecy and Kay, were able to “go over the whole thing,” as Cecy put it.

“What could Mamie mean first by telling us the hermit was back, then telling us why Johnson is away,” Kay was wondering. “That girl never says anything nor does anything without a good reason,” she concluded.

“Did you see that terrified look in her eyes when she saw the policeman coming?” Cecy said. “I wonder if we couldn’t tame her a little?”

“That’s what we have got to do,” Kay declared. “Perhaps we can really help her. Also she is our only hope in this land matter. I’ve been feeling that for a long time. She lives with the Johnsons, although she is only some distant relation. She calls Tom Johnson her uncle, but Henri declares she is no relation at all, just a girl they took out of an orphanage.”

“To be made a little slave of, I suppose,” said Cecy. “No wonder she is wild. But she is certainly coming over to our side as far as she dares. Oh Kay, if only we could get some real facts to work on,” sighed Cecy. “We seem to be going around in circles.”

“Which is always part of the unwinding process,” said Kay more cheerfully. “I feel now we *have* something to work on. Poor little Jeanie’s scare did more for us than to provide the joy of finding her safe. It brought Mamie Johnson into our charmed circle,” Kay predicted.

“But suppose she fools us, gets us to believe in her, and then gives us away?” Cecy cautioned.

“That’s a chance we have got to take,” Kay pointed out. “That writer who wants to know about the Morgan place and simply won’t talk to regular agents, must really be interested. Win Vernon, down at the hotel, is *sure* he means to buy. As a matter of fact, I think Win had some more details he was just about to give me when we got the Jeanie alarm. But say, Cecy, you said the other day that your sister Carol was only helping out at the camp and that your father insisted upon both you girls having a real vacation this year.”

“Yes, that’s so, Kay. In fact, that was why we took the little cottage out here and came back to Melody Lane. You see, Carol works awfully hard at that Nursery in Newkirk, and father insisted she take a rest this year.”

“And she certainly needs it. I’ve heard they have been doing great work at that nursery. But, Cecy, do you suppose she might be ready to give up the camp work now?”

“And jump in with us?” cried Cecy. “I wouldn’t wonder. Carol is nothing if not a detective, and she wouldn’t call it work to run around in our dear old Melody Lane woods, looking for the traditional ghosts. But I’m afraid our prim Miss

Evans wouldn't know how to run a camp out here without Carol."

"I wish we could buy her off or something," Kay pondered. "We most certainly do need another girl in our squad and she ought to be even a little better than we are, to tackle Mamie Johnson."

This was all being decided upon when Cecy and Kay talked it over on the eventful evening after Jeanie's adventure. As usual, the girls were out on Kay's porch; Cecy liked to come there and Kay needed to be there. Her mother was doing extra work in the office and someone had to be with Nannie, evenings, to give her time off. She usually took it out under the wild cherry tree and she couldn't hear the telephone at that distance.

"There's the phone now," sang out Kay, sprinting indoors to answer it. "It's for you, Cecy!" she called back at once. "It's Carol."

Then Cecy began: "You mean you can leave camp now, right now?"

After a pause and while Kay almost danced in glee at that much good news, Cecy went on in the one-sided conversation, letting it leak out that Carol was now free to leave the children's camp and begin the vacation which her father had insisted upon her taking.

"Where is she now, at home?" Kay demanded to know as Cecy, all smiles, turned away from the phone.

"Yes, she's home."

“Then, can’t we talk to her at once, right away? I feel I just can’t stand this brain pressure another minute,” and Kay clapped her hands to her head to hold it on. “What with the man to buy the place, Mamie Johnson coming over to our side—we hope, the hermit back from his mysterious trip, and that secret message from the plane; why Cecy, I’ll just blow up if Carol doesn’t come in at once to act as umpire.”

“But why do you suppose Carol has been let off?” Cecy asked quizzically.

“Why? Oh, yes. Why has she?”

“Because Jeanie’s little trip has so excited the girls about ghosts being out here, that Miss Evans has decided it was a mistake to come to Melody Lane at all, and she’s breaking camp.”

“No!” exclaimed Kay. “She couldn’t be so silly.”

“Well, that’s what *she* says. Carol couldn’t say much over the phone but her voice was enough. You see, it was Miss Evans’s mistake. She should not have brought the baby into the camp in the first place, and since she did, she should have been sure she couldn’t slip off that way all alone.”

“So now Miss Evans wants to escape from any blame, by just setting up her camp elsewhere and forbidding the girls to even mention our Melody Lane,” Kay added disdainfully.

“I suppose,” Cecy agreed. “But Carol knew how fine a camp site Beaverbreak is, and it was on her recommendation they came out here.”

“Could dear Miss Evans be just a little bit jealous of Carol?” Kay asked cautiously.

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“Oh, no. You see, Carol has her own work in the city, and this camp is under Miss Evans’s supervision through city appointment. She is probably right, in wanting to keep the children away from a ghost story territory. They make up such stories themselves and the nervous kind take advantage of them to plead homesickness. Carol said half the children were crying to go home already.”

“Ghost scare, eh?”

“Just that, and maybe our turn is coming.”

“You mean Carol will jump right in and run the ghosts in the manor down, first thing?”

“Exactly that. Carol, as her friend Ken says ‘don’t mess round with ghosts, she runs them right down.’ You know, Ken is Ken Powell, Carol’s particular young lawyer friend. You must see him soon, Kay,” Carol’s sister declared, and Kay seemed delighted with the prospect.

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CHAPTER XI

CAROL JOINS THE SQUAD

“But this girl, Vivienne,” Carol was saying. “She is the crux of the whole plot. Where is she? Why has she disappeared?”

“According to mere scraps we have been able to pick up and guess at,” Kay answered the older girl, “she disappeared to escape old Johnson.”

“Was he threatening her? What is his connection with her life and her property?”

“That is what we have got to coax wild Mamie to tell us,” Kay replied. “She must know; she lives with the Johnsons, and is a sort of tool for their schemes. Why, that silly little trap I tripped over in the woods was set there by Mamie, Henri told me the other day. I suppose old Spike Johnson has been suspecting me of getting too close to the Morgan house, so he told her to set a trap for me. Only a foolish child would ever have thought that a spill from a wheel would scare anyone off,” Kay scoffed, remembering it.

“But those little things all betray a plot,” Carol pointed out. “I suppose Mamie has orders and she is trying to follow them.”

“And she’s scared to death of old Johnson, herself,” Kay added. “And I guess she has reason to be. She was sent away to some sort of school once; everyone around here knows that, and I suppose the mean Johnson people she lives with

hold a threat over her.”

“Very likely. That’s an old story but it goes right on,” said Carol wisely.

The three girls were now in the cozy little Duncan sitting room. A heavy downpour of rain had driven them in from the porch and this was the first chance they had with Carol’s wiser counsel to “go hammer and tongs after that mansion mystery,” as Kay put it.

“I’m so afraid our buyer, the writer, will slip away if we can’t put the deal through quickly,” Kay said next. Cecy was letting her do all the talking tonight, because, after all, it was Kay’s mystery.

“Let’s see.” Carol was toying with her pencil, as in her trained habit she had been taking notes while the girls talked. “Old Johnson is the agent but you can’t go near him——”

“Can’t even let him know there is a possible buyer,” Kay interrupted. “That would spoil everything. Suppose he did hear of this writer man, Mr. Hadley, and in old Spike’s clever way he should get around the ‘no agent’ objection by having some private party negotiate the deal; where would we be?”

“Left,” said Cecy crisply.

“And the girl Vivienne, who used to live there and who possibly has a right to the place; where would she be?”

Carol pondered. To Carol who was new on the case, as Cecy pointed out, it was the mythical Vivienne who carried the real secret.

“And the hermit,” sighed Kay. “It’s so hard to approach a man and ask questions. Why couldn’t there have been a Missus Hermit?”

“Not afraid of a man, Kay?” joked Carol.

“No, not exactly,” Kay answered. “But I do respect their—intelligence.”

“He seemed to respect ours,” Cecy pointed out promptly.

“Don’t be silly,” Carol told them, “All we have to do now is —” she drew lines and made notes following the figures she was tracing on her pad, “is, first, to see the hermit, second to cage Mamie Johnson, third to warn Win Vernon, down at the hotel, to keep everything secret, not to talk to strangers, and all that.” She paused while her two listeners waited. “No doubt we will find there are lost papers, there always are, you know.”

“We suspected that before this even started,” Kay told Carol. “If there had not been lost or stolen papers, my mother would have been able to trace the records that would show our home was taken by fraud.”

They told Carol then about the little office in the woods, and their adventure with Sinbad, the hermit’s cat.

“But, Carol,” Kay started again, “how can Miss Evans rip up the camp when she has only just settled it?”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter,” Carol explained. “These camp sites are loaned to the city, and the city has plenty of

equipment handy for moving anything at any time. Miss Evans can move nearer salt water and be closer to other camps. As a matter of fact, it would not be a good thing for the children to stay here now. There is nothing like a ghost scare to excite them, and then what would their mothers say?"

"We certainly did need you, Sis," Cecy remarked. "Kay and I were about sunk in all this. I've had lots of fun working on our mysteries, but when it comes to hermits, Spike Johnsons and disappearing Vivienes, I'm afraid I need my big sister's advice."

"Nonsense," Carol protested. "You two were getting along splendidly. You're just a little confused now, that's all. The Jeanie upset was startling, but it's over now. So let's see how we can reach your hermit. I think we will have to start from there."

It was still misting next day when the three girls started off to "beard the hermit in his den." Carol was only a little older than Cecy but Cecy had always seemed like her little sister, which she actually was. But big, strong, husky Kay, who was a little younger even than Cecy, towered above them both. Cecy and Carol were wearing their blue and white camp suits, and as usual Kay was wearing her tan skirt and striped sweater—the last thing that ever bothered Kay was her clothes.

"I hope he hasn't gone for another bus ride," Cecy remarked, referring to the hermit. They were jumping across the watercress spring, taking the shortest cut.

"It's a wonder there are any woods left out here," Carol

remarked. "Everything is building up so."

"There wouldn't be a single tree left if the town council hadn't stopped Tom Johnson," Kay said. "First; they made this a restricted zone; he could build only good expensive houses, and then they stopped him altogether, on someone's complaint. It was that complaint that set me going. I had suspected he might have some false claims and that they might even include mother's." Kay's eyes always sparkled when she spoke of that home of theirs.

"Oh, look! There's Henri!" Cecy exclaimed. "The very boy we want to meet. He'll know if the hermit is home."

Reaching the boy, who was armed with a rake and sickle, the girls greeted him effusively.

"We're so glad to run across you——"

"We had been hoping we would."

"Just the boy we were looking for."

Each girl added her bit to that salute for Henri.

"So what?" he asked, as if suspicious that all this was more than he should have expected.

"We were just going up to the hermit's," Kay began, but he stopped her.

"Don't. He wouldn't want to see anyone," Henri told them.

“Why? Is there anything the matter?” Kay asked.

“Well, no, not exactly. But he’s sort of down, for him. You shouldn’t bother him.” Henri was quite positive about that.

The girls exchanged question and answer glances. How could they get around Henri? He looked like a guard in his blue shirt and Scout shorts, with that willful hair trying to get into his eyes, although it certainly had been combed this morning. He carried his rake straight up in his arm like a weapon of honor—or something. He would surely stand by the hermit, they realized, even if they did want to see him.

“Oh, he won’t mind us,” Kay said, ever so lightly, as if calling upon the hermit was one of her everyday little tasks. “He invited us to come back, you know. Come along, girls,” and she only smiled at Henri as they started.

“But listen,” he called. “You better not, not today anyway. He wouldn’t even let me chop his wood. Said he was positively *not* to be disturbed.”

“Do you think he is sick?” Carol asked, cautiously.

“Oh, he’s never sick,” scoffed the boy. “But he’s awfully disappointed. I guess that bus ride was a failure,” he added, vaguely.

“Well, we’ll just have to try and see if he’ll be as friendly as he was the last time,” Cecy suggested. “Henri, couldn’t you go ahead and just say there’s something *very* important we have to ask him about?”

“Yes, do, Henri,” added Kay. “Say Kay Findley wants to tell him something about the old Morgan place. Perhaps that will interest him.”

“O. K.,” Henri agreed. “But when he says a thing he means it, and he doesn’t want to be disturbed. But I’ll try.” So reluctantly, Henri lowered his rake and turned back to Proud Hill.

“Disappointed after his bus ride,” Kay said to the other girls too low for Henri to hear. “You know, Carol, he went away right after he got the message from the plane, that was signed ‘Desperate.’ Remember we told you about it?”

“Oh, yes, of course, I remember,” Carol assented. “But what might that mean?”

“We thought the message might have been from Vivienne, the girl who used to live in the Morgan house and that he was going some place to meet her,” Kay told Carol.

“Oh, yes. And if he’s so ‘down’ now, as Henri says, it didn’t turn out right. Maybe he didn’t meet her,” Carol concluded in a whisper.

“There goes Henri around to the back door,” warned Cecy. “Let’s hope he won’t refuse to see us. What would we do if he won’t tell us how we can start on this sale business. We could never ask old Spike Johnson,” she murmured.

“There, there’s the door opening. Yes, there he is,” Kay added, as once more the hermit of Proud Hill stood on his doorstep to greet the girls.

“Step in,” he asked them, to their surprise. “It’s an unpleasant morning. Besides, these woods may have—ears.”

CHAPTER XII

A BRASS KEY

They were in the hermit's cabin and the same thought must have come to each of them. What an artistic home! How could such order be kept in so small a place? But it was. Just one room, apparently, divided more by the colorful rugs and queer fur skins on the floor than by partitions, of which there was only one, and that did not go up to the rough, beamed roof.

The furniture was made from unpainted and unvarnished wood, probably from trees cut by the hermit right there at his doorstep. And over under a huge, square table stood a very modern and up to date bag, an air-luggage piece, rather unusual in such surroundings or for a hermit's use, the girls thought.

The man was wearing slacks and a fine soft flannel sport shirt. On his feet were Mexican sandals, the whole outfit suggesting he might have made a shopping trip out of the disappointing bus ride. To Carol, who had not seen him before, he seemed more like a professional man than a hermit, his suave manner adding to that impression. Who was this hermit, she wondered? And why was he hiding here?

Kay "broke the ice." She could always be depended upon to get things going.

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Carol had been introduced as they entered the cabin, so Kay went right ahead.

“Oh, Mr. Thorsen, we are so excited. We have found a buyer for the big Morgan place,” said Kay, just like that.

“A buyer? What do you mean?” the man asked, and Carol noticed how seriously he stroked that queer beard that seemed too old for him.

“Yes, that is, we hope we have,” Kay amended. “You remember I told you I was going to try to get my own mother’s home back from Tom Johnson? I haven’t any real proof he took it by fraud—that’s what we hope you will help us with.”

The pause that followed that frank statement was what might be called eloquent. It seemed to hold a promise of something important to follow.

But suddenly Kay felt she had better not say anything more about the writer who had told Win Vernon he would like to buy the Morgan place. It was all so uncertain just yet, and besides, the hermit might not like to have anyone connected with writing or publicity so close to him, if he really were in seclusion there.

“A possible buyer?” he repeated. “I’m afraid that cannot even be considered just at present. A little later, but not just now,” he concluded.

“A little later we might be able to try to sell it.” Kay pressed. “You see, Mr. Thorsen, I feel sure if we brought a genuine customer up to Tom Johnson he would have to sell or pay out a lot of money. My mother who, you know, is in a brokerage office, says that is the law,” she said very solemnly.

“Law? What does that scamp care about law? But at any rate, I don’t want to discourage you, and just a little later, even a month from now, I may be able to help. But not now. I was disappointed the other day when you so kindly sent me that message dropped from the plane. I was very hopeful then, but oh, well—” and he looked hard at the beamed ceiling. “There is a short time left, but it seems too short just now.”

At once a gripping awe possessed the girls, and each of them felt its moving influence. They were sitting there in this strange home of the hermit’s, asking him questions about something that must have had a tragic influence on his own life. Everyone knew that he lived there as some sort of watchman for that big house across the hill. But what was he watching for? What was he waiting for? Why was he hiding?

It had been one of the bravest acts of the Melody Lane girls’ experience, when they dared to go up to his door and break in on his solitude. But there is some secret clue between kindred minds that inspires confidence, and it was that which had led them on.

But even Kay the impulsive, the recklessly determined girl, who felt she must get what she wanted if it was her right to do so, was hesitating now.

Ask him what? About Vivienne, the mysterious creature who had only been known as the girl who used to live in the big house? Ask him why that man Johnson controlled the property, and according to the local real estate agents, would only sell it on his own terms? Ask him what he thought about the ghost stories that were known to have scared off more than

one tenant and perhaps more possible buyers?

The sad, broken remarks the hermit had just made, seemed too personal and too mysterious to permit of further questioning. “Just now he could do nothing, but perhaps a little later he could,” closed the argument. Also, that there was only “a short time left, too short a time,” added to this conclusion. How could they presume to intrude further?

It was the hermit himself who relieved the tension and again set the girls at ease.

“You youngsters!” he sort of laughed. “To talk about getting a buyer for Morgan Manor! Even if such a thing were possible wouldn’t you have to get hold of the owner first?”

“The owner,” Carol repeated. “We understood that the man, Tom Johnson, has complete control of the place, that he is the sole agent.”

“That’s what *he* thinks,” said Mr. Thorsen very slowly. “He may have a technical right to control the estate just at present, but there is also a moral right to be considered.”

“You mean someone has a right to the place but cannot claim it now?” Kay spoke up.

“That’s exactly it,” Mr. Thorsen replied. “But see here. Should I be discussing this with you youngsters without the consent of your father, perhaps?”

“Oh, yes,” Kay said quickly. “You see, my father—is dead.” She paused a moment, then went on, “And these Duncan girls

are trained in social work, at least Carol is,” she amended, “and social workers have to do all sorts of things to help people who cannot help themselves.”

“Really, Mr. Thorsen,” Carol felt obliged to say, “we have had more strange family problems to work out than one would ever believe existed, and as Kay says, our folks seem to think we get along pretty well, and without getting ourselves into very serious difficulties.” She was thinking of all the other Melody Lane stories they had worked out. What would the hermit think of those adventures if he knew about them?

“Not that I haven’t confidence in you, myself,” he added politely, “for I have. In fact, it may be that girls like you, who would be unsuspected and therefore unwatched, might do more than I have been able to do since I have been here. It seems now I have accomplished just about nothing at all.”

Sinbad, the big gray tiger cat, yawned and stretched on the bear skin rug, then got up and went over to where the girls were sitting almost in a row. He brushed his sleek fur first against Carol, then against Kay, but when he reached Cecy he stopped to sniff her toes that were poked out of her frivolous summer sandals.

“He remembers you saved him,” the hermit remarked. “I should have felt very sorry if anything had happened to old Sinbad.”

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“Is he a sailor?” Cecy asked, remembering there had been a fiction sailor named Sinbad.

“Yes, I brought him from the Canary Islands,” the man replied,

as Sinbad finally crossed over to his chair and sprang up on his knees.

“Would you allow us to go into the Morgan house, just to sort of look around?” Carol cautiously asked. “That is, of course, if you have a key.”

“Yes, I have a key, and I see no reason why you shouldn’t go through there if you want to,” he answered. “It’s perfectly safe in the day time,” he continued. “As you possibly know, ghosts only work at night,” he added with a smile.

“Oh, yes,” chirped Cecy. “We have found that out. We’ve met up with a lot of ghosts in our adventures, but never one in broad day light,” she insisted.

“And there’s never one around even at night if *I* happened to take up a watch over there,” Mr. Thorsen said. “It seems a strange foot must tread upon the floor to give the ghost a signal. But, I can assure you, the spooks respond to that,” he told the girls decidedly.

“Some people did move in there though, didn’t they, Mr. Thorsen?” asked Kay.

“Yes, indeed they did, and nice people too. Folks who were determined not to be fooled. But even they didn’t stay long.”

“When could we go through?” Carol pressed for that chance.

“Any time. I can give you a key now,” and the hermit went to a wall cupboard and came back with a large brass key. “This is

for the door off the side porch. It is easiest to open and not so lonely to enter, as the big door under that front arch. It was a beautiful place, until tragedy ruined it.” He stopped abruptly at that, and the girls got to their feet.

“Be careful though,” he warned them. “Better talk this over with your folks first. I would not encourage you at all if it were not for the claims of this young lady, Kay Findley. I feel, she has a right to do all she can to get back the little home that was her father’s. That is only one of the crimes that lay at the door of these avaricious Johnsons,” and his hands clenched at his sides as he said that. “When some people, who have no understanding of money affairs, taste its poison they become infected by it. It completely controls their every action. Avarice is only one step from thievery.”

“And old Tom Johnson is said to own half of Melody Lane!” Kay exclaimed, defiantly.

“He doesn’t own it but he has gone through some of the motions,” said Mr. Thorsen. “Well, go ahead and look over the lovely old place,” he continued. “Take your time in returning the key. It has been a long time since a young girl has crossed that threshold.”

Carol had the key, she seemed to be most responsible, and as the girls started off again down from the cabin through the woods, with its winding paths, they instinctively looked over to the big brick house that was now half hidden in trees.

“Should we laugh or cry?” asked Kay. “We’ve got the key but

not much else.”

“I think that’s a lot,” declared Cecy. “Now, we can start right in.”

“Ghost hunting?” Carol prodded.

“Well, what would you advise? You’re the senior member, Sis,” Cecy reminded her.

“We’ll go over there just as soon as this mist clears,” answered Carol. “Our hermit may not have told us much, but he hinted at an awful lot, I think.”

“And we are out to get the answers,” declared Kay. “I’m satisfied. He will help us as soon as he can; he promised that. And it’s going to take us quite a while to make our own discoveries.”

“Lay the ghosts first,” insisted Cecy.

“Exactly,” answered her big sister Carol.

CHAPTER XIII

THEY MET HIM

But things did not run right straight along in a bee-line for the ghost hunters. There had to be interruptions. When the Duncan girls' friends found out that Carol was free from camp work, they insisted upon giving Cecy and Carol a welcome back to Melody Lane. There were tennis parties, movie parties, swimming parties and every conceivable form of good time making, for Melody Lane was ever a sociable place to live in, and no family could have been more popular there than were the Duncans.

"If only Thally Bond could be here this summer," Carol lamented, "what times we would have." She was referring to her chum from grammar school days, who had played such important parts in their many summer adventures. But Thally was now, as she wrote Carol, "flitting from one summer college to another looking for one where brains were not important." This year it was Columbia's turn.

Cecy longed for her friend, Rosie Wells, but she, like Thally, "was on the wing," mostly in airplanes with her family, looking for better times.

Polly Cob, Flinders to us, the girl who played the main part in the Secret of the Kashmir Shawl story, had already been around to see the girls, to renew their pledges of friendship and to prove she was keeping her part of the bargain they had made under such exciting circumstances out in the

hills of New Jersey.

Yes, Flinders was “getting along fine” and carrying her best friends, the Cob children and Aunt Mary with whom she lived, right along with her.

But Kay was impatient. She enjoyed all Carol’s and Cecy’s good times and was as prankish and merry as anyone else, but her mind was on other things, and these other things constantly beset her, as she put it.

“Above all things, we must not let any of these other girls know about the Morgan place,” she warned Cecy. “That would be sure to spoil it. In a place like this, nothing is so important as gossip.”

“Oh, I know it,” Cecy agreed, “and I had a hard time to get Gerry Owens to ‘unplan’ a party she had all fixed up. Her father and Dad are old friends, and I suppose she felt obligated.”

“Let her give her party later when we have finished our detective work,” Kay suggested. “How about trying to see Mamie today? We ought to make sure she isn’t dying to tell us something very important before we undertake to jump into the ghost scene. I met Henri yesterday, but he only gave me a sort of salute. I hope we can do something for that boy. Maybe help him get his Boy Scout uniform.”

“Yes, we could do that,” Cecy agreed. “But where might we find Mamie? We had better keep away from her place down in the meadows. Don’t let us get the whole tribe on our heels.”

So that afternoon the two girls just took a stroll through the little pine grove that was still called the woods. Kay was bubbling over with plans for inspecting the old house, the inspection having been delayed because Carol was helping Miss Evans move camp. The two younger girls Kay and Cecy, had promised not to go in there at all without Carol. In fact, she was holding on to the key herself so they couldn't get in.

"But tomorrow is the day," Kay repeated. "You know, Cecy, we won't find anything so very remarkable about the place. It is not so old as to be musty or moldy, I know that. And it is not long since it has been occupied."

"We'll see," her chum answered. "But I think I see someone coming down the path. Sure enough. Here comes Mamie."

"Hope she sees us and doesn't run," Kay said. "I'll call. Mamie!" she did call out in a very friendly voice. "Come along this way!"

The figure on the upper path stopped, then continued on toward them.

"I'll bet she has got something to tell us——"

Before Kay finished, Mamie Johnson, as untidy as ever, was beside them.

"I've been lookin' for you," she began. "Thought maybe you'd gone away."

"No we're right here," Cecy told her. "Got some news for us?"

“Well, Uncle Tom’s back. So you better watch out.”

“Why?” Kay asked. “Why should *we* watch out?”

“Because he’s after you, I heard him say so,” the girl cautiously said.

“Mamie, is he your Uncle Tom?” Cecy asked.

“Nope, no relation.”

“You just live with them, and work for them?”

The girl dug her tattered shoe into the dust on the path. “But I don’t dare say anything about them,” she whispered. “I don’t want to go back to that school. That was worse than this.”

“You will never get into trouble through us, Mamie,” Kay promised. “You can be sure of that. But Tom Johnson stole my parents’ home and I’m going to get it back. If only I could find out where he keeps his old papers, the papers I need would be with them, I’m almost sure of that.” Kay amazed even Cecy with this blunt statement made to a girl they were not sure they could trust.

“You kept me from the cop, but I couldn’t ever get the papers for you. I’d be afraid as death to try that,” Mamie said. “But don’t you know he can’t find them, either?”

“Which are the ones he can’t find?” Cecy asked.

“Why, them for the big house. He’s gone all over the country lookin’ for them. But that girl must have them, he thinks,”

Mamie said.

“You mean Vivienne?”

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“Yeah, that’s her. But I hope he never catches her again.”

“Again? Did he catch her once?”

“Sure. When she lived over there, before the hermit came, Uncle Tom had her scared to death with his fake doctors. Didn’t you know?”

“I heard something about it,” Kay answered truthfully. “But why did he want to scare the girl?” Kay pressed.

“Oh, it’s all mixed up,” protested Mamie, “and anyhow, I don’t dast say any more. Aunt Hezzie beat me today for just talkin’ to the man that buys the eggs,” Mamie whimpered.

“And who’s Aunt Hezzie?” asked Cecy.

“Don’t you know her neither? She’s the worst one. She says she’s a witch and I guess she is.” One could see that Mamie was very much afraid, indeed, of Aunt Hezzie.

“Is she Tom Johnson’s wife?” Kay went on with her frantically hurried questioning.

“Wife? Not much. She’s his sister. Guess there ain’t nobody on earth ’ud marry one of them Johnsons ’less they’re crazy.”

“I guess you are right there, Mamie,” Kay agreed.

“Look! Look! By the spring! There he comes,” and before the girls saw who *he* was, Mamie had darted off like a deer, over the bushes, to the old river road.

“It’s Johnson,” said Cecy. “Shall we just stroll along and pretend he doesn’t matter at all?”

Without a word more they walked along, as casually as if this were just another lovely summer day. But the footsteps behind them came faster and closer. The girls pretended now to be talking earnestly about some bug, anything at all, just to keep their voices going. As the figure, which was now just behind them, seemed too close for all three persons to take the same narrow path, the girls drew aside to let it pass.

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But it did not pass. Instead, the man almost brushed them into the bushes as he stepped up, stopped and faced them.

“You seen a girl go by here?” he asked sharply.

For an instant Kay felt she wouldn’t even answer him; Cecy had waited for her to speak. But she finally did say:

“Yes, we saw a girl, a girl they call Mamie Johnson.”

“Which way did she go?”

“We were not watching her,” said Kay, but her sarcasm was lost on the man. The girls started to move on again.

“Say, wait a minute,” he ordered. “I want to speak to you. What you doin’ hangin’ around the Hill so much? That’s private proppity and I’m in charge. Them grounds ain’t fenced in but

they soon will be,” he seemed to sneer.

This time all he got for an answer was a look of deep scorn from Kay’s blazing eyes. She seemed too indignant to trust herself to speak.

“I’m warnin’ y’u,” he said again.

“Warning us! You Tom Johnson, better look out yourself!” Kay declared. “What right have you to stop us with your threats? There’s a law——”

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“Now, now, don’t go gettin’ up on high horses,” he changed his tone instantly at that word law. “I’m not threatening you. I’m just warning you. All around these parts,” and he waved a long lanky arm to point out a great surrounding area, “is my proppity. And I don’t like no trespassin’. That was all I wanted to tell you,” and this time it was he who stepped aside and went slouching down the path ahead of them.

“Oh!” groaned Kay, in suppressed anger. “What a mean, contemptible man.”

“Say, darling,” said Cecy gently, “that’s my arm you’re pinching. Don’t mind me, if it does you any good but try another spot, for a change.”

“Oh, Cecy dear, I am excited,” her friend admitted. “What impudence to talk to us like that.”

“I thought you were going to hit him.” Cecy was laughing now, Kay really had “gone at” Spike Johnson as if ready to hit him, if she were further annoyed.

“Hit him? I wouldn’t dirty my hands. Didn’t he have the meanest, most cringing look out of those leaky eyes? No wonder poor Mamie is afraid of him. But he didn’t like that word law, did he?”

“Indeed, he did not,” Cecy agreed. “Which made me think of something! You know, Carol’s friend Ken Powell, is a very smart young lawyer. He has been too busy to get out here, except for short calls—he must see Carol, you know—but he is going to have more time soon. Why don’t we ask his advice on this? There just isn’t anything Ken likes better than lost legal papers. We find them and he handles them. He has done it before for us, you remember I told you.”

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“Perfect. The lawyer and the crime,” chanted Kay, feeling a little easier since old Spike Johnson had gone out of sight. “But we don’t even know where to look for the papers, and actually are not sure what papers they should be. Oh, dear!” she sighed, “isn’t this terribly slow?”

“But I’m glad we didn’t go at it so fast we might have run into Spike Johnson as our ghost in the big house,” Cecy reminded her. “We are only girls, you know,” she said seriously, “and not the kind who might think it smart to deliberately run into personal danger. You know, Kay, we have a standing promise with our father, Mr. Felix Duncan, that we will take good care of ourselves.”

“I know; that’s how I stand with Mother,” Kay added. “Did Carol say she had worked out any *reasonable* plan for us to go into the house? I don’t mean just to look over the place, but to stay there long enough to find things out,” Kay asked.

“Oh, she’s working on it and you can depend upon her. Carol is as interested in this as we are. She’s a regular girl rescuer, Dad says, and we all know now there’s a girl to be rescued in this.”

“Yes.” They were out of the woods and going along the paved street now. They were going into the village to get stamps, and Cecy wanted to buy a toy for little Jeanie Davis. The child was happy again with her Aunt Betty in her own little home, and at latest report, her mother would soon be well enough to leave the hospital and go home to her.

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“We must get through with our spooky business before Mother comes back,” Kay said without any introduction to that subject. “You know, she is going away tonight for a little vacation. I’ve been begging her to go as soon as her office work slackened, but I don’t believe she would have, if you girls hadn’t come back. She feels there’s safety in numbers, I guess,” Kay concluded.

“I hope she’s right,” remarked Cecy slyly.

“Of course Mother knows we are going to do all we can to sell the big place and that I am determined to investigate our own claims,” Kay explained. “She gave me permission to do anything you girls, especially Carol, would consider safe. But, just the same, I wouldn’t want her to be worrying, and she might be if she were here.”

“All right, Kay, we will try to take good care of you,” Cecy smilingly answered that. “But don’t you go ‘bustin’ up ghosts the way you felt like doing to old Johnson. Even a ghost might be human, you know.”

“And will be human, I know that too,” declared Kay, sort of squaring her broad shoulders in defiance. “But Mr. Thorsen said there wasn’t much time,” she reminded Cecy.

“Yes, and I heard old Johnson say he would have a fence around Melody Lane, or his half of it very soon.”

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“He did say that, didn’t he?” Kay was not so light hearted now. In fact she seemed worried.

“Don’t you worry, Kay,” Cecy tried to console her friend.

“You’ll see. We’ll work it all out somehow. It may take time, but all important things do.”

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CHAPTER XIV

MORGAN MANOR

The day they finally went through Morgan Manor was so bright and sunshiny that the marvelous place, instead of seeming spooky, was actually gorgeous.

With the brass key opening the side door they entered the morning room, built in a half circle with sides of glass, tiled floor and a great glass topped table in the center. The effect of the soft green vines and flowering bushes and shrubs, clinging and caressing the diamond glass windows was truly enchanting.

“Beautiful!” Carol exclaimed. “No wonder they are fighting to get the place.”

“And this handsome furniture!” Kay followed. “Just look in here; the dining room. Just see these cupboards and glass cases and built in sideboards. I knew there was furniture here; that was why so many wanted to rent it, but I never thought it was as handsome as this.”

“It certainly is gorgeous, all this heavy oak furniture, Dutch period, I suppose.” Carol was tugging at the door of a great built in cupboard but it didn’t open. “Locked, I guess,” she decided. “Queer how they had cupboards that look like clothes closets in a dining room, but perhaps the old Dutch Colonial period had anything that was practical, if it did seem out of place.”

Cecy's especial admiration centered on the foyer, the front hall, with its massive yet severe panelling, and graceful stairway.

"To think of Spike Johnson ever owning this," she sighed.

"Or of Mamie Johnson ever sliding down this balustrade," chimed in Kay, who was now running up the stairs and not sliding down the rail.

"Oh, come up here!" she called out. "Hold your breath, you'll need it!"

There they found the entrance hall to the main bedrooms. It was square, just equal to the first hall in space, and over it was a dome of the most delicate, beautiful stained glass the girls had ever seen. It was not a great raised dome, but rather gently sloped to a curved finish, that, they discovered later, really penetrated the ceiling line and was finished inside the house. The tracery, the imagery and the soft coloring held the three girls spellbound.

From this opened the main bedroom, with a great mantle. The furnishings left here were merely a pair of twin beds, an inlaid mahogany chest of drawers, and an up to date small dressing table, covered in black and white material, with the smartest bow of shiny black ribbon dashing off the corner.

"This must have been poor Vivienne's," exclaimed Kay.

"No one but a modern girl would ever appreciate that dressing table. How dreadful if this place should be hers and she can't claim it."

"And to think of things like this being left here, and not even

damaged by intruders,” Cecy speculated.

“But, Sis, you know intruders look for value and could never see it in a draped dressing table,” Carol told her.

“But that stained glass ceiling,” again the girls stepped under the dome to admire it once more. “Was there ever anything so perfect?” Kay went on.

After this feature had been exclaimed over again, all the rest of the lovely place, “seemed tame” as Cecy said, not even the game room with its many curious game sets, excited so much admiration.

“I suppose we ought to look for traps and such contrivances,” said Carol, “but this might be all a trap, it is so far beyond the usual design for a house. It is quite remarkable, really.”

“But this is a manor,” Kay pointed out, “not just a house. And wouldn’t a writer revel in all this?”

“If he doesn’t get tired waiting for it,” Cecy said. “But look at these beds and lovely mattresses! All covered up carefully—” They were peeking into other rooms.

“You see, this house was rented furnished; people just brought rugs and small things,” Kay told them. “But no one stayed long. And it is supposed to be for sale, yet Johnson would not take a chance on anyone buying it. That’s the story, at any rate. They say there is some reason why he wants to hold on to it up to a certain time.”

“That must be what the hermit meant by there not being much

time left,” Cecy reasoned. “Wouldn’t it be dreadful if the time expired and then Johnson would either own it or buy it in?”

“Well, we can’t find out anything else from Mamie,” Kay said. “It wouldn’t seem right to have her run risks even for this good cause.”

“And we could hardly go to the hermit again and cross question him. If he wanted to tell us anything else he had plenty of chance when we were there,” Carol concluded.

“When can we come in here, Carol?” Kay asked anxiously. “Can’t you tell us now what you have arranged to do?”

“When I turn the brass key in the door. But first, go outside and see if the coast is clear. Even if Johnson did get on the bus, as Jackie Thorne told us so innocently, there might be someone else around.”

It was some time later when Carol did get the chance to disclose to the younger girls her plan of investigation. She had asked Mrs. Baker to come with them “for company,” as she put it, and everyone knew that Mrs. Baker was better than the sheriff in a fight. Besides this precaution, Carol had had the telephone connected and she finished:

“All we have to do now is pack up some bedding, and our overnight bags and move in.”

“Oh, Carol! That’s simply wonderful!” Kay exclaimed. “When? Tomorrow night?”

“Yes, the sooner we get in there the sooner we will find out

what all this talk is about. Mrs. Baker goes any place on an hour's notice, so all we need to do is to get ourselves ready."

"And some food," Cecy suggested. "Even if we don't stay here in the daytime we could get hungry in the night or maybe would like an early breakfast."

"We better not be seen around here in the daytime at all," Carol continued. "If the 'ghosts' get going they might despise the opposition of mere girls and go off without giving us a real demonstration."

"Dad would not have let us come if we had not had the phone connected," Cecy told Kay. "You see, all we have to do if real trouble should pop up would be call the police."

"And give Mrs. Baker a broom handle," added Kay. "She's a mighty woman, I know that. She used to work in the first aid emergency corps, and everyone said she could do the work of a man."

It was fun to get ready for the expedition, as Kay called it. And while it must have seemed a bit complicated, the girls were, as ever, resourceful enough to get around everything.

"But suppose Ken drives out to your house and someone tells him you are here? A car going in there would give us all away," Kay reminded them.

"I've fixed that," Carol answered, with a very broad smile.

"All the same, Ken is wonderful at running things down. Think of how he helped us in Stingyman's Alley," Cecy

recalled. Kay had been told by Cecy of that adventure, and as she was now saying, Ken Powell, Carol's young friend, had been a very active partner in the thrilling experiences. In fact, it was Ken who had run down the queer figure so cleverly disguised as to have terrified everybody around the Sunshine Day Nursery. So Cecy had a great regard for Ken's detective as well as legal ability. But as Carol said, Ken might come in later.

It was early evening now and they were actually ready "to try their luck at ghost hunting," as Kay kept saying. They were to put their luggage—and it was quite a pile with the bed covering—into Carol's little car and take a chance on running it into the Morgan place without being noticed. It was a pleasant evening and the car was to be left under a clump of tallish bushes, where no one would expect to find it. To use the garage would have meant having its key; besides going into the big three car garage could not have been done very secretly. Mrs. Baker was to be there at eight o'clock that same evening, directly after the girls should arrive.

"Here comes someone—a gentleman and he's carrying a bag —" Cecy stopped short, for the gentleman with the bag, who was just stepping upon the porch certainly looked like—certainly was the hermit!

"Coming here!" gasped Kay, immediately afraid that something was about to spoil their plans.

Carol went to the door, and Mr. Thorsen asked if her father were at home.

“Father?” she repeated. “No, he isn’t Mr. Thorsen. I’m sorry. But he had to stay in town tonight; you see he’s a newspaper man——”

“Oh, is he, indeed?” The hermit looked just about as much like a “hermit” as the air-plane bag he was carrying looked like a Gladstone; which was not in the least. “I’m sorry. I wanted to talk to him.”

“But do come in,” Carol invited, leading him into their little summer living room, while Cecy quickly grabbed her own bag out of the biggest chair. “We are glad to see you ourselves,” Carol assured him. “We were just—thinking about the big house——” She quickly thought it best not to mention exactly what they were expecting to do. She had better wait until he told them why he had come.

“Well, young ladies,” he began, “I felt I should talk to your father, instead of to you and get his opinion, or perhaps I should say consent, before I further implicated you in this sad business of mine.”

“But, Mr. Thorsen,” Kay spoke up, “you haven’t implicated us. I, at least, was determined to do this, that is, whatever we can do, before we even met you. Don’t think that the girls’ father, Mr. Duncan, would blame you,” she insisted. “I’m sure he has a lot of confidence in Carol and Cecy.”

“Oh, indeed he would not blame you for anything, Mr. Thorsen. Kay is right,” Carol declared. “We have something of a reputation for solving mysteries.”

“Well, then, at that rate, I’ll just say a few words to you all.

You see, when I got that message which you three girls so providentially procured for me——”

“It fell right down on our garage,” Kay interrupted.

“Yes, so Henri said. But you were there to get it and you sent it safely to me. For that I am very grateful.” No one interrupted now. His serious manner forbade it. “I followed a lost trail when I got that message, but——” he made a gesture of disappointment, “I could not find it. It was gone again, as it had been several times before, and now I must go on searching. You must pardon me for talking in riddles, but I have to respect another’s wishes,” he inadequately explained.

“But may I ask you a direct question, Mr. Thorsen?” Carol ventured.

“Certainly. I only hope I can answer it.”

“Has that man Johnson a legal right either to rent or sell Morgan Manor?”

“No, he has not. He hasn’t even a right to put his foot on those grounds,” said Mr. Thorsen bitterly. “In fact, since I came back from abroad I have obtained a court order to restrain him from trespassing there.”

This information brought a wave of relief to each of the girls. They would not have to worry about the Johnsons bothering them at the big house.

“You see,” the hermit began again, “that was my brother’s home. His wife and he both died after an automobile accident,

and I was not here. It has been the regret of my life that I could not even get here quickly after the tragedy.” It was not a warm evening but the man brushed his face several times with his handkerchief.

“I should have been here,” he began again “to care for their daughter, my niece, Vivienne.”

“That was very sad, Mr. Thorsen,” Carol spoke for all his listeners.

“And I suppose old Tom Johnson jumped right in and got his clutches on the place,” flared up Kay. “He always did take advantage of misfortune. That’s what he did to my poor father,” she concluded angrily.

“Yes, you are right, young lady. But the Manor isn’t lost yet. If I can get what I am going after tonight, maybe we will fool Tom Johnson after all.”

“And if *we* can get what we are after,” Kay declared again, “if we can prove that all the scares about that lovely place are nothing more than silly tricks, played to keep you from getting anyone to buy the place, then someone will buy it. I feel sure of that.”

“I know you spoke of a buyer, but it cannot be sold until my niece, Vivienne, becomes eighteen years old. And there is a strange stipulation in her parents’ will. For Vivienne to get her rights to the property she must live in it when she reaches her eighteenth birthday. There is only a short time left for her to comply with that order, and she is gone; I can’t find her.”

Not even Kay made a comment on this revelation. The hermit was going to try again to find Vivienne, who had been frightened away from the manor.

“She went away to escape Johnson, I suppose,” Carol remarked after a pause.

“Yes, and left me no message. She had been living there with faithful and trusted servants, but old Johnson had a small mortgage on the place and so she felt she could not forbid him to go in and out. Then, her nerves gave away, merely a reaction, shock from her parents’ sudden death and the pressure Johnson was bringing upon her to leave the place or he would take it over. Finally he brought doctors and there were threats. She feared her mind would give away as these doctors insisted, so one could not blame her for—escaping,” he said sadly.

“And you have never heard from her?” Kay asked.

“Yes. It was you who brought me a message in that little bottle. But she had gone away again when I tried to reach her. Oh, well, I feel I shall find her in time,” he concluded, vaguely.

“You are pretty brave girls,” he added after a long pause, “here are the other keys to the house. The water was turned on in the spring when I had some work done on the grounds, and I had the electric light and gas turned on today. If you can rent the place don’t worry about the rent, just get someone to live there long enough to kill those stories. I’ve tried it, of course, but without success,” he finished. “You youngsters may have better luck.”

“We will, don’t you worry,” Kay sang out. “Ghosts have no terror for us. Only cowards ever resort to such silly tricks. We know that.”

“I believe that too, but every time I ever slept in the big house myself, nothing happened. One has to see a ghost before he can catch him, I suppose.” And Mr. Thorsen was ready to leave. When he did leave the very air seemed charged with mystery.

“Do you think we should have told him we were going over tonight?” Cecy asked rather timidly.

“No, I don’t. We want to go, and some little thing might have prevented us. I feel more determined than ever now,” Carol said.

“That’s because you know there really is a Vivienne and that wherever she is she needs our help,” said Kay, rather sadly.

And that was it. The possibility of a girl in distress has been the real motive in even Kay’s real estate work. She hoped to get her parents’ home back and in that process surely the mystery of Morgan Manor and the Hermit of Proud Hill would be uncovered.

CHAPTER XV

READY FOR THE FRAY

They were actually in the big house, bags and baggage, and Mrs. Baker was in the kitchen making tea; late evening tea never hurt any one according to Mrs. Baker. It made them sleep well to have something warm in their stomachs, was her idea.

“Are we lost or is it my vivid imagination?” Cecy wanted to know, as they rambled about.

“It is even bigger at night than in daylight,” Kay agreed.

“And spookier,” Cecy added. “Couldn’t we get Mrs. Baker to drag another small bed in here with the twins, so we could punch each other if things got too alarming to trust our voices?”

“Now, Cecy,” Kay tried to reassure her, “that connecting room is so close we can hear Carol if she so much as turns over. Besides, take my word for it, nothing will happen; not tonight, anyway.”

“I think so myself,” Cecy faltered. “But just the same, we might have bad dreams. Well, just as you say, let’s leave that gorgeous hall light burning. It is so wonderful with its reflection aimed at the stained glass dome.”

“I suppose there’s a regular battery of lights upstairs directly over the dome,” Carol speculated. “They would never trust to daylight to show up all that beauty. If we stay

long enough we'll try it out some night," she promised.

After Mrs. Baker had given them her sleep-inducing tea, right in the kitchen on a cute little glass-topped table, they had to listen to her outbursts of praise for the beautiful place.

"Never in my born days have I seen anything like it," she was telling them. "And so up to date; none of your old cobwebby, musty, ramshackle barracks is this place. What a boarding house it would make now, wouldn't it?"

"Or a private boarding school," Carol suggested. "It is hardly large enough for a school, I suppose, but it would make one unit of a foundation," she told her listeners.

"Oh, of course, Carrie, you would think of a school," her sister said teasing her about her well-known educational interests. "How about a summer hotel?"

"Or a nice little hospital?" Kay thought. "With the right kind of doctors and a nice old nurse, I could enjoy a sick-spell in a place like this myself."

"Let's go all over the place before it gets any later, rattle every door and pull down every shade," Cecy said. "If there's one thing I hate it's to walk about at night and imagine there are pop-eyes staring at me from outside of windows," and she was pulling down shades before Kay had time to even rattle the morning room door.

They raced around and made a lot of echoing noises, even hollering in big spaces to make definite echoes.

Mrs. Baker added her comedy by rattling tins and kitchen stuff,

besides giving vent to her great hearty laugh whenever she thought it would be appreciated.

“No radio,” complained Kay, “and this is the night for my pet sketch.”

“You may have a new pet sketch,” Cecy reminded her, “even more thrilling than the regular number.”

But nothing like that was happening at all, and, as they didn’t want to phone anyone and so disclose their hideout, they soon went upstairs to look things over in the more private and personal quarters.

Kay yanked out every drawer of the mahogany inlaid highboy, and even rattled the white paper linings looking for clues. There were odds and ends, even some undies, some white gloves, an empty purse and several pairs of silk stockings, but there were no real clues in corners nor under covers.

“But if Mamie Johnson ever got in here, wouldn’t she have a grand time?” Kay commented.

“I have an idea old Johnson was trying to take good care of things here, that is, he was seeing to it that things were not damaged, so they would have their real value if ever the place fell into his hands,” Carol remarked. She was not doing any searching but was frankly resting in the room next to that of Cecy and Kay. They, of course, were in the “auditorium,” that great major room that opened off the stained glass entrance. The girls called this room many fantastic names, but “the auditorium” was the current favorite.

Cecy was trying out the dressing table. “I think this is the cutest thing,” she sort of cooed, “all covered with this two-toned transparent stuff. It looks black but is all misted with a white undertone.”

“I think they call it overtone,” said Kay.

“You’re thinking of a symphony, dear, this is a dressing table,” Cecy insisted. “If only we could find something—” She stopped, so suddenly and so breathlessly, both the other girls called out to her.

“What, what did you find,” Kay asked, jumping away from the highboy and pressing close to Cecy.

“This folded paper. Look, it’s a letter. It was tucked away under the folds of the big ribbon bow.”

“It might just be—an old letter,” Kay warned, to keep down false hopes. “How does it begin?”

“Bring it over under the light.” Carol was willing to disturb herself now. A letter might mean something.

“It starts: ‘Dear Uncle Teddy’,” said Cecy, “and, see, it’s signed ‘Viviene’!”

Under the light they read it. It was indeed written to “Uncle Ted” who, they decided, must be Mr. Thorsen, and in a rambling nervously scrawled note the writer told him she couldn’t stand it any longer, she was too frightened. And it went on to beg that he would not try to bring her back until *after* that birthday, because “she never wanted to see the place

again.”

The girls stopped reading, but did not attempt any comment. Surely this was just as the hermit had said.

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Vivienne had gone away in terror, and did not want to come back until it would be too late, according to her parents’ will, for her to claim the property.

“Go on, Carol, finish it,” Cecy said finally.

“It’s hard to read. The poor girl must have been desperate,” Carol said. Then she continued reading:

““Your letters were all returned so I know you are travelling. I’ll try the last address with this if I can post it. But, Uncle Ted, I’ve got the deeds and I’ll never give them up till you come, and I can reach you some place where I won’t be afraid of him.” It is signed ‘Vivienne’,” Carol concluded.

The girls were spell-bound. This seemed like a voice from the great unknown.

“She never got it mailed,” said Cecy.

“And did you say it was hidden in that bow?” Carol asked.

“Why wouldn’t anyone else have found it?”

“It wasn’t *in* the bow but under the tacked on cover, right at the corner under the bow,” Cecy explained. “See, right here. I could feel it as I tried to straighten the bow ends.” They all examined the soft dressing table cover at that, but they found no more papers.

“But, Kay, did you say people have lived here lately? That they have been in here since Vivienne went away?” Carol asked.

“Well, they probably didn’t really live here. But I heard that people who came in here were scared off by things that happened nights,” Kay answered. “Of course, anyone who could afford to consider buying a place like this must have had servants, and naturally they would come in first. Perhaps they got scared off before the prospective renters or buyers ever came in at all. I do know there was a perfect flood of ghost scares around early last spring. But the Johnsons may have spread a lot of that stuff, themselves. What do you think is most important in the letter, Carol? I do hope the hermit doesn’t stay away long.”

“The important thing, I should say, is that part about the deeds. You know, Kay, Mamie told you that Johnson himself couldn’t find the papers, and that he was scouring the country for them.”

“Can’t sell a place without the deeds, I know that much,” sniffed Cecy. She felt pretty important to have made the big discovery.

“If a deed is lost beyond ever being found, a legal copy can be obtained,” Carol said sagely. “But it takes a lot of legal red tape and a long time to put it through.”

“Thank you. You sound just like lawyer Ken Powell,” teased Cecy. “Wouldn’t Ken just love all this?”

It took them a long time to be satisfied that they had fully discussed every possibility of the letter, and its effect

upon the impending crisis in the property deal. Could they have known that Tom Johnson had only a few weeks left to fulfill at least one part of the negotiations, and that then he would be able to “take steps to build the fence” around this big piece of Melody Lane, they would have felt even more excited about it.

“Why ever do they call that man a hermit?” Carol asked suddenly. “He looked like a professional man tonight, didn’t he?”

“Oh, I can explain that,” Kay replied. She had been living here in Melody Lane while the other two girls had been away. “I think when he came back here, and found Vivienne was gone, and there was all this trouble about the place, he just built that cabin on Proud Hill so he could watch the Manor. Then, he did seem to want to avoid everyone, perhaps for some personal reason, so he had Henri and others attend to all his outside affairs. Of course, when he lived in a cabin he had built himself, people began to call him a hermit.”

“That’s what it amounts to, I suppose,” the older girl answered. “And he must have stayed here in this house while he was building the cabin.”

“Yes, he did. I know that. And I believe Vivienne left just before he came, so folks got the idea that she had been a prisoner here and that he released her,” Kay added.

“Here comes Mrs. Baker up to bed,” said Cecy. “We had better get ready ourselves.”

But when they turned to the door to speak to Mrs. Baker, they were surprised to see she was not only carrying her

broom, but also a lot of other things.

“I thought you would be wanting to leave this door open so I could hear you,” she explained, “so I brought up some pans and pots. We’ll put them right on the floor in the doorway, and then let anyone try to walk over them without giving an alarm.”

The girls roared in laughter at this plan, but agreed it was a grand idea.

“But what’s that in your hand? Not the broom, the other thing?” Cecy asked.

“Oh, this,” and the woman waved a formidable looking weapon, “that’s a monkey wrench. It’s the finest kind of weapon. It can toss as straight as a die and heaven help the one that stops it,” she intoned.

“A monkey wrench?” exclaimed Kay. “Well, keep it handy, Mrs. Baker, but we don’t think we are going to need it, not tonight anyway. Those funny folks who make the noises, don’t even know we’re here.”

“Well, I have no fear. We all know you can knock a ghost out with a feather,” and she swung the monkey wrench again. “Well, take your beauty sleep now,” the laughing woman advised them. “And remember I have my weapons handy by me.”

CHAPTER XVI

FIRING A MONKEY WRENCH

When they could stop laughing at Mrs. Baker's demonstration, they again talked over that precious letter. When might they give it to Mr. Thorsen? Suppose he stayed away a long time? And how often would the girls, themselves, come over here nights to finish their test? And suppose someone should come early in the morning and find the kitchen open? Was there really any safe way of keeping their presence in the house over night, a secret?

Carol, who pretended she was doing no snooping on this first night, was, nevertheless, poking around a little.

"This room I am in must have been Vivienne's," she said suddenly. "Did you count these mirrors in the dressing room next door?"

"Oh, that's a sweet little room," Cecy replied. "I noticed that on my first excursion. But why do you suppose they had that clumsy big wardrobe in it? It's like the one against the wall in the dining room," she pointed out.

"Yes, it is, isn't it? And has that same scrolly design. Maybe someone in the family liked to carve wood," Carol guessed.

"Maybe it was the hermit," Kay was quick to add. "He made his own cabin, and certainly that shows skill."

“That must be it,” Cecy concluded. “Because that big double doored thing built smack against the hearth wall looks out of place in a dining room. But if a member of the family built it, it’s a wonder they didn’t put it in the living room.”

“Hey! Hey!” suddenly called Carol from the dressing room, “look here, look what I’ve found!”

“Oh, a picture, a girl’s picture!” both girls exclaimed at once as they looked at the little paste-board in Carol’s hands.

“Yes, a girl and a boy!” she said. “And there’s writing on the back. See! Viviene and Bob! Now we’ve got something. Bob. We ought to be able to find Bob if he’s around here.”

“Oh, isn’t that wonderful,” Kay breathed. “See, isn’t she sweet. But there’s no date on it.”

“Wherever did you find it, Sis?” Cecy asked.

“I just yanked open that little wall cabinet and it was wrong side out, flat against the side.” The girls studied the little candid camera shot. It was fresh and the paper crisp and clean. This could only have been made recently.

“We could ask over at the drug store if they printed it,” Kay suggested. “They might even know who Bob is. If we could find Bob he may know where Viviene is.”

“This little picture is probably the most important ghost we could have caught,” said Carol. “Certainly Mr. Thorsen made it clear he must find Viviene before some important time expires. And here we have her letter and her

picture.”

“He said maybe we could do more than he has been able to do,” murmured Cecy.

“Not that we want all the bouquets,” her sister teased, “but these really do look like clues.”

One would hardly expect girls to fall asleep at the drop of a shoe with all this exciting interest to think over, but there came a time. The whispering ceased.

Later, much later some sound pierced Carol’s consciousness. She awoke and instantly knew where she was and why she was there. With her hand on her flash light she listened. The sound was outside; bushes swished and light branches crackled as if being broken. Noiselessly she slipped out of bed, and had her slippers and robe on in an instant.

First, she covered her flash with her hand as she glanced at the girls. They were sleeping peacefully. They had pushed the two beds close together and Cecy’s foot was over on Kay’s blue blanket. Going to the room that looked over the rear grounds, Carol slipped her fingers under the window shade, lifting it from the sash just enough to allow her to peek out to where her car was supposed to be hidden. Yes, there was a light, a moving light. Someone was over by her car.

“But they can’t move it,” she was thinking. “Let them look it over if they want to, I’ll not wake the girls for that.”

She watched patiently, not allowing the window shade to so much as crinkle. Then a figure behind a light moved

out from the bushes that lined the drive like a hedge. It was a weird looking thing; the light seemed to be behind it or under it, for it threw a subdued shadow all about it, and made it look headless.

“It will go away—I hope,” the watcher was telling herself. “There’s no need to make an outcry just—for that.”

It did move, but not on the gravel drive. It seemed to slink along in the uncut grass for a short distance, then stop, to look up at the big house, where Carol, alone, watched from a window.

It seemed ages, but was probably not very long before the lighted thing turned from the front path and slunk down toward the garage.

“It will go out the back way, of course,” Carol was prompting her courage. “Yes, I can see it fading through the shrubbery.”

Glad enough to get back into her bed, Carol spent no time in risking any moving about that might waken the girls. That this was a prowler she felt sure, although it was not easy to figure out how a prowler could carry a light that seemed to show through something white with dark lines beneath—two dark lines, she had seen distinctly, but no head.

“Of course the head wouldn’t show if the prowler was just carrying a light,” she tried to tell herself. “Of course, that was it.”

Then almost instantly she heard a scream.

“Oh, Mrs. Baker,” she answered, springing out of bed this time, “what’s happened?”

Following the scream and more screams, there was the thump of heavy iron rolling down the stairs. “Oh!” yelled Cecy, “that’s the monkey wrench! Kay, wake up! Mrs. Baker has—fired her—monkey wrench!”

There was a wild scrambling over the pots and pans that barricaded their door, as the three girls switched on lights and hurried to find Mrs. Baker.

“Oh, I’m killed,” moaned the woman, “I’m hurt terrible.”

“Wait, wait, Mrs. Baker,” Carol was calling out as she ran down the wide stairs, to reach the woman that lay sprawled and moaning at the bottom. “What happened?”

“I don’t know, dear, but my leg is hurt. I must have twisted my ankle.”

Cecy and Kay were with Carol now and they helped her get Mrs. Baker up, supporting her under her arms until they could reach a chair.

“What happened?” Kay insisted. “We heard the monkey wrench fall——”

“And you must have heard me fall with it. Oh, my! Oh my! To think I have to be useless when you children may be needin’ me —” She winced with pain that seemed to be getting worse.

It took some time to get hot water ready and find towels to use

in bandaging her ankle, and all the time poor Mrs. Baker kept bemoaning the trouble she was giving.

“Why were you coming down the stairs?” Cecy asked when the foot had been bathed in the hot water, and was wrapped in a thick towel to keep the heat in.

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“Well, I had no clock—I forgot to bring one up,” Mrs. Baker answered, “and something woke me.” She paused a minute and just had a good chance to pinch Carol’s arm as she said that. Carol understood that whatever “woke her” she did not want the younger girls to guess what it might have been.

“Was it a noise?” Cecy persisted as the narrator hesitated.

“It could have been. There’s lots of noises around at night,” the woman said vaguely. “But I’m so used to an early cup of coffee, I was slipping down to get one, and that’s just what I did,” she laughed. “I slipped down to the bottom and the monkey wrench went even further. You may find it outside the door, the noise it made.”

At that they hurried to make the coffee she had wanted so badly, Carol insisting that the younger girls go right back to bed while she, herself, attended to it. They scampered back willingly enough and could hardly be blamed for a few irrepressible titters on the way up.

“Listen, dear,” Mrs. Baker whispered to Carol as soon as she was sure the younger girls were safely upstairs, “I did hear something and I was coming down to turn on the kitchen light to scare off whoever was prowling about. I believe in keeping them out instead of chasing them out. It’s easier.”

"I heard something, too," Carol told her, and then rather discreetly recounted what she had seen from the window. "Just someone looking my car over," was the way she put it.

"I heard a step on the back porch and was waiting to see what next. I didn't want to wake you girls at all. But after I waited long enough and didn't hear anything else, I thought I'd best look things over. And isn't it a shame now to have this old ankle all stiffen up?" worried Mrs. Baker.

"But you are the one who is suffering; you mustn't think about us," Carol told her. "You must have turned on it."

"I did that and I sat on it, too. There's nothing worse than an ankle to get in your way when you fall, especially down stairs."

Good-naturedly she talked on as Carol opened the condensed milk and gave her a fragrant cup of coffee. Bad ankle and all, surely Mrs. Baker was splendid company, and Carol sincerely hoped she would be able to stay with them until the test of the manor had been satisfactorily completed.

"Will you come over every night?" Mrs. Baker suddenly asked, as if reading Carol's thoughts.

"Oh, no. That won't be necessary. Besides we may be able to get someone to come in and live here," Carol answered.

"And would you give up so soon? Not find out what you explained to me you were bound to get to the bottom of?" asked Mrs. Baker.

“Oh, no, we’re not going to give up at all,” declared Carol. “We would arrange to stay here ourselves, even if some friend did come in temporarily.”

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“Well, take care that you don’t leave me out of your plans,” ordered Mrs. Baker. “I’ll get after that noise and whoever made it just to spite them for this hurt to my poor ankle.”

And Carol agreed she would surely have a chance to do that, very soon.

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CHAPTER XVII

THE QUIZ

How was Mrs. Baker's ankle? Could she get around on it? That was the general question early next morning, although the reassuring odor of bacon and coffee from the kitchen answered, even before the girls called down to Mrs. Baker to make sure.

"As fine as silk, and looks better for the beauty treatment you gave it," came back the laughing reply from Mrs. Baker, up the back stairs.

"Then, we can hustle along," Kay was prompting. "I can't wait to get over to the drug store to ask about the picture. Isn't it thrilling how romance has swooped down upon us?" and she swooped a splatter of soap suds over a helpless Cecy. Cecy seemed to have soap in her eyes at the moment.

"You must know most of the young men around here, yourself, Kay," Carol started in. "Are you sure you are not overlooking a Bob or two?"

"I've been racking my brain. You see, so many people come in and out of Melody Lane just for the summer, and they take their Bobs with them, that I couldn't know them all. But I'm starting in at the drug store. Dan Holden not only takes in the negatives to have printed, but also the subject's life history with them. But isn't that a cute picture? It could have been taken under any of the trees around here," Kay reasoned.

“I only hope Bob still loves her,” said Carol. “That would help a lot. He would have been pretty sure to keep track of her if they are still as chummy as they look in that picture.”

“Say, listen here,” commanded Cecy. “I have such a fine idea I almost woke everyone up last night to tell you about it, and here I haven’t had a chance yet.”

“But do you hear that bacon calling? And I hate lazy bacon. Mine must be prompt,” Carol announced. “And as for waking everyone up, Cecy, when was it you thought of doing that? Before or after the monkey wrench battle?” She was secretly thinking what a fine healthy young sleeper Cecy was these nights.

They hurried down to the morning room, where the early sun made beautiful tracery from the outside vines and graceful bushes. It was, Kay admitted, “breath taking,” and that really was an admission from practical Kay.

“Well, here goes!” announced Cecy. “And if you don’t listen I’ll just tell it to the china cockatoo. Isn’t it gay over by that window? I thought, as Carol thinks and Kay will think, that the solution to this housekeeping problem is Aunt Bessie.”

“Oh, yes. Exactly. Aunt Bessie!” Certainly Carol was listening now. “Where is she? Could she come?”

“I’ll tell Kay about Aunt Bessie, in a few well-chosen words,” Cecy promised, “so she can catch up with us.”

Then Cecy told of the lovely lady, she, Cecy, and Polly Cobb had lived with last summer. She was a rather rich lady who could go and come as she pleased, was simply perfect as any

lady could be, the girls just adored her, and best of all, she was “full of fun.” When they had parted last fall Aunt Bessie had given a promise of everlasting interest in the girls. They had been with her during those eventful months recounted in the Secret of the Kashmir Shawl, and here, certainly, was her chance to show that interest. So Cecy said.

“She’s at a hotel and she hates it,” she went on. “She wouldn’t travel this year and I honestly think she would be crazy about this place. She’s as free as air, not a chick nor a child. Just Peter her chauffeur, and Snippy her little black dog. Carol, we could phone her. I could phone while Kay goes over to the drug store.”

“And while I go home to see about that little house of ours. After all, Cecy, we still have a dear father, who is entitled to some of our time,” said Carol. “Your idea of giving Aunt Bessie a chance to come out here is perfect, Cecy. I’ve been trying to think of someone ever since Mr. Thorsen told us we really could rent the place. Certainly, all three of us girls have to attend to our routine duties, and this matter must be fitted in between.”

Mrs. Baker was bringing in more toast, and her comical hippity-hop walk was put on, they knew, to hide an actual limp that could hardly have been cured so quickly.

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“And you won’t want me here today?” she asked. “That suits me fine, because I wasn’t finished at Mrs. Bird’s when I dropped everything to come over and help you out,” Mrs. Baker said cordially.

“And a nice way we treated you for doing all that,” Kay confessed. “I do hope your ankle is really getting all right?”

“It’s fine,” and she raised her other foot to show how fine the injured ankle was. “What with the hot water and beauty pack towels, shouldn’t it be?”

So the day’s programme was arranged. Cecy would go home with Carol and phone Aunt Bessie from there. Kay would, she said, “break her neck over to the drug store and give Dan Holden, the druggist, a prize quiz,” while Carol would do the day’s marketing for their old housekeeper, Rachel, who had come back like Mrs. Baker, “to help them out,” while they were staying at Melody Lane.

They had finished picking up their things and packing their bags, deciding to leave some of the less important bedclothes hidden in the queerest places, but taking the better blankets home. Mrs. Baker had her work done and was to go along in the car, Cecy and Kay would hop in the rumble seat, and everything had been locked and relocked, when they heard someone calling.

“Who’s that? It’s out by the garage. I’ll see,” only Mrs. Baker would have made that speech.

“No, you sit right there by the door until I bring the car up, Mrs. Baker. The girls can see who it is,” Carol ordered.

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They were already seeing. “It’s Mamie, Mamie Johnson down by the back fence,” Kay announced. “Why doesn’t she come up? We can’t waste time with her now,” and she started to call

Mamie to “come on up here.” But Mamie hollered back that she couldn’t, for them to come down there.

Annoyed but still bent on hurrying, Kay and Cecy raced down the path. Mamie was peeking through the mesh of the high wire fence that had a barbed finish at the top.

“Come around to the side gate,” Kay told her. “You can come in that way.”

“Oh, no, I don’t dast. I wouldn’t dare set foot on that prop’pity,” the girl declared. “But I had to warn you. He’s home and he’s after you.”

“Well, that’s fine. Let him come along. We’re after him too, so that makes it all right. Don’t worry, Mamie,” Kay assured her, seeing her nervous efforts at convincing the two girls on the other side of the fence, of their danger, “we’re not a bit afraid. We had a fine time last night and—” She caught herself about to say “they were coming again.” Better not spread the news of their plans so carelessly.

“Really, Mamie, you are good to come and tell us,” Cecy said gratefully, “but we’re in an awful hurry. Couldn’t you come around later?”

“It might be too late. He’s roarin’ mad. Says he’ll get the hermit— And, oh say,” she suddenly changed her tone “old Hank Paxton is out, and he’s after Uncle Tom.”

“Hank Paxton? Who’s he?” Kay asked.

“One of the people that owned the places Uncle Tom took,”

Mamie replied. "Hank was in jail a while. But they let him out. He hadn't done nuthin'. But he blames Uncle Tom for that too, beside for takin' his house. It was that pretty little gray one with the rose bushes around the door. His wife died and he says that was Uncle Tom's fault. He's afraid of Hank, Uncle Tom is," Mamie admitted.

"But he wouldn't hurt us." Cecy told her.

"Well, you're here, and the Johnsons claim this is their place, so he mightn't know it was you. Honestly, you better watch out —" and away Mamie scurried, waving her hands in unspoken appeals as she went.

"Threats," murmured Cecy. "But don't let's tell Carol until we deliver Mrs. Baker; it will only delay us and I just can't wait to talk to Aunt Bessie. If only she hasn't made any plans she can't break, I know she'll come. Kay, she's the nicest person."

It took but a few moments for them to satisfy Carol as to the reason for Mamie's visit, and she seemed to understand that they had more to tell her when opportunity offered. Carol had Vivienne's letter in her keeping, while Kay had the picture of Bob and Vivienne handy in her white fabric purse. Kay looked at the snapshot, studied it, and whispered to Cecy about it, even as the little car covered the road to Mrs. Baker's home.

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"Nothing like an early start unless it's an early finish," Mrs. Baker commented, as she cautiously got out of the car "minding that ankle." Mrs. Baker had a joke or motto or an old saying, with which to answer every question, and her reputation of

being better than the sheriff didn't half do her justice.

Following Kay first, we find her at the drug store quizzing Dan Holden. He seemed to suspect "somethin' excitin'" when she showed him the little picture, and when he recognized the girl as the one who used to live in the big house at Proud Hill, he almost choked.

"Sure is her. Where is she now? I recollect she disappeared just about the time the hermit came back," he began.

"Came back? Had he been here before?" Kay asked.

"Certainly, certainly he has. Wasn't he William Morgan's brother? And didn't William get that place when his old father died? He was the richest man in these parts. William Gladstone Morgan came from England, had a big textile factory down in New England, but he built his home up here." Certainly Dan Holden did know the history of Melody Lane.

"But where does the hermit come in?" Kay pressed.

"First I knowed about him he came here to visit his brother—he was the late William Morgan—that girl's father. It seems Theodore, that was the hermit's name, had taken his fortune and gone to Europe to study singing. Foolish way to waste good money, if you ask me, but they say he made quite a hit, had a fine voice and was headin' for the high spots when his brother and wife were killed. After that he gave up the singin' business and came here. But he never got over not bein' here with his kin. And he's the fellow they call a hermit. Ain't folks silly, just because a man would rather live in his own cabin than in a hotel?"

“Yes, they are, Dan,” Kay agreed. “But about this picture. I’d like to find this young man or some trace of him,” she ventured.

“See here now, Kay, you might as well out with it. You’re trying to track down your father’s property, ain’t you?” Dan asked.

“Yes, I am,” Kay said to that.

“Well, you’re dead right and I wish you luck. That skinflint Johnson should get his. He certainly gave everyone else theirs.” Kay realized this was slang and that he meant Johnson should get what was coming to him. “He happened to have a few dollars, how he got it ain’t so certain, and when everyone else went dead broke in the hard times he offered to lend them money. In that way he got the property papers, for security you know, and first thing people went out of their nice little homes and Johnson took over.”

“I know that, Dan. That’s how he got my father’s place,” Kay just had time to say in an undertone before an early morning customer came in, and was eventually waited upon.

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Kay’s cheeks burned with excitement. She had always suspected that the town’s druggist must hear and know a lot about people’s business, but what Dan had so willingly told her was surprising in spite of that. He was coming over to her now; she was perched on a stool without a thought about soda. Dan had wiped his hands carefully on a towel and she had noticed the customer had bought an unwrapped bar of toilet soap.

“As I was sayin’, it’s time someone got after Johnson,” the

druggist began where he had left off. “Why, a man couldn’t own as much as a hen house in this town for the past fifteen years but he made an offer to buy it. And if it was any good he’d get it, too,” declared Dan, slapping the counter to prove it.

“But tell me what you think of his hold on the big Morgan house?” Kay asked without apology. “Would a mortgage give him the right to sell the place and buy it in?”

“No, it wouldn’t, not just a mortgage,” the druggist answered. “But he lent Mr. Morgan a little money, there in the depression, when big business slumped so. Then he paid some taxes, and did things like that, that weren’t worth much in themselves, but he was so foxy he got notes for these little loans. Of course, Mr. Morgan, like everyone else, expected his business to pick up promptly, but you know that second slump just knocked the very bottom out of everything. I tell you, I felt it myself. If you could see my unpaid bills,” and Dan Holden took his glasses off to ease the strain.

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“But what about some special date when the place can be sold? Mr. Thorsen hinted about that to us girls, and we got the idea it depended in some way upon this girl, Vivienne,” Kay reasoned.

“You’re right there, it does.” He spoke very quietly now and kept watching the door for customers. “You see, Kay, in a place like this store a man hears a lot. There’s the telephone booth—Tom Johnson always shouted his business right out and anyone around here could hear him. And I know what’s holding him up. He hasn’t got the deeds to that place,” he spaced every word to add to its importance.

“I’ve heard that too,” said Kay. “But who has?”

“The girl, Vivienne. Before they closed the house the servants used to come in here and use this phone privately, and Margaret Simmonds, she was the housekeeper, told me herself that Tom Johnson had scared this girl away. But it wouldn’t do him any good, because he could never sell the place. Those servants idolized Miss Morgan and took-on something terrible when she disappeared.”

This had been a very long talk indeed, but Kay Findley felt her time had been well spent. The town druggist was certainly well-informed and he was kind and willing to help her if he could.

“Dan,” she said a little wearily, “do you think there’s any chance of my getting hold of the deeds to those small houses he got by forced sheriff sale? I believe if I could lay my hands on a bunch of papers that he wouldn’t put in the bank, but must have hidden some place, I could prove he had claimed false notes and unjust interest.”

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“You’re right there. He never paid for a box in the bank. Ed Ziggler, the hardware man, told me he ordered from him the strongest breadboxes he could get for his papers. Wouldn’t even buy a decent box like the rest of us. If you’re looking for those deeds, better look for his breadboxes. They make up his storage vaults, I know that much,” declared Dan, emphatically.

“I’ll remember that,” promised Kay, and she meant it.

“Let me see that picture again?” Dan asked. He took off his glasses, polished them on a paper napkin, and after carefully

fitting them back on his eyes he scrutinized the picture. “Yes, sir, that’s her, all right, but I don’t know the boy. She was away so much and her folks used to go on cruises all over the world, so Vivienne never had much time to make friends around here. Nice looking chap, but I don’t remember as I’ve ever seen him.”

CHAPTER XVIII

GOOD LOOKING SCOUT

Kay left the drug store with a feeling of mingled disappointment and expectation. She was disappointed because Dan Holden could give her no possible clue to the identity of the Bob in the picture. She was hopeful now that she would actually get some legal claims against Johnson, who, Dan had declared, everyone knew had given persons small loans to tide them over, and then had pounced upon the securities of pledged homes or other pieces of land “without due process of law.”

“I was sure of this, of course,” Kay reflected, as she hurried back to the Duncan cottage to join Cecy and Carol, “but I couldn’t understand why no one had tried to fight it out with him. I can understand that now. The constant drop in business was so severe no one had any money left to fight him with, and no courage to do it, either.”

Dan had given her a lot of important information. She was simply “weighed down with facts now,” whereas before she had been “inflated with guesses.”

“And his papers are stored in breadboxes,” she deliberated. “Where ever might the breadboxes be?”

Naturally she thought of the little real estate office in the woods, where she had expected to get some work to do, in order to have access to files and boxes of old stuff that was stored there. But after the episode of Sinbad the cat, and Mr.

Thorsen's advice to the girls that they keep away from the place, she had not followed up her first intention.

What next? Cecy would have her answer from Aunt Bessie now, and she, Kay, would have to offer some excuse and some encouragement to Win Vernon, the clerk at the hotel. He was sure the writer, Mr. Hadley, would buy the place. The writer had had at least an outside inspection of it, and he even told Win he ought to know something about that place, as he thought he knew someone who had once lived there. Who this was did not seem important, except that it had increased Mr. Hadley's interest in the manor.

"Won't Mr. Thorsen be surprised though?" Kay's thoughts raced on. "To have a letter for himself written by Vivienne and to have this nice little picture."

Before she reached the Duncan cottage she could see Cecy on the porch waiting for her, and waving frantically like a frenzied traffic regulator. She must have good news from Aunt Bessie or she would never be going into such setting-up exercises on the front porch.

She was racing down the walk now and calling. "Oh, Kay, she's coming, she's practically here. It's all settled, and they're having the car oiled and gassed for the trip. Peter, her nice old chauffeur, is bringing her, and——"

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"Oh, hey there! Wait a minute. I'm a star guesser but you're away ahead of me. Let's go some place and sit down flat. I've been perched on a soda stool so long in Dan Holden's drug store, I feel like the latest permanent equipment," Kay sighed.

They went indoors where it seemed safer for their confidences, and all were soon able to catch up with each other, as Kay had expressed it. Cecy was so happy over Aunt Bessie's coming to the manor that she could hardly trust words to express her delight, but threw in a lot of gestures, squeezes and even a few original dance steps to heighten the effect.

"And so soon!" she chirped, "practically right away, because she just hated that hotel, and said her little dog, Snippy, was pining away visibly from restrictions. So *now* we can get Mrs. Baker, with her broom and monkey wrench, and defy even old Hank Paxton who wants to burn down Johnson places. Poor Mamie, she's so terribly afraid of all those threats. It's a shame she can't be taken away from those people," Cecy declared. Mixing subjects was as simple to Cecy as mixing phrases.

Kay's story of her interview with Dan Holden was not less exciting. The news that Mr. Thorsen had taken his share of his father's estate and gone abroad to study singing explained many things about him. Certainly his name was not Thorsen but must be Morgan, Theodore Morgan, according to the druggist. But he had taken an Italianized name for his voice career, the girls decided, so while that would not have been Thorsen, it could account for the changes. Thorsen sounded Scandinavian, Carol thought, and perhaps he had lived in Norway or Sweden.

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"Because he must have been always fond of wood carving," Kay guessed, "and perhaps made those big Dutch cupboards when he was a young man right here at home."

"But, shall we ever find dear Bob?" breathed the romantic

Cecy. “I should so like to have him and Vivienne——”

“Whoa up there! Sis,” cautioned Carol. “Give me a little chance at romance. Charity begins at home, I’ve heard tell, and I haven’t even had a ride with Ken since we came out here. Whew! This sort of work certainly is demanding,” sighed Carol with a comically exaggerated expression of sorrow.

Time flew that day. After a family reunion at the Duncans, with their father Felix Duncan, that indulgent person who never could say no to either of his daughter’s requests for freedom of action. He had to listen patiently to their latest accounts of the biggest thing they ever came across. Even Ken Powell, Carol’s friend, did get out from the city for a little evening visit, and they all went over to Kay’s to pick her up for a ride just to make it unanimous.

Carol told Ken about the prowler who took her car license number out in the Morgan bushes, and he properly warned her not to take too many chances.

“Even foolish folks are not always harmless,” he reminded her, “and I personally think Mrs. Baker’s monkey wrench is the right idea.”

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“And you a custodian of the law,” Carol teased him. “How can you advocate violence?”

“Where you are concerned——” Ken was the sort of young man who believed that discretion was the better part of valor, and now, in the short time he and Carol had to themselves, he was trying to make her, too, see the importance of the famous saying.

But even so pleasant an evening must pass for “night cometh on.” The morning would bring Aunt Bessie, and for Kay more clues to run down, for Carol perhaps a little loneliness for her friends in Newkirk, especially for Ken, and for her old friends now gone from Melody Lane, especially Thally Bond.

Kay was up bright and early helping Nannie with a lot of housecleaning they wanted to finish before Kay’s mother came back, when there was a ring at the back door. Kay answered it, that is she pushed the screen door open to find there a splendid looking boy in the uniform of a scout.

“Oh, Henri,” she exclaimed, “I didn’t know you. You look simply grand. Come in and let me see you,” she invited him.

“I can’t stay long,” Henri faltered. “I’m going to camp. But I thought I should come around and tell you I was going. You might be wanting something.”

“I’m so glad you did. Here, sit here, and let me see you, or perhaps you better stand over there and show me some of the stunts. How do you salute the flag? And what’s an important wigwag message?” Kay was thinking it was quite likely Henri had come over to show his uniform instead of notifying her he was leaving for camp. And she didn’t blame him, either. “How long will you be gone?” Kay continued more seriously.

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“I’m going for two weeks.”

“And your uniform is new?”

“Yes, just got it last night. I had some of the money myself,

from helping the hermit and cutting a little grass; there wasn't much grass cutting this year. But the hermit gave me the rest." He ran his brown hand affectionately over the tan felt hat, straightened the cord and seemed reluctant to set it down on the chair. Henri was a proud scout, and Kay, looking at his fine tanned skin, his carefully slicked dark hair, and above all, at his splendid bearing, was proud of him herself.

"The hermit isn't back yet, is he?" Kay asked.

"No, he told me he had to go on a long trip, but my mother is taking care of Sinbad, his cat, you know. Sinbad is used to staying at our house and Mother likes cats," Henri said in a soft voice.

"That's just splendid. But Henri do you know this old Hank Paxton who, they say, is out to get revenge on Tom Johnson?"

"Everybody knows Hank and no one blames him, either. His wife died after Johnson took their house and it just about set him crazy."

"That's easy to understand. But Mamie Johnson told us we had better look out. He might try to get into the Morgan house, thinking some one else was in there," Kay said.

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"You girls were in there the other night? When Mrs. Baker fell down stairs, weren't you?" Henri asked indirectly.

"Yes, we were, and we may visit there again. A friend of ours is going to rent the place," Kay told him.

"That's just the thing, just fine," declared Henri. "That stuff

about ghosts is all bunk. Well, I've got to be going. I hope you make out all right."

"And I hope you have a fine time at camp. But wait a minute. I want Nannie to see you," and Kay called Nannie in to give the boy scout more praise and even to pick a stray thread off his uniformed shoulders.

Henri finally got away, with Nannie and Kay watching him going.

"He's just the nicest boy," Kay said as he finally disappeared.

The next interruption in Kay's housecleaning schedule was a phone call from Cecy. She was over to the Morgan house to prepare for Aunt Bessie's arrival, and she begged Kay to get on her wheel and go right over.

"Oh, Cecy, I've got such a lot to do," Kay pleaded. "I had planned to go over this afternoon. Won't that be time enough?"

"Well, there is such a queer old man hanging around," Cecy sort of whispered. "Mrs. Baker couldn't come today, she'll be over toward evening, and Carol wants to go to the village. I'm not a bit afraid," Cecy insisted, "but Carol won't go and leave me alone."

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"She's right about that, Cecy. Yes, I'll be over very soon." So Kay hurried through the things she couldn't leave to Nannie, and was on her wheel for the manor in practically no time at all.

"The queer old man," she was thinking, "he could be poor old

Hank Paxton. I hope he doesn't——”

She was just about to turn in the lane that led to Proud Hill when a man, a wild-looking old man jumped out from the bushes, and pushed a pole he was holding directly across her path.

“Git down! Git down from that wheel or I'll knock you down,” he called out to her.

Kay did “git down,” as quickly as she could stop the wheel.

“What's the matter?” she asked, trying not to show how surprised she was. “Want me to do something for you?”

“For me? Nobody kin do anythin' for me,” muttered the man, but he had dropped the clothes pole and was looking at Kay so wild-eyed that Kay felt this certainly must be poor, demented Hank Paxton.

“Now, maybe I can, Mr. Paxton,” she said. “You might have known my father. He was Gerald Findley. I'm Kay Findley.”

“Findley? Findley?” repeated the man. “There was a Findley, right next door to our own little house.” He stopped and rubbed a very grimy hand over his wrinkled face. “He was a young man, I can remember that, but he was nice and kind——”

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“Well, now see here, Mr. Paxton, maybe you can do something for me,” Kay said, a strange thought flashing through her mind. “Maybe you can tell me which of the cottages was ours, if yours was right next door.”

He did not answer that at once, and he looked suspiciously at Kay. She pressed him further, trying both to wake his slumbering mind and to divert him from this passion for revenge.

Finally he said: "How do I know you ain't trying to fool me? Everybody does, and you was goin' right in there." He lifted the heavy pole again to point it toward the manor.

"I was going in there," Kay said, "because I am going to get this place out of Tom Johnson's clutches. And if you help me, I'll help you."

"If your name is Findley I believe you," he said quietly. "And nobody around here but Gerald Findley's girl would ever call me *Mr.* Paxton. Yes, I'll help you. But I can't now. I've got to go hide."

A car was coming down the lane as he crept back into the bushes. In the car was Aunt Bessie.

CHAPTER XIX

SURPRISING

All at once the girls' various parts in this adventure had become too complicated for a general sharing of them. That is, the developments were piling up and the clues springing out from so many different sources, that for the present at least, the girls were unable to discuss together all the angles they were working upon. So Kay did not attempt to tell Cecy just then about the man with the threatening clothes pole, neither did Cecy tell her that the same man had tried to get in the garage, and that she hadn't told Carol. It was not easy to scare him away, and Carol might have become too much alarmed.

"But everything will be different when Aunt Bessie comes," was Cecy's cheering thought, and she wondered if Peter, the chauffeur, and his wife Molly would be able to stay, too.

Kay's wheel came along so close to Aunt Bessie's car that they arrived practically together.

"Another nice young friend," she greeted Kay. "These Duncan girls do have the loveliest chums. And what a place this is! Here, Peter, put Snippy on the side porch; here's his leash. He was simply smothered in that hotel," went on the beloved Aunt Bessie, who really wasn't an aunt to anybody.

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Carol and Cecy and Kay were overjoyed at having her there. It would make a lovely summer place for her—if all the threats and menaces could be put down, and if, oh, if Vivienne Morgan

would only be found to straighten out the whole tragic tangle. But for the present, at least, the girls would do all they could to make Aunt Bessie comfortable, and on this, the very first day the task of making the great house livable seemed more than they had counted upon.

“I love it, I love it. Don’t worry about me having this or that,” Aunt Bessie insisted, as soon as they found a place in which she could settle down and be comfortable. This turned out to be the lovely red leather divan in the sun room—she was simply delighted with this room, with its red and gray tiling and the deep red leather and reed furniture.

“But, Aunt Bessie, you have got to have a lot of things—” Carol tried to insist.

“My dear child, what I’m really trying to do is to get *away* from a lot of things. I felt positively smothered in that hotel. And, Cecy, you know how I loved the house I had out in the country last summer? And do tell me about Polly, the darling girl we called Polly or Flinders or Mary, she had so many names. She lives out here now, doesn’t she?”

“Yes, she does,” Cecy told her, “and she’ll be in to see you as soon as she knows you’re here. She’s doing wonderfully now. Has a place clerking in a stationery store and lending library.”

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“She’ll like that, I’m sure,” Aunt Bessie said. “That child was so romantic that a place among books ought to suit her perfectly.”

And so they talked, Cecy and Aunt Bessie being most

intimately concerned in last summer's happenings, as they, and not Carol or Kay, had spent that time together.

After lunch, which the girls had made a picnic of, Aunt Bessie followed her well-established custom and took her nap. She was put upstairs in the room Carol had used; that was the room the girls had called Vivienne's. The exquisite stained glass dome fascinated her, as it had everyone else who had ever seen it, and she wondered, at once, if it were well protected from the other side.

"If that runs along those stairs to the third floor as it seems to," she pointed out before entering her bedroom, "it must be well screened from having things fall on it. What a crime it would be to have that broken! I never saw such an enchanting place as this, and not old at all, but fresh and comparatively modern."

The girls tried to answer her questions but she was tired, and claimed to be a "pretty old lady," so she gave in and prepared for her nap.

Left to themselves they fell at once into an important discussion of a number of things that had to be settled.

"But if Win Vernon, the clerk at the hotel, you know, brings that writer, Mr. Hadley, out here to look over the place, what ever can I tell him? I've been holding Win off but now he insists on having the man see the place, and he's coming out this weekend," Kay had started things off with that declaration.

"Well, let him bring him along," Carol suggested. "Now that we have Aunt Bessie here all the proprieties are taken care of,

and why shouldn't the possible buyer go through the place?"

"I told you Aunt Bessie would be the answer to our worries," Cecy chuckled. "Nothing like a real understanding woman as a background for us. And is Aunt Bessie understanding?" Cecy couldn't stop applauding.

"Yes, this is a big improvement," Kay conceded. "Even these bags and boxes seem to help. And Snippy completes the picture. He has the cutest little bark." They paused to hear Snippy's bark. "But after all," Kay went on, "what good is it for a man to look at a place he wants to buy, when we nor anyone else, so far as we know, has any authority to sell it or buy it?"

"Let's handle each thing as it pops up," Carol wisely advised. "When I started in at social service work I used to get completely confused, with so many angles of real problems all coming at me at once. But now I know that they really can be separated. And somehow, one thing clears the way for another."

"Then, we'll just show the house and get Mr. Hadley's reactions?" Kay asked. "That's what you call his ideas on it, isn't it, Carrie?"

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"You are correct and very technical, my dear," Carol answered, assuming an authoritative voice and manner. "Let's hope he *wants* the place. Then we will proceed to get it for him."

This sounded very simple, and both Cecy and Kay were glad to accept the advice.

“I haven’t done an awful lot in all this,” Cecy said reflectively, “but I did get Aunt Bessie.”

“And I found out our nice hermit was a singer,” Kay added. “We suspected that, didn’t we, the first time we saw him standing in the cabin door? He looked exactly like someone in grand opera. And to think of country folks calling him the hermit! What a laugh he would have at that, if only he could feel like laughing,” she concluded.

A little later when they looked over the kitchen supplies, just before Mrs. Baker was due to arrive and take up her work, they found the grocer had not sent pineapple juice, Aunt Bessie’s favorite breakfast drink, so Kay was glad to go for it. Her wheel was always handy, and she would rather be out doors than in at any time, so off she went, for three cans of the unsweetened variety of pineapple juice.

There was some one walking toward her as she took the path to the main road. She thought she knew who it was but she hated to believe it.

“Here he comes,” she decided, “sure enough, old Tom Johnson himself. Well, he won’t stop me this time,” and she pedaled faster so as to get around the curve before he could reach it. The roads were rough and she was riding on the walk.

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But, instead, she got to the curve just as he did, and she had to dismount or run into him.

“Good afternoon!” he said so pleasantly she could hardly believe it was he. She muttered a reply and tried to pass on but he deliberately blocked her way.

“Wait a minute; don’t run away. I won’t eat you,” he said, still maintaining a friendly tone of voice.

“Let me pass,” Kay demanded. “Why do you dare stop me again?”

“Now you listen to me, young lady,” he said, in a more commanding tone, “I’ve got good news for you if you ain’t too dumb to listen to it.” Kay looked at him but did not answer. Her pause gave him another chance. “I’ve been looking over my papers and I find—well, your father didn’t owe such a lot on his house. He was a nice man and did pretty well, but, of course, his house had to go with the others when the development went under.”

Kay was so astonished she could not speak had she wanted to. What was this man trying to tell her?

“Fact is, I been thinking it over, and as I say, looking over old papers and one thing or other and I might—well, make a deal with you,” he finished, plainly finding it difficult to make that proposal.

“A deal with me! What do you mean? If you have anything to say about my parents’ property that you took from them, you know where to find my mother,” flared Kay, determined to get by him now, although the very mention of their home by this man seemed to fascinate her.

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“Oh, yes, I know,” he was getting back to his snarling tones now, “I know where to find your mother, but you’re the one *I* want to deal with.”

“Why?” Kay demanded.

“Because you’re the one that’s makin’ the trouble, and if you’ll promise to let up, just stop this business of—well—” he tried to laugh but couldn’t, “ghost huntin’ you’re callin’ it, I hear, why, I’ll talk business with you.”

“You must want something terribly bad, Tom Johnson, to say that,” Kay retorted.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ll get it anyhow. It’s as good as mine right now. *She’ll* never come back here, and there’s only a little while left. So if you don’t want to take my offer——”

“I don’t. And what’s more I don’t want you to stop me again. Do you hear?” and Kay’s voice was loud enough for most any one to hear.

“Oh, well, no harm to ask.” He was still trying to win her over. “Don’t be in a hurry. Think it over. I hear your ma’s away. Wouldn’t that be a nice surprise for her when she comes home?”

Poor Kay didn’t feel like getting on her wheel again. Should she try to deal with this man?

CHAPTER XX

FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!

Kay was so overcome by this sudden turn in old Johnson's attitude, that her courage and resolution were threatened. She got back to the manor with the pineapple juice, and promptly broke into a storm of emotion as she tried to tell of her experience with old Johnson.

Aunt Bessie was now with the girls, adding her cheering influence, but just now Kay could not be cheered.

"To think that he actually dangled right before my eyes, the offer to give us back our home," she sighed. "Told me what a grand surprise that would be to my mother, as if *I* didn't know that. But all the time, I felt I should not take his offer. I knew there was a bigger prize at stake." She was frankly crying now and Cecy had her arms around her, trying to console and quiet her.

"*Well!*" breathed Aunt Bessie, "I don't want to go sentimental or silly. I know you girls would not like that. But I never saw such courage in my life. Most anyone would have grabbed up the old skinflint's offer before he had a chance to change what he uses for a mind." Aunt Bessie looked very sweet now in her orchid voile, with her lovely big glittering afternoon pearls about her neck. It had not taken her long to feel at home among her young friends. She was, as Cecy had said, a most understanding person.

“I’m so glad you did defy him, Kay,” Carol said. “You’ll see, he’ll come back with a better offer. They always do. But now we begin to see how this all fits together. The girl, Vivienne, must be found and come back here by a certain date, her birthday perhaps, to save the property from being publicly sold. These are probably the terms of the will we have been hearing about, bit by bit.”

“Yes,” Kay looked up to say, “I’m sure that’s it. Mr. Thorsen, and even Dan, the druggist, told me that. Although they didn’t exactly make it all clear. It might be her birthday: wills usually do emphasize birthdays. And we haven’t the slightest idea where she is. We can’t even give Mr. Thorsen the letter or the picture. Isn’t it mean he had to be away when we need him most?” Everything seemed dark to Kay today, dark and discouraging.

“I think it’s just wonderful to have old Johnson want to make concessions to us,” Cecy said, getting Kay a fresh handkerchief from her own bag in the hall. “For a man everyone around here is afraid of, to actually appeal to girls like us—well, I just think it’s thrilling, and now we will surely win.”

A telephone ring disturbed them. It was Win Vernon calling from the hotel to tell Carol he just had word from Mr. Hadley, that he would be out for the week-end, and to ask Kay if “everything was all ready.”

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“Oh, yes, of course,” she replied, although hesitantly. “We’re all ready to show him the place, but, of course, we have to wait for Mr. Thorsen to come back before we can talk terms,” she finished. And that seemed to satisfy Win, for she promptly hung

up.

“And now,” said Carol, when she felt it would be a good thing to change the subject, “Aunt Bessie and I have planned our schedule. I’ll visit her tonight, since I’m the oldest—” She paused to make that sound like a joke. But she was thinking about the strange figure she had seen out the window that night, and about which she had said nothing to the other girls. “Of course,” she continued, “we’ll have Mrs. Baker stay here all the time. She’s going to keep house for Aunt Bessie.”

“Will Peter stay, Aunt Bessie?” asked Cecy. He was the dependable chauffeur, but had a wife and little home of his own to think of.

“No, not just now, dear,” Aunt Bessie told her. “As a matter of fact, I would just as soon call a cab as to have to listen to the constant needs of my own car. Peter is as good as gold, of course, and I don’t know what I would do without him,” she hurried to add. “But it’s so restful here. You have reliable taxi men, haven’t you?”

“Indeed we have, Aunt Bessie,” Kay spoke up. “Ever since Carol and Cecy left Melody Lane we’ve had a lot of improvements, including taxi service.”

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“Would you like fresh cut fruit, or apricot whip or a pie for your dessert?” asked Mrs. Baker beaming at the door. “I have time for anything you prefer——”

“Oh, the fresh fruit, I think, Mrs. Baker,” answered Aunt Bessie. “By the way, what’s your first name? It’s so much more sociable——”

“That’s what I think.” Mrs. Baker was thoroughly understanding herself. “The name by rights is Annie, but it’s Ann they call me and it suits me better, I think myself,” and she went off to prepare the fresh fruit.

When the dinner was over and Cecy and Kay started off to go to their homes, leaving Carol with Aunt Bessie in the big house, the summer evening was quickly pulling its draw strings, and the streaks of late sunset were turning the great blue bag of the sky into a darkening canopy.

Kay was on the wheel properly, while Cecy, being smaller, was perilously perched on the handle bar. She would slip down at intervals to get “on better,” but they managed to cover the short distance to Kay’s cottage safely.

“You won’t be lonely tonight, Kay?” Cecy asked as they were ready to separate.

“No, darling. I’m all right now and I didn’t mean to go to pieces that way,” Kay confessed. “But somehow, I was so surprised——”

“No wonder. It certainly must have been a shock. Well, so long, Kay, and if you want me, just give me a ring. I’ll even try out your great new taxi service should you want me in a hurry,” promised Cecy, as she left on Kay’s wheel.

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But that was not what happened. It must have been shortly before midnight when Melody Lane was thrown into an uproar by the cry of fire! Church bells rang, whistles blew, people shouted: “Fire! Fire! Fire!” in that wild and startling uproar that is everywhere the call to volunteers. It seemed that

everyone heard it at once, perhaps that was the purpose of the great outcry.

Carol had her car out and was calling; “I’m all right, I’ll be back soon,” to Aunt Bessie and Mrs. Baker, before the First Church bell even broke the monotony of its deafening clang. She had already phoned to Cecy and Kay that she would pick them up, so the three girls got to the scene of the fire before the hose was attached to a distant fire hydrant.

“Oh, it’s the little office in the woods,” Cecy exclaimed first, “and just see the trees!”

“They’re not all burning, just lit up from the blaze,” Carol said, trying to drive in closer, but not making much progress because of other cars and the crowds surging around.

“Oh, it really is Johnson’s office,” Kay declared. “Isn’t that awful? They’ll be sure to blame poor old Hank Paxton. I wonder if he did set it afire.”

“Hush, don’t mention names, Kay, there are too many around us,” warned Carol. “I would hardly believe so many lived in Melody Lane.”

“Cecy,” gasped Kay, “just think. That’s where I was so determined to get work, to look through the boxes we saw through the windows.”

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“Yes, I know. Well, boxes won’t last long there,” Cecy answered.

“Get back there! Get off of that hoseline! Don’t you know

better than getting in the way?” a volunteer fireman was shouting at a car down further in the line, and as that car tried to obey orders the whole line moved backwards, making it dangerous for all the cars.

“I’m going to try to get out of here,” Carol told the girls. “We can’t do anything and that little place will be in ashes before they get the streams on.” So she did very cautiously edge out of the line, and managed to get free from the jam of cars into the open roadway.

The excitement was intense. Voices kept calling out Tom Johnson’s name, as if the owner could do anything about the fire. The great patches of blaze flew high into the trees, and the woods were lighted up from one side to the other.

“If the woods should really start burning,” Kay said, her voice showing her anxiety, “there’s no telling where it would stop. A forest fire is dreadful.”

“Oh, they’ll control it soon,” Carol tried to assure her. “It’s only a small fire; it just looked terrible because the dark green of the trees throws out such a lurid reflection.”

“If there were any papers in there, they’re gone now,” sighed Cecy. “Remember the big trunk we thought might have something important in it?”

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“Yes. Well, there’s no trunk there now,” replied Kay. It seemed as if everything went against her today.

“But the firemen were throwing things out when we first came up,” Carol reminded them. “They may have saved something.”

“What worries me most, is what will happen to that poor old man, Hank Paxton,” Kay told her companions. “Everyone said he was going around vowing vengeance on Johnson, and surely they will say he set this fire whether he did or not.”

They were going back along the road toward Kay’s house which was nearest, and were moving slowly because of the congestion. Just as Carol all but stopped to let a car pass, someone called out:

“Hey, hello! Didja see the fire?” and there was Mamie Johnson almost on the running board!

“Why, Mamie,” called back Carol. “You better get out of this jam. Someone will run you down if you don’t look out.”

“Oh, I’m all right. Isn’t it a big fire? I like a fire. And it’s all insured, Uncle Tom says. He never cared about old papers, said he was through with them when he stored them there,” and the same tomboy Mamie laughed as if the fire had been the best fun she had had in a long time.

“Now, you listen here, Mamie,” Kay commanded sharply, “if you go hollering about liking a fire, and it being all insured, first thing you know they’ll say you started it.”

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“No, would they?” The girl’s voice and manner changed instantly. Certainly Mamie wanted no more to do with the law. “But I didn’t, honest I didn’t,” she declared. “We know who done it. That crazy old Hank Paxton. He just hated——”

“Better get in here with us, Mamie,” Carol invited her. “We’re

going up to Proud Hill and you can ride over. Then you won't get into any trouble."

"No, sir. I ain't goin' home. I don't care if I stay out all night," Mamie bragged. "Everyone's out to the fire, and they won't miss me; not tonight they won't. I'm goin' to see the fun. Don't worry; I won't get hurt. Good-bye. I'll be seein' y' u," and at that, Mamie was lost amid the cars, through which she was squirming in and out with the dexterity of some clever animal.

"That girl," breathed Cecy, who had scarcely said a word to her, "seems headed for trouble. Talking about fire being fun and everything being insured——"

"And blaming old Paxton, but, of course, everyone will do that," Kay said, rather wearily.

"She seems the most pathetic case I've come across in my experience," Carol remarked, as Kay was about to leave the car. "We might do something for her, if we could get through with all these other things. Of course, I intend to look into the case, and find out what right the Johnsons have to her custody, but I can't do any more just at present," Carol decided.

"With all the enemies Johnsons have, she's sure to make trouble talking about insurance," Kay finished. "Well, thanks for the ride, Carol, and I'll be over in the morning when I go to town for Nannie. Mother may pop in on us any minute, and I must not disappoint Nannie in my part of the house cleaning."

"Good night and cheer up," Cecy called to her as Carol started the car. "You can't tell, we may even find our B-O-B!"

Later when Cecy had been left at her home, and Carol had talked with her father, who complained that this wasn't the kind of vacation he had expected the girls to have upon their return to Melody Lane, Carol promised to go slow and try to forget other peoples' troubles.

"But she thrives on them, Dad," declared Cecy. "Why, she's even dieting. Only ate four of Rachel's best pancakes this morning."

"It's all very well to joke, Cecy, but Carol has put in a long stretch of hard work at that nursery," the father protested. "She ought to be at college, if things hadn't turned out so——"

"So perfectly scrumptuous," Carol interrupted him, giving him with that statement the extra assurance of a good hug. "This is my night to stay with Aunt Bessie, Dad," she explained, "and I expect to enjoy it. Mrs. Baker is as good as a comedy, to listen to. So don't worry, I'll be over early in the morning, Cecy," and off she went to Proud Hill.

CHAPTER XXI

MAMIE'S PLIGHT

Kay was fussing around the house, trying to interest herself in the preparations for her mother's return. It was hours later than when they had left the scene of the fire, people had apparently all gone home now, for the street was almost quiet, and Nannie had gone off to bed after hearing all about the excitement.

Then Kay heard a cry, a call coming from out by the garage.

"Whatever—whoever—" But she did not wait a minute to answer that cry. "Someone is suffering—" She had the back door open at once, and had switched on the garage light from the button there.

"Help! Help!" came a strangled cry. "Here—I—am, Kay!"

"Someone who knows me!" Kay dashed down the few steps, and the next moment found a figure writhing in agony on the cement in front of the garage. She bent down to see who it could possibly be, when the figure moaned:

"It's me, Mamie, and I'm burned. But save the box, it's by the side—" Then she stopped, and Kay knew she must have fainted.

"Mamie! Mamie!" she called, the light over the garage door showing the poor child's face so streaked with grime and soot as to make it look unlike that of a white person.

Then Kay saw the burnt hands; poor Mamie's hands were hurt terribly.

Realizing this was more than she, herself, could take care of, she dashed back to the house and called the hospital for an ambulance. Nannie heard her, of course, and quickly had the first aid things down, and was pouring water on Mamie's face and sweet oil on her hands, that seemed too badly burned for Nannie to attempt to apply the ointments. Before Kay left the phone she had called Carol, and Carol was going to go directly out to Firkin Hospital, expecting the ambulance would have brought Mamie in by the time she got there.

"She's coming around, poor child," Nannie told Kay, as she again looked down at the pathetic figure that was Mamie.

"Get the box; hide it," Mamie murmured. "I got burned getting it, but that's the one." She stopped as the pain again made her cry out.

"You got the box from the office?" Kay asked. "Why, Mamie? Why did you go into such danger?"

"I wanted that box; my papers are in it. I know, he showed me when I got back from that school and—now—they can't get me again!"

"So that's it," Kay said to Nannie, "she was burned getting the box, with her papers."

The ambulance was coming into the drive now and Mamie was suffering too much to care what they did to her. Even if they had been taking her to jail, she was in too

much pain to care.

The doctor gave her first aid, his treatment easing the awful pain somewhat, while Nannie bathed some of the black off her face before they put her in the ambulance.

“But the box,” Mamie cried out. “Get it and hide it——”

“All right,” Kay promised, and she did go to the side of the garage where she found—a charred breadbox! It was still hot to her touch, and she knew it must have been in getting this and carrying it to her, that Mamie had burned her hands so badly.

Only when Mamie had heard Kay give Nannie the order to “hide it,” could the doctor succeed in quieting her. Then she lay back exhausted, as Kay got into the car to go to the hospital with her.

Carol was waiting there and both girls promised Mamie they would look out for her, and told her not to worry, as the stretcher with the queer little face showing above the cover, passed into the mysterious recesses of the hospital.

“Anyhow, they can’t get me here,” Mamie was able to say before the door closed. Then Carol and Kay remembered. They would have to notify the Johnsons!

“I forgot all about them in the excitement,” Kay told Carol. “Not that they’ll care what happens to her, but we can’t take their responsibility.”

And this was all attended to when the girls gave the case history at the desk, and the attendant there offered to

send a message to the Johnsons through the police, as there was no telephone within reach.

Carol and Kay could well imagine how frightened the Johnsons would be when a policeman would call on them after the fire, but “it was time,” Kay said, “they got a taste of their own medicine.”

Carol insisted upon staying with Kay for the night, and no argument from Kay that “she was perfectly all right and not nervous at all now,” could dissuade Carol from doing so. So Carol stayed.

As soon as the car had been put away Carol had phoned to tell Mrs. Baker that she was staying with Kay. “Let’s look at the box,” Kay began, “that’s what poor Mamie almost killed herself trying to get. It will be in the kitchen I suppose; yes, there it is,” and they then saw the old box, set in the middle of the kitchen on a pad of newspapers. Nannie was evidently taking no chances on the dirty old burned box touching anything in her kitchen.

“Wait, I’ll get some work gloves. That box is certainly black,” Kay said, as she opened the cellar-way door and came back with two pairs of big white cotton gloves.

“It’s actually warm yet. Anything in there must be charred,” Carol remarked, trying to get a grip on the box cover, which was bent and twisted from the heat.

“I hope Mamie’s papers are safe,” Kay said anxiously. “She was sure they were in that box; she said she saw Johnson put them in, after threatening her with terrible things if

she didn't do what he told her. Is there anything worse than a helpless child in the hands of such people?"

"Nothing," said Carol who was making no headway with opening the box. "This old lead lock has melted into the box metal, and it's just about sealed beyond opening," she said, as Kay watched her.

"It's too heavy to be pried open, I suppose?" Kay suggested.

"Yes. Besides, if the papers inside are charred we had better handle them carefully. I wouldn't even shake the box more than is necessary. They might fall apart."

So after making a few more careful attempts to open the box, they decided to wrap it up in the papers Nannie had around it, and get someone with proper tools to open it in the morning.

"You must guess what I'm thinking about it," Kay said to Carol, when it was finally wrapped up safely.

"What?"

"That perhaps the papers I need may be in there. Remember Mamie said Johnson didn't want them any more? That he had gotten through with them?"

"Yes, she did say that," Carol reflected.

"Well, those could be the very papers that signed away our property to him," said Kay very seriously. "Even when Dan Holden, the druggist you know, told me that Johnson had had the hardware man get those extra heavy breadboxes for

him to put his papers in, he also said that Johnson got the properties to cover small loans.”

“And why did people hand over their places to him?” Carol asked.

“Because of his threats and the awful bad times everyone had to go through. When those few cottages were built by some construction company that he was in partnership with, *he* carried the mortgages. That’s how he sold them so easily, of course. Then, when those honest people fell back in paying an unlawful interest, and couldn’t pay on the principal at all, of course he took the places right back,” sighed Kay.

“Yes, I’ve heard of that kind of speculation before,” Carol answered. “But cheer up, Kay, things may not be so bad after all. Now, we must ask the hospital about Mamie. They should have her fixed up by this time.”

The report they got from the hospital was favorable, as far as Mamie’s burns were concerned; these, they told Carol, would heal probably without leaving scars, but there were other “scars” not so easy to eliminate or heal.

“The child has been so neglected and so undernourished,” the nurse said, “that it will take care and treatment to get her back to normal. She hasn’t even been kept clean,” came the further statement, “and the people she is with evidently are not capable of taking care of her.”

Bad as that report sounded and really was, the girls quickly planned to do what was right for Mamie at last.

“I’ll go out to the hospital tomorrow,” Carol said, “and see what should be done. Whatever money is needed we’ll hope to get from some good Samaritan. It’s quite surprising how good the Samaritans are when they know how much good they can do.”

Before either Kay or Carol was dressed in the morning, Cecy was on the phone. She wanted to know what had happened and why Carol had stayed at Kay’s, and more than anything else, she simply demanded to know, why, even why on earth, had they not stopped for her.

“Whatever hurry you were in, I think you were awful not to stop for me,” she grumbled. “And anyhow, if Mamie was so burned you had to hurry her to the hospital, couldn’t you have stopped here on your way back?”

Carol finally made her sister understand that had they stopped that time of night, it would have disturbed their father, and that was something she, Cecy, must know they never did when it could possibly be avoided.

So with the promise of calling for her first thing, and taking her into town while Kay and Carol did their respective marketings, Cecy was finally willing to forgive them. But she would demand all the details, the girls knew, as soon as she saw them.

Later, when Kay quickly told her all she could about Mamie’s suffering, and her heroic rescue of the old box which they all hoped would be found to contain Mamie’s papers, and even Kay’s, Cecy was completely satisfied and full of sympathy for the girl. She had so many plans to rescue her at

once from the Johnsons, and to do such wonderful things for her, that Mamie was as good as a Cinderella then and there.

“We’ll go to the hardware store first and get a good strong tool to either cut that box, or knock it open with. But don’t say a word to Ed Ziggler about what we want the tool for,” Carol cautioned.

“Or to anyone else; we mustn’t even mention that box,” Kay added. “We have to go in the drug store and we’ll be sure to hear all the latest news there.”

“Did you phone out to Aunt Bessie, Cecy?” Carol asked as they were entering the drug store.

“Certainly I did. How else do you think I knew you were away all night?” Cecy reminded her.

“Oh, of course, I did know that,” Carol admitted. “What I should have asked you was, are they all right? Did they have a quiet night——”

“Or did any ghosts crop up? I don’t know, Sis. It was Mrs. Baker who answered me, and she seemed afraid I might guess what she was trying to say, so maybe it was ghosts. I wouldn’t know.”

CHAPTER XXII

IT WAS JIMMY'S FAULT

They certainly did hear a lot of news, if not all of it, at the drug store. Melody Lane was still buzzing with reports and rumors of the fire, but as soon as Dan Holden got the store to himself and his three girl customers, as Cecy whispered to Kay, “he sailed right in,” on the news Kay had promised.

“As far as the fire goes, who cares?” he started. “Even Tom Johnson himself doesn’t give a hoot. Of course, he’s had it insured since they put it up to sell the new development places, and since then it’s just stood there idle, and *he* had to keep on paying the insurance.”

The girls looked an interesting answer, but did not venture to put it into words. They didn’t want to interrupt Dan. But they ordered sundaes, early as it was, just to be friendly and encouraging.

“And the things folks are saying,” Dan went on, dropping another blob of goo on top of Kay’s sundae, “saying that poor old Hank Paxton set that shed afire. Why, Hank was sick abed all day. I know it; I could swear to it.” He raised his voice to make that offer sound solemn and important.

“He was sick in bed?” Kay asked quickly. “How do you know Dan?”

“Why, his daughter Liz—you know she’s stooped and

wears thick glasses—well, she was in here three times yesterday for medicine for him. And I know it was for him for she had his prescription from Doctor Clark. He's real good to old Hank, the doctor is," Dan affirmed, kindly.

"But last night," Kay argued. "It was started last night."

"I know, I know that, too. And Hank couldn't move an inch last night. He was so bad with aches and pains that Liz had phoned the doctor, the doctor phoned me, and I sent out Dick with another kind of medicine at 8:30. He was in bed all right, and he didn't have anything to do with that fire."

"Oh, I'm so glad," Kay answered. "I felt so sorry for that poor old man the other day, and we have been talking about all his troubles, Dan." She looked at Cecy and Carol who were nodding their agreement. "Even if he had been around those woods and might have dropped a match or anything, we had made up our minds to try to save him from any more jail sentences. It almost destroyed what little mind he had, to be in that jail; anyone could see that," Kay insisted.

"But what Mr. Holden here says, makes it so positive," Carol spoke up. "Surely, with the doctor's word and the boy going out there, and people around likely speaking to his daughter during the day, there could be no doubt of it. He must have been sick all day."

"He was. I know it. But there's got to be a goat for everything, you know, and the person that's down and out comes the easiest," Dan declared. "But I'd sure hate to see poor old Hank made the goat this time. He's suffered enough."

“And who has blamed him?” asked Cecy a little timidly. It was strange how timid she always seemed when Carol was around and how brave at other times.

“Oh, just about everyone,” Dan answered. “They’re plain dumb, these people from out around the edges of this town. What one says they all say, especially if it’s something not too good about someone. That’s true,” for the girls laughed a little. “There’s nothing flies around like bad news,” and he expertly picked up their glasses in one hand.

Being ready to leave, Carol, the trained social worker, wanted to make sure that the druggist would help them with their defence of old Hank, should that become necessary.

“Sure I will, certainly I will,” he answered, in his usual way of repeating a statement. “I’ll do it and be glad to. I’m just about sick and tired of folks coming in and out here, listening to other people’s telephone conversations, tasting bits of loose candy—though I try to keep it covered in accordance with the health laws—but, just the same, they get at it.” Dan stopped to regain his composure. That upsetting of his counter always made him mad, even to think of it.

“And I’d like to show them I can hear, see and think, just like other folks, and I’m no wooden servant around here, either. They act as if I had no right in my own place, just here to wait on them.” He made a pass at the air with his little towel to relieve his feelings.

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So the girls left with Dan’s promise of help to reassure them. He might be talkative, they were willing to admit that, but his

arguments were sound, they knew that, also.

“Where now?” Kay asked as Carol started her car.

“Right out to the place where the little office used to be,” Carol told them. “We must look all over the surrounding ground and see if we can find anything that might show how the fire started. In the city the firemen would do that first thing, but out here—well, I imagine most of those men are busy at their own work this morning.”

“Likely,” Kay agreed. “I wonder if any of the Johnsons went out to see Mamie?” she asked.

“I don’t believe they would go near that hospital,” Carol replied. “They might think it would cost them something.”

“Or that they might be charged with neglect,” Cecy suggested. “I’d like to see Mamie myself. When do you suppose we might go, Carol?”

“That depends upon her condition, of course,” her sister told her.

“I’m going to take her a big bouquet,” Cecy went on. “Poor girl, I don’t suppose she has ever been given a bouquet in her life.”

“Well, here we are,” Kay announced. “I’m glad there are no children around, and it’s a wonder, too.”

As they looked first about the ashes of the little office, poking with sticks and trying to escape the dust from wet piles of

debris that was scarcely cold, they were almost silent. It seemed to them so much had been buried in that small pile of refuse. Kay felt instinctively that telltale papers had been destroyed there. The other girls were just as sympathetic, but to Kay it meant more, for it had been she who began the search that she had so ardently hoped would somehow result in success. And now, this was all—all but the grimy old box, not yet opened.

Cecy was following a little trail that led away from the ruins; a little brown streak in the grass.

“Look!” she called out presently, “here’s a little burnt path that goes—” She was following the burnt streak in the grass that led quite a distance from the spot where the office had stood. “Come here!” she called again excitedly, “and see if this isn’t where it started.”

Kay and Carol were beside her at once, and just as she had said, this must have been where the fire started for here—the burnt streak ended!

“Yes, this is where it started,” Cecy said, getting down to pull the deep grass and weeds apart, “and—I—smell—kerosene!”

“Yes, that is a streak of oil; I can smell it plainly.” Carol sniffed and then they were all sniffing. They found a very faint smell of the oil beyond where the grass was singed.

“Oh, I’ve got it!” Kay yelled then. “Here! Here’s a kerosene can!”

Sure enough, there was indeed a kerosene can, the old-

fashioned kind, part glass and firmly bound with metal, and all the oil was not entirely gone out of it. They had found it at a considerable distance from the streak that showed where the fire had started.

The three girls were too excited to even try to guess who might have owned the can, until again Kay called out “Here’s a box of matches! And they’re spilled all around!”

Finally Carol suggested that they take the can to the store nearest the path to the woods, and ask there who had bought kerosene yesterday.

“That’s a can from Wilson’s, I’m sure,” Kay declared. “They rent them and even lend them to their customers.”

Back Carol drove to Wilson’s store which was only a short distance away, and there Mrs. Wilson looked alarmed when Kay held up the can and asked if it was hers. At first she was not willing to admit that it was, but when the girls told her the story of their finding it spilled in the woods, she reluctantly told them her story.

“That was little Jimmy Nixon’s and I’ve warned his mother he was too young to carry oil, but she always sends a note that she has to have it——”

“How old is he?” Carol asked.

“About six or seven, a nice little fellow. I hope nothing happens to little Jimmy,” Mrs. Wilson said anxiously.

“Oh, no. He surely did not *set* the fire,” Carol told her.

“He evidently spilled it and then—did he buy matches too?”

“Yes, he did, and I warned him to be careful,” Mrs. Wilson pointed out. She was plainly worried about it all.

Assuring her she had nothing to worry about, the girls started off again, this time to find little Jimmy Nixon.

“We must be careful not to frighten him,” Carol warned the girls, “also, not to frighten his mother or whoever may be at home with him. We might not get at the truth at all if that should happen.”

They found Jimmy, but not at his home. Kay knew him, and discovered him sitting under a tree a little off the road, but where he could see whoever might be passing by.

She called hello to him, and he got up quickly, ready to get away, it seemed. But one by one the girls slipped out of the car, and soon Kay was talking to Jimmy as if there had never been a fire the night before. Cecy and Carol picked up fern leaves and a few late violets, that happened to be around where the little boy dug his heels into a small hill, and when he was convinced they were his friends he was quite willing to talk to them.

“It was too bad you spilled your oil,” Kay ventured.

“Yep,” answered Jimmy.

“And your matches too. We found the box. Do you want to bring it home to your mother?”

“Nope. She doesn’t want them,” and this time the little boy was certainly going to run.

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Carol dropped down beside him. He was a darling child and seemed loved and cared for. Bit by bit she drew a picture for him without exciting the least alarm. There was a hill right there, and he had tripped, hadn’t he? And then the matches—he had been playing with them and a match just goes off itself——

“But *I* didn’t start that fire,” the boy blurted out at that point. “And I kicked the can away, far as I could.”

“Certainly you did,” chimed in Cecy, “we found it not burned at all. It was nowhere near the fire.”

“I knew that, and Mums did too. But—I don’t want to go down there——”

“Oh, yes you do, Jimmy. You should see how funny it looks without the office there. Hop in the car and we’ll ride you all around it.” And then Carol Duncan put into practice one of the most important rules of juvenile training: that no dread must ever be left in the mind of a child.

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CHAPTER XXIII

THE BOX WAS OPENED

Great must have been the surprise of Liz Paxton, the woman who was “sort of stooped and wore heavy glasses,” when people began sending nice things to eat to her father, Hank Paxton, instead of the threats and warning she had been hearing since the fire.

The change came directly after Kay Findley and the two Duncan girls went to the police station with a cracked kerosene can, and the story of how it got that way. Not like the volunteer firemen, there were always police officers on duty, and it was Mr. Reardon, the very man who had helped the girls when little Jeanie was lost, who was now commissioned by the chief, George Steel, to go out to the fire site and confirm the girls’ story.

This was gladly done, for Hank Paxton had the sympathy of most people, and the police were only too glad to spare the old man further trouble.

“We girls seem to have been getting along famously lately,” Carol remarked, as they were finally starting back to Aunt Bessie and the manor, “but, then, we have been getting splendid cooperation,” she added.

“Haven’t we?” Cecy chimed in. “I feel sort of left out of the big things today. But I know the people at the hospital have been wonderful to Mamie, and now here are the police

actually falling over themselves to straighten things out for Mr. Paxton. I'd like to have seen the little car they dashed out in to bring him the good news about Jimmy and his oil can. I'm sure it was full of other good things besides news," she finished.

"But, Carol," Kay's voice showed disappointment, "I wish we could have gone back to my house and opened that box. You don't know how hard it is for me to wait——"

"Yes, I do, Kay, but it can't be helped. I did want to tell you before, but we can't open that box," Carol answered.

"We can't! I'd like to know why not? Who has a better right——" Kay was blazing with indignation.

"Strange to say, darling, there is someone who has a better right," Carol had to tell her. "You see, it isn't our box, and as far as we know, whatever is in it is not ours, so it's a good thing we didn't get it opened easily, Kay. In our excitement last night we didn't think of that. But I spoke to Officer Reardon just now at the police station. He's going out to your house to get it——"

"Then I'd better go back and not go out to the big house with you——"

"There's no hurry. He won't get there until afternoon. Then he'll have to take it over to the station to have it opened."

"Oh, Carol!" Kay exclaimed. "How am I going to wait that long! And if mother comes this afternoon on the express, I'll just die if I haven't—news for her."

“But the box will be opened just as soon as they can reach it, and Chief Steel is there, as the proper authority. He has to see that everything is kept safe. Just picking up an old box after a fire wouldn’t necessitate such precautions usually, but Mamie could claim she had told us there were papers in it, and Johnson could even claim we had taken things out. So, you see how important it is for us to be very careful about it?” Carol pointed out.

“Oh, I suppose so,” sighed Kay. “But I’m terribly disappointed.”

At the manor they found Aunt Bessie and Mrs. Baker all excited about a caller who had just left.

“The gentleman who wants to buy the place,” Aunt Bessie told them, “and he’s simply delighted with it.”

“Oh, you showed him through?” Kay asked in surprise.

“Oh, yes, indeed I did. And also the nice young man who was with him, Mr. Win Vernon, his card said. He was so sorry you weren’t here, Kay. He seemed especially to want to see you,” Aunt Bessie was taking a glass of fresh water from Ann’s tray. Her nice plump cheeks were pinker than ever, and her soft gray hair fell in lovely links all over her head.

“And I’m very sorry I wasn’t here,” Kay answered.

“But we’ve been pretty busy today, Aunt Bessie,” Cecy said. “I was afraid at one time we might collapse or something, but here we are,” and Cecy, who never tried to disguise her feeling for Aunt Bessie, was simply beaming upon

her now.

“Yes, darling. I know. But let me tell you about Mr. Hadley. That’s the writer’s name who wants to buy the place. He just went into raptures over it. You needn’t worry about him as a customer. All he wants is a chance to sign the contract,” declared Aunt Bessie happily.

“That’s it, though,” Kay said with a sigh, “we don’t yet know whether he can ever sign a contract. I wish Mr. Thorsen were back. He must have gone on a new clue, searching for Vivienne. But here we have the picture and the letter for him and he doesn’t even know it.”

“And he might even know who Bob is,” Cecy added. “I do wish he would come.”

“I’ll have to go back home now, I’m afraid,” Kay suddenly apologized. “I’d love to stay longer; you’re all having such a nice time out here. But mother may come in, and it would be awful if I weren’t there when she arrived.”

“All right, Kay, I’ll run you over,” Carol offered. She knew that Kay was anxious to get that box to the police station and have it opened before her mother’s return.

As they were ready to leave, Carol went out into the kitchen to speak to Mrs. Baker alone.

“How were things last night?” she asked. Then whispered: “Any more ghosts?”

“I heard noises; there surely is something wrong around here,”

Mrs. Baker answered, under her breath. "I didn't want to wake Miss Bessie, but the snap of a window shade, that went up and down several times, could never have been done from outside."

"A window shade?"

"Plain as the window itself and not a shade disturbed this morning. It would snap up and down and seemed to be somewhere around the dining room," Mrs. Baker whispered.

"But what could cause that?"

"Leave it to me. I'll be finding out, and don't worry your young head about such things. I just didn't want to make any disturbance on Miss Bessie's first night here. But—well—wait. If I hear a window shade snap tonight, I'll find out who's snapping it."

Driving back to bring Kay home, the two girls talked about the possible buyer for the big house. Carol seemed to feel, from Aunt Bessie's account, that he was sure to buy it, if only he could. And she also declared that something must happen to clear that matter up soon.

But what Mrs. Baker had told her of the snapping shade was absorbing her attention so completely, she scarcely heard Kay talking about the delayed opening of the box by the police.

Ever since the night Carol had seen the queer figure out by her car she had been expecting it would reappear, and apparently it had come again. It was well she could have such dependence upon Mrs. Baker. After all, bringing Aunt Bessie

into anything like danger was not pleasant to think about.

“Carol,” Kay suddenly said, “I was asking you if we couldn’t stop at the police station now?”

“Oh, excuse me, I didn’t hear you,” Carol apologized. “I don’t think we should, Kay. They said they would call you the first minute they could get over for the box. I believe there’s a council meeting this afternoon, but Mr. Reardon was certainly as anxious to find out what’s in it as we are.”

“Oh, he couldn’t be, Carol. But thanks for bringing me over—” She stopped talking, for there was a small car right in front of her door, and she knew it was the service car from the police station.

“I’ll go in with you,” Carol offered. “They might want to ask us some questions.”

They found a strange officer talking to Nannie in the kitchen, both of them standing over the old box, which was now well wrapped up in paper and tied with a piece of rope. The officer introduced himself as Mr. Appel, and said he had been sent over to get the box.

“It may be just junk,” he suggested. “I don’t believe Tom Johnson would know how to read his own papers.”

“But we are hoping it may have some old deeds in it,” Kay could not help saying. “You see, Tom Johnson claims to own a lot of land around here.”

“I know it and as you say, Miss, that’s what he claims. Well,

I'll take it over. There's a meeting this afternoon but we'll get it open as quickly as possible. You see, the chief has to be there himself."

Soon Carol was gone and again Kay was alone. She was too restless to do even the little things she felt she should be doing, so she called the hospital to inquire for Mamie.

"She's getting along nicely," came the reply, "but she's had quite a shock. The doctor wants her to rest completely for a few days."

"Hasn't she had any callers?" Kay asked.

"None are allowed yet. Not that her condition is any way critical, but she's so excitable the doctor insists on her being kept quiet."

After asking if there was anything Mamie would like and could they send her anything, and getting that definite negative reply that nurses know so well how to give, Kay had to be satisfied.

Away from Carol and Cecy, and after going through such a lot of excitement, Kay felt suddenly lonely and depressed. And it was so unusual for a girl with her high spirits, that she would have laughed at it, had she not realized why she was feeling that way.

"I've been expecting too much," she finally admitted to herself, "and I suppose I'm getting sorry I didn't take Tom Johnson's offer. Think of my being able to tell mother we were going to have our little house back."

Mercifully the phone rang. It was a telegram from her mother saying she would be home the next morning. Kay called in Nannie and together they made new plans for tomorrow's lunch. Now her mother was coming home, now at last Kay could "let down" and confide in her own, dear mother.

Time was not hanging heavy now. Cecy was phoning to Kay, and Kay was phoning to Cecy. Carol had consented to let Cecy stay out with her tonight and Cecy begged Kay to "come on out too." But Kay declined. She had a lot of little things to do, she insisted. And there was that report from the police station which she was still waiting for.

But the evening wore on and it was after nine o'clock, when the telephone finally rang again bringing a call from the police station.

"Yes, yes; I'm Kay Findley, she replied nervously.

"Well, we got the old box opened and there are some old papers in it," came a reply from Chief of Police Steel. "But I think I'll have to wait to talk about them to your mother," he said.

"Oh, yes, I see, Chief," faltered Kay. "Well, Mother won't be home until tomorrow. Can't you tell me if you found our papers? Any with the name Findley on them? Gerald Findley?"

"Well, yes, I did find that name," came back the tantalizing voice of Chief Steel. "But they're torn and not in shape to be deciphered as they are," he added. "But I know you're anxious and you'll sleep better if I tell you, I believe they are the papers you have been looking for."

CHAPTER XXIV

GHOST AT A TEA PARTY

The relief was so great, Kay just dropped her head on the telephone table and didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"He said the papers I was looking for, the Gerald Findley papers, seemed to be there," she tried to realize. "Of course, they may be just papers recording the transaction," she remembered, "but no, they have got to be *our* papers, those which took the home from my parents unjustly. Mother would never feel so bitter, nor father would not have been so seriously shocked if it was just an ordinary loss."

Nannie came in and they talked and talked, Kay trying to draw every last syllable of comfort from the kind housekeeper's reasoning.

"But, child dear," Nannie finally coaxed her, "you must be getting to bed. The way you have been running around since your mother went away, is no credit to my good management." Since there seemed nothing else to do, but to go to bed, Kay finally consented.

"But first I must phone to the girls," Kay told Nannie. "That they found any papers with my father's name on is good news. If the exchange of those properties had been regularly recorded, I don't believe even Tom Johnson would have the deeds scattered around the woods in breadboxes. It seems to me he just imagined all those records were useless

now, but we're going to make sure of that, this time."

So she phoned Cecy, and promised to keep her informed on "every little thing no matter what it might be."

"Something is sure to happen soon," Cecy insisted. "Poor Mamie could never have burned her hands like that for nothing."

So night and the necessity for sleep, at last conquered the excited girl, and night also had fallen on Morgan Manor. The evening had been spent there pleasantly exploring the spacious grounds, and when Cecy discovered Sinbad, Mr. Thorsen's big cat coming up to their own back door for something to eat, she was overjoyed.

"When his cat is back he is certain to be home himself tomorrow," she told the others. "Kay said that Henri told her the cat was being cared for by his mother, and they live quite a distance away, so someone must have brought him back because they knew Mr. Thorsen would be home," argued Cecy.

They fed the cat generously, but he refused to come into the house at Mrs. Baker's coaxing. Instead, without even waiting to wash his face, he started off again for the cabin on Proud Hill.

Cecy was sleeping in one of the twin beds and Aunt Bessie in the other. It seemed more sociable that way, Cecy said, but Carol suspected her sister had wanted the company.

Carol took a room down the hall not far from the third floor stairs. She and Mrs. Baker had arranged that. They had also arranged quite a set of signals, to be used if there was

any reason “to look over things during the night.”

“I’ll just tap on your door and you come along without saying a word,” Mrs. Baker had told Carol very privately. “Then, we can go down stairs, or up stairs, or wherever we think we should go, without waking the others.”

But Mrs. Baker didn’t even have to tap at Carol’s door for she heard the noise first, perhaps. At any rate, they both met in the hall, each carrying a good, strong flashlight. Mrs. Baker was also armed with her trusty monkey wrench, so that they were both ready to go after the curtain snapper. For it was the roll and unroll of a curtain spring that they stood listening to.

Then Mrs. Baker motioned to Carol to come along down stairs and follow the noise. Once out of possible hearing of Cecy and Aunt Bessie they could whisper.

“It’s somewhere in the dining room,” Carol said, and Mrs. Baker shook her head “yes.”

Down the broad stairs they crept and Carol realized they must be walking right into danger, for whoever or whatever was making that racket could most surely see them coming. And *they* could not see the perpetrator.

Carol grasped Mrs. Baker’s arm and halted her when they were almost down the stairs. They stood there listening a minute, while that roll and unroll of the curtain spring snapped and vibrated through the house.

“That is not on a window in an open room,” Carol whispered. “It sounds muffled, shut in somewhere.”

“It does. Let’s—go—down——”

Not risking even the sound of snapping a light on, they entered the dining room. Instantly they located the sound, and Mrs. Baker pointed her wrench at it.

“Over there,” her lips formed unspoken words. She was pointing at the big Dutch cupboard that stood part way in front of the hearth. The girls had wondered about it being placed in that position; the racket going on inside it now made Carol wonder still more.

“You stay right where you are,” Mrs. Baker whispered to Carol. “I’ll see—” and she tiptoed over to the big cupboard.

Even had they spoken outright, it would likely not have been heard by anyone inside that closet, for the racket was deafening. Carol made signs to Mrs. Baker that she would help her, but Mrs. Baker just waved her off.

Aiming her flashlight at the cupboard door, Mrs. Baker very carefully put her hand on the glass knob. And the next minute she gave it a yank!

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” came out a torrent of screams, and as Mrs. Baker opened the door wide, a figure, a grotesque figure fell partly out on the floor.

“Come out of there! Come out of there!” demanded the doughty Mrs. Baker, giving a good poke with her wrench at the thing that was squirming inside.

Carol had crossed the room now and had trained her own light

within the cupboard.

“The other side,” she called. “It’s going out a hole on the other side——”

“It is—not,” cried Mrs. Baker, making a grab at the leg that could now be seen trying to get out a hole on the other side, as Carol had said.

By now Cecy was shouting at Carol from the top of the stairs, and Aunt Bessie was begging someone to please close her door. But those struggling in the dining room could pay no attention to that.

“Don’t murder me! Don’t kill me!” came the cry from the cupboard, in the unmistakable high, squeaky voice of a woman.

“Come out of there——” threatened Mrs. Baker, who was tugging harder than ever to get the person out, “or I’ll not say what I’ll do. Carol dear, turn on the lights!”

Quickly as the light flooded the big room, both Mrs. Baker and her victim came into full view.

“Let me get a look at your face,” demanded Mrs. Baker, then she seemed to gasp.

“Glory be! It’s you, Hezzie Johnson! You crazy——”

“Annie, Annie Baker!” moaned the woman, lying in a queer heap on the floor at the cupboard door. “Don’t hit me with—that. I wouldn’t hurt no one. I had to do—this——”

“You did, eh? Well, you won’t have to do it again, scaring foolish folks. But you hit the wrong trail this time. These young ladies don’t scare.” Mrs. Baker might have added, that she herself didn’t scare, either.

Carol had not said a word. She was so amazed at these two women really knowing each other, that she just stood there staring at the scene.

“Get yourself up out of that, Hezzie Johnson, and tell us right out what this means,” commanded Mrs. Baker. Cecy was downstairs now, clinging to Carol, and apparently had shut Aunt Bessie’s door before she came down.

“Oh, I can’t. I’m dead!” sighed this Hezzie Johnson, who was, of course, the sister of Tom Johnson whom Mamie had told the girls about. It was hard for her to get to her feet, because of the way she was tangled up in the trappings she was wearing; but finally she stood upright before them.

“Of all the crazy—” Words failed Mrs. Baker, for there stood the ghost, Hezzie Johnson, with a black cloth wound around her head, an old sheet and some lace curtain rags tied around her from her neck down, and on each side, below her waist and under these rags shone a light, a flash light, hanging from her hips. Instantly Carol knew that this explained the figure she had seen outside at night: no head and a light on each side!

“I had to do it,” the woman blubbered. “Tom made me. He’s bankrupt completely. Can’t pay the taxes on all them places he took, and we’re about starved,” she sobbed. Even Carol was inclined to pity her.

“If Tom Johnson is bankrupt it serves him right,” declared Mrs. Baker. “He didn’t care how he made other folks suffer.”

“It was wrong,” the queer woman admitted, “but he thought some time he could fix things up.” Carol recalled then that Johnson had actually offered to give Kay back their home—on certain conditions. “I was agin’ it always. I used to have to lean ’way out over that glass tower upstairs and flash lights, but I told Tom I wouldn’t do that any more. I cud a-been shot at from below and never know what hit me!”

“The beautiful dome,” thought Carol. Yes, the woman might have been shot at as she feared, and then the prize of Morgan Manor would have been ruined.

“Even if you were ordered to do such dangerous things, is that any excuse for breaking in here and trying to scare every honest tenant or buyer away?” Carol demanded now.

“But this is all there is left, young lady,” answered the queer looking woman, “and Tom said if we could hold it off till that girl’s birthday was passed he could sell it.”

“And rob someone else,” chimed in Mrs. Baker. “Well, we fooled you. But maybe you’ll be so good and so *kind*,” she was being very sarcastic, “as to tell us how you got in here?”

“There’s a hole by the hearth to put the logs in,” the woman said slowly, “so Tom pushed this closet agin’ that, and I could crawl in and out——”

“And there’s the curtain,” exclaimed Carol. “See, it just rests on two hooks and she was pulling that up and down.” Cecy, a

little timidly, went over to the cupboard to see what Carol was pointing out, and the two sisters seemed satisfied now that they at last had solved this ghost story; with the excellent help of Mrs. Baker, of course.

Hezzie Johnson wanted to get away. She had gathered the ragged trappings around her, after untying the two flash lights from around her waist. She didn't bother taking the black thing from her head; evidently she was used to the queer make-up.

"I gotta go," she said. "I suppose, Annie Baker, you'll be sending us all to jail now," she simpered. "And we haven't had an egg to eat for a month——"

"Certainly little Mamie seemed starved." Carol felt she had a right to blame this woman for that.

"Oh, that one! No one could feed her. But she's safe now——"

"And getting something to eat too," chimed in Cecy.

"Well, no one starves around here, not even you, Hezzie Johnson. So drag yourself along to the kitchen by that back hallway," ordered Mrs. Baker, "and I'll make you a cup of tea. You're not deservin' of it, but we're the generous kind around here."

It was then that the ghost of Morgan Manor sat down to a tea party.

CHAPTER XXV

VIVIENE

Kay was the only one of the little group who had not taken part in the ghost capture, unless Aunt Bessie also was counted out, because she insisted upon keeping her door shut. But the other girls made it up to Kay the next morning. They gave her such an account that only the actual glare of Hezzie Johnson's flashlights and the marvellous drape of her trappings, were really missing.

Kay was now at the manor and Mrs. Baker was telling everyone about "that poor creature Hester Johnson." Not only had Mrs. Baker given her all the good hot tea she could drink and fresh cookies with it, last night, but she also gave her "a bag of tea to take along with her and all those stale little tea cakes that were not getting eaten up fast enough."

"But the horrible creature! Wasn't she bold to sit down and eat after trying to frighten us to death?" Aunt Bessie wanted to know.

"Maybe she was, but she was hungry too, and an empty stomach has bad manners—as a rule," quoth Mrs. Baker. "Think of that brother of hers ordering her to flash lights above that lovely big stained glass dome, that's fit for a church!" she pointed out. "And did you realize that Tom Johnson can't pay his taxes, that he's bankrupt?"

"What exactly does that mean?" Kay asked very

seriously.

“It means that *he* can be sold out now, and those pretty houses bought in by anyone who can *pay* the taxes,” Carol explained. “I asked the woman why it was that her brother, who only has a small mortgage on this big place, felt he could get it so easily, and she told me it was because of the will. There’s a clause in it requiring Vivienne to be living here on her eighteenth birthday, or the property can be publicly sold.”

“So Johnson’s game was to keep her away from here, have the place sold out, and then as he held the only mortgage he could buy it in,” Kay added. “I’ve heard he had some speculators all ready to buy it. Then they would turn it into another development.”

“But, Kay, darling, tell us about the box,” begged Aunt Bessie. “You say your mother came home early this morning——”

“Yes, she’s home and we’re awfully excited. The police found the original deeds and transfers of those places, including ours, and they say there isn’t a doubt but what Johnson had acted unlawfully. Of course the places are all run down now and need a lot of repair, but if they can be bought in for the taxes due, anyone who ever owned one of them will jump at the chance to buy it back. Even old Hank Paxton would be able to borrow that small amount to buy his back. Can you imagine that?”

“And you, Kay Findley, started all this——”

“Oh, well, you girls would have done the same thing if your home had gone as ours had,” Kay interrupted Cecy, quite

humbly. “But after all, Cecy, how far could I have gone without you and Carol?”

“You’re very right there, my dear,” applauded Aunt Bessie. “But do tell me what your mother said when you told her.”

“I just couldn’t tell you, Aunt Bessie,” Kay answered. “We were both so excited, I trying to tell her, and she trying to understand, we just neither one of us made sense until we got over to Chief Steel’s office. We had to behave there,” Kay admitted, with a chuckle.

“They had the papers to show your mother?” Carol asked.

“Yes. We stopped as we came up in the taxi from the train, the clerk had phoned me before nine o’clock to come over. Oh, girls and Aunt Bessie too,” Kay almost cried, “if you ever knew how I have dreamed of this. I just devoted my life since I knew how to do it, finding out why——”

“And now you may even get the commission on selling this place,” Cecy reminded her. “That might pay all the taxes and then you would have your place free and clear.”

“Oh, mercy me!” cried Kay, who looked very pretty now with her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkling. “I must be dreaming. But *please* don’t wake me up,” and she struck a comical pose.

“We were waiting for you to come so we could go over to Mr. Thorsen’s to bring him the picture and the letter,” Carol said. “Or should we phone him to come over here?”

“Yes, let’s do that,” Kay suggested.

“It would be better to have him come over if he’s the real owner, since we are living here, or at least I am,” Aunt Bessie pointed out.

When Mr. Thorsen came over he wore a sport shirt open at the throat and light corduroy slacks. As he came along the walk Aunt Bessie expressed her admiration.

“He’s a professional man if I ever saw one,” she whispered to Carol.

They all went indoors from the porch where they had been sitting, and Mr. Thorsen glanced around with interest. There were fresh flowers in bowls, the place was sweet with their fragrance, and even in the short time that Aunt Bessie had been there she had put the print of a fine hand upon the whole arrangements.

“Oh, Mr. Thorsen!” Cecy exclaimed. “I found the letter. It’s for you, see?”

Without a word Mr. Thorsen took the folded sheet Cecy handed him, and they all fell silent as he read it. Finally he looked up, and his deep blue eyes were glistening.

“*You* found this!” he asked Cecy, “and I had searched and searched——”

“But a man never would think of looking under the cover of a dressing case that was all tacked down,” Cecy told him. “And the big bow was on top of that, too.”

He nodded. Then looked again at the letter. “Poor little

Vivienne!” he explained. “How she must have suffered. And she was waiting for me, but I couldn’t get back.”

“But we have something else,” Carol said, just a little hesitantly, “this little picture.”

When he had examined that he said at once that Vivienne had written him about her friend Bob. They were college friends she had told him and it was in one of the last letters he received before starting on an ocean voyage around the world that she had written him how much she thought of Bob Colton. That was the boy’s name, he said.

“You see, I was on a concert tour singing,” Mr. Thorsen said in a low voice, “but I left at once when I heard of the tragedy of my brother’s and his wife’s deaths. But I should have come home before when they asked me to. Had I done so I would have been here to save Vivienne——”

It was Aunt Bessie who undertook the difficult task of telling Mr. Thorsen how they had trapped Hester Johnson. He was not surprised he said. He had always known they were the ones to blame. But he couldn’t catch them because they never came while he was in the place.

“So I built the little cabin on the hill, thinking I could watch from there. But that didn’t work either,” he sort of smiled. “When I agreed to let you girls come in here and have someone come with you,” he bowed most courteously to Aunt Bessie, “it was with the idea that you might succeed where I had failed.”

“Because they thought we would scare easily,” Cecy put in.

“Also, we were supposed to be tenants or buyers, and Tom Johnson was all ready to take this lovely place himself.”

It took a long time for the little party to give Mr. Thorsen all the details, and naturally he was astounded to hear the story of the box from the burnt office, and of the papers that were found in it. It was so late when they finished talking that they invited Mr. Thorsen to stay to dinner, but he insisted he could not do that this evening. They all understood he had much to think over privately now, with his letter and his picture.

“But, Kay dear, you must ask your mother to come out,” Aunt Bessie proposed. “I tell you. You call her up, tell her I am going to speak to her, then I’ll invite her. She has a car, I suppose?”

“Oh, yes; she couldn’t get along in her business without a car, and I’m expecting to drive next year myself,” Kay answered. “But do you think I should——”

“We think you *must*,” Cecy interrupted, “and oh Kay! Ask her to fetch your little radio.”

“The very thing,” said Carol, “that’s one thing we’ve been missing, the radio. Do call your mother, Kay, and don’t take any excuse.”

Mrs. Findley could not have refused such an invitation as Kay, Aunt Bessie and even Carol and Cecy poured into her ears over the phone, so she came, and Mrs. Baker gave them all a dinner worthy of the occasion.

It seemed as if everything wonderful had happened, almost

everything that is. But where was Vivienne?

While the radio was still faithfully reproducing the music and songs from the distant studio, and the joyous strains were waking echoes in Morgan Manor, just before the real dark of the evening settled down, the door bell rang.

“I’ll go,” Cecy called to Mrs. Baker; and she went.

A young man stood at the door. In light flannels, no hat and with that telltale smile of the collegiate, Cecy knew he was someone very important.

“I beg your pardon,” he began, “but is this house rented?”

“Well, yes,” stammered Cecy, feeling Kay coming up to do her share in welcoming that voice.

“I’m Robert Colton——”

He got not one word further. “Come in!” cried Carol, Cecy, Kay and perhaps even Aunt Bessie, although she was sitting happily beside Kay’s mother. “Oh, you’re Bob!” Cecy exclaimed. “Where is Vivienne? Do you know?”

The young man so surprisingly besieged by a group of strange girls, was naturally quite beyond giving them an immediate answer. But when some of their gasps, questions, and other fragments of speech died down to coherence, Bob was stammering words. They seemed to mean that Vivienne was right there in the car at their very door!

“You see, I read about that fire, and the newspaper gave

a local story about this Morgan house,” Bob said very quickly. “Vivienne was staying—well I had called on her,” he put in evasively, “so I induced her to ride out here right away.”

“Oh, she must come in at once!” cried Kay. “Isn’t this too wonderful! You know what it means, Mr. Colton?”

“Well, I know that tomorrow is Vee’s birthday,” he said. “That’s why I just made her come,” he finished. “I’ll go get her _____”

“Come on, girls,” called Carol, “we must all go get her,” and they raced down the steps over to the drive where there actually sat Vivienne Morgan, the heir to all this estate, if she were living there on her eighteenth birthday, tomorrow.

It would have been too much to expect the other girls to do anything sensible, and they didn’t. Such sudden and complete joy seldom comes even to happy young girls, and now, it seemed, Vivienne Morgan was going to be counted as belonging to that envied class, herself.

She was lovely! Her dark lashes fell on her creamy skin and her eyes were just that deep blue that the girls had noticed first thing about the hermit. And her hair was dark and wavy like his, also. Yes, she did look like her uncle, and the girls thought her beautiful.

“We must go over and get Mr. Thorsen,” Carol insisted. “He should be the first to know——”

“Can’t I go?” asked Bob. He must have wanted to get away for a moment.

When Mr. Thorsen came Vivienne met him on the porch, and even Cecy stood aside for a few minutes.

“I had lost you—” they heard him say.

“Oh, no, Uncle Ted. I was coming back—later—” the girl answered.

“But when I got that note from the plane——”

“I was really desperate then,” she told her uncle. “You see, I had heard that man was following me, so I turned right back when I reached the airport.”

“That was how I missed you,” Mr. Thorsen said. “Let’s go inside and join these wonderful friends,” he suggested as quickly as he seemed able to.

They finally all learned the story. Vivienne had run away to escape from Johnson’s threats. He was trying to have her confined some place until after this important birthday had passed, but she became so alarmed lest he really would put her in a sanitarium, she decided to disappear. She had waited as long as she felt it was safe for her uncle’s return, but finally she felt that she could wait no longer.

“I had money enough from the estate,” she was saying, “so I knew I would be all right for some time. Then Bob—well, he broke the rules and found me. I was staying with friends in Delaware,” she finished, a little shyly.

“But you are staying here now,” Kay spoke up. “This will be your legal residence on that birthday—it’s

tomorrow isn't it?"

Before the perfect evening was over, Uncle Ted was singing an operatic selection with the radio, and even Win Vernon at the hotel had heard the news.

"You see, Kay," Win was calling back, Mr. Hadley, the writer, knows Mr. Morgan the singer, and he has been trying to find him."

"Not someone else to be found?" exclaimed Kay into the phone, out in the hall where the others could not hear her.

"Exactly. This Mr. Morgan whom they called the hermit, went away from his tour, broke his contract, and Mr. Hadley says, even tattooed his arms so he wouldn't be tempted to go back to opera. But Mr. Hadley said that wouldn't make any difference if they could find him. The tattooing could easily be covered up."

"He's here, Win. Bring on your Mr. Hadley tomorrow. Everyone is positively found and all the scores are settled _____"

Then she promised to give Win all the details in the morning.

"But suppose that lady who is out there now will want to buy it?" Win reminded Kay.

"Oh, she won't. She only came to help us out. And you see, our opera singer will perhaps take up his contract again, so he won't want to stay here either," Kay replied. "And Vivienne will return to college I think; Bob is at Harvard—But

honestly, Win, I've got to go back to the living room. They're all having such a wonderful time in there. I'll see you with—the commission,” she finished, as a rich baritone voice was floating through the halls of Morgan Manor.

When it was possible for them to again consider details, no one was sure what would happen to Spike Johnson, but it seemed he would have more to settle than back taxes. Mamie would be well taken care of—Carol considered that her responsibility as a social worker, and as Mamie had said “her papers were in the burnt box” and they did not give the Johnson's a legal claim over her. As to Vivienne and her home, which would be her's now as long as she wanted it, her uncle, told her all the fine furniture was in storage; he had attended to that directly after he got back from abroad, which was only a short time after Vivienne had disappeared. Her own personal things, clothing and everything, he told her, were cared for by her faithful housekeeper, Margaret Simmonds, so that, after all, perhaps little had been lost in all the tragic confusion.

“Isn't it all unbelievable,” the young girl exclaimed. She was with her uncle on the great couch which was now covered in lovely flowered linen, and which Cecy at least knew, was royal blue velvet underneath. Bob was on a chair as near as he could get to the couch, but he would have been happy anywhere in that room.

“We won't know what to do with ourselves, this has been so exciting,” Carol said when there seemed to be a chance for that sort of remark.

But then they did not know that soon again they would be

called upon to work on another mystery *The Clue of the Crooked Key* which will be the title of the next volume in this series.

THE END



Transcriber's Notes

- Copyright notice provided as in the original—this e-text is public domain in the country of publication.
- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.
- In the text versions, delimited italics text in _underscores_ (the HTML version reproduces the font form of the printed book.)

[The end of *The Hermit of Proud Hill* by Lillian Garis]